



In the service of the future

United Germany's historical policy

Edited by Anna Kwiatkowska



OSW | 35 YEARS

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Warsaw 2026



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OŚRODEK STUDIÓW WSCHODNICH
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Introduction

Anna Kwiatkowska

Inception of memory

States conduct historical policy. If a country abandons such a policy, it is nonetheless carried out with respect to that country and its citizens – often even within its own territory – only with another state at the helm. You either conduct your own historical policy, or someone else does so on your behalf. There is no alternative. This premise should form the foundation of every contemporary debate on history and national identity. The state, possessing vast financial, institutional, and symbolic resources, is today the most important – though not the only – actor in historical policy, and it may or may not support grassroots initiatives undertaken by others. Consequently, it is often the state that decides which events and which protagonists are remembered, and which are omitted from official narratives of the past. For memory is not neutral – it is selective. Whoever influences it, influences the shaping of the future.

This book seeks to capture and understand the complex mechanisms of German historical policy, which have undergone a fascinating and controversial process of transformation in the post-war period. In this context, the publication poses the question of whether and how Germany has addressed its own past, particularly its most dramatic and difficult aspects – the Holocaust, total war, and Nazi crimes. How has this morally burdened past been transformed into the foundation of a modern national identity and the country's international standing? What mechanisms, narratives, and institutions have accompanied this process?

The work consists of nine chapters presenting various aspects of German historical policy, prepared by outstanding specialists in their respective fields from the Centre for Eastern Studies and other institutions whom I was able to invite to participate in this project. The individual studies describe, among other things, its evolution, modes of mourning and commemoration of Germany's own victims, the significance of museums and monuments, and the role of education in shaping the memory of the past. They also show how the reconstruction of historic buildings, the form and content of textbooks, as well as films and media campaigns, have become instruments for shaping a new identity. The authors have sought to present both Germany's successes and the difficulties associated with these processes.

In the opening chapter, we analyse the concept of state historical policy and the mechanisms of Germany's moral conversion after 1945, indicating how the German state shapes the framework of collective memory by determining the direction of the historical narrative. We also argue that, contrary to many claims, there is no 'end of history' in the writing of history. We further demonstrate that it is untrue that post-war Poland – not through its own fault,

but nevertheless – missed the moment to appear in the narratives of others. These narratives continue to be spun, their content constantly revised and supplemented, with new threads continually emerging. This opportunity should be taken advantage of.

Next, Marek Cichocki discusses the historical policy of Helmut Kohl's governments, showing how his political decisions shaped and strengthened the desired image of Germany internationally. Wojciech Pięciak examines the evolution of memory concerning German victims of the air raids (*Bombenkrieg*), illustrating how controversially narratives of victimhood may be constructed. Wojciech Konończuk describes the extensive reconstruction of German monuments observed over the past quarter-century and the significance of new symbols in the urban landscape for shaping historical identity. Robert Kostro presents the functioning of institutions – museums and memorial sites – as well as other instruments of state historical policy that effectively mobilise memory at both national and international levels. In this context, Ryszarda Formuszewicz outlines the complexity of German historical policy in the international dimension – including its relations with Russia – showing how memory shapes foreign policy and, conversely, how foreign policy influences memory. The volume also includes a separate chapter on the process of creating, and the controversies surrounding, the so-called German-Polish House in Berlin, which is intended to serve multiple functions – from a museum to an educational and documentation centre, and perhaps even as a monument to the Polish victims of the German occupation.

Finally, Hanna Radziejowska and Mateusz Fałkowski present the findings of research commissioned by the Berlin branch of the Pilecki Institute, shedding light on how German society perceives its crimes and victims, and how the state narrative influences education, citizens' awareness, and perceptions of neighbouring countries. The importance of this influence is confirmed by Kamil Frymark's analysis of school textbooks, in which the author demonstrates how the image of Poland, Israel, and France is shaped in German education and how this affects subsequent generations.

The main intention of the authors of this book is therefore to show how Germany, after the devastation of war it brought upon Europe and the world, used memory policy to rebuild its position – moral, political, and economic – in Europe and globally. Although it moved through a web of controversies, it ultimately achieved its goal and stands as an example of how, through years of work, planning, and significant investment, a coherent narrative about oneself and a new national identity may be built.

The publication we present to the reader also shows how complex and multifaceted the process of shaping historical policy is. The conclusion that

emerges is simple: states that care about their place in history, actively formulate narratives of memory, and pursue historical policy have the ability not only to shape their image in the world but also to protect – and even advance – their own interests.

**He who tells history, owns the future.
The success of German politics of history
and the Polish sin of omission**

Anna Kwiatkowska

MAIN POINTS

- **In 1945, Germany lost not only its statehood, its army and part of its territory but, above all, its moral credibility.** The crimes of the Third Reich – the Holocaust, total war and the systemic destruction of Europe's nations – disqualified the nation in the eyes of the world as a civilisational partner. In the post-war international order, Germany could no longer serve as a standard-setter, a role model or a point of reference. Its past became a burden that needed to be addressed. Although it quickly regained international significance as a key ally of the United States in its confrontation with the USSR, Germany long remained a suspect state – not fully transformed and still operating in the shadow of a history it had yet to come to terms with.
- **Already in the first years after the war, the elites of the Federal Republic of Germany understood that any endeavour to rebuild the country had to go beyond institutional and economic matters.** To regain international trust, it would not only be necessary to establish a stable democracy but also to thoroughly reshape the national image. West Germany deliberately embarked on a project of identity transformation: through modernisation, integration with the West, and democratisation – and also through the gradual construction of a new narrative about itself. These efforts, undertaken at the intersection of politics, culture and education, took the form that today is referred to as historical policy.
- **The German model of conducting historical policy is now regarded as a paradigm: it is effective, consistent and deeply embedded in the state institutions, education and culture.** It enabled Germany not only to rebuild the moral agency it had lost after the Second World War but also to transform itself into a tangible force – politically, symbolically and economically.
- **This success was built on a narrative of conversion, which holds that the greater the evil committed in the past, the greater the potential for redemption and thus moral reward.** The Germans declared they acknowledged their crimes, made an effort to come to terms with them, and then demonstrated to the world that they were capable not only of transforming their nation but also of becoming a model for others and actively promoting values such as democracy, human rights and peace. Moral conversion was recognised in Germany as the foundation of a new national identity, grounded in a critical view of its own history.

- **This moral paradox – that the descendants of perpetrators today enjoy a higher moral status than the descendants of their victims, or even of the victors – should serve as a warning.** If historical policy can so effectively shape the image of a state, then its absence or neglect may lead to lasting marginalisation in the symbolic sphere and, in the longer term, in the political and economic spheres as well. This is all the more significant given that, for half a century after the war, Poland played almost no role in the global exchange of historical narratives.
- **Poland cannot afford further neglect. The emergence of new historical debates, prompted by fresh discoveries, research or events such as the war in Ukraine, offers the nation an opportunity to assert its own narrative.** Historical policy is neither a whim nor an act of revanchism – it is a duty of every mature state. Just as the state conducts foreign, social and economic policy, it must also conduct historical policy. Not as a substitute, but as a complement.
- **It is time to move beyond the belief that history belongs solely to the past, and that commemoration is a matter of emotion rather than one of interest.** On the contrary: historical policy is applied policy – as instrumental and operational as any other. As such, it serves the interests of the community. It can build the prestige of the state, explain its national interest, strengthen its position in negotiations and shape its international image. Poland has both the right and the obligation to speak with its own voice, to demand its own memorials – such as a monument in Berlin to the Polish victims of the Nazi occupation in Poland – to insist on its place in history textbooks, to remind the world that compensation for mass destruction remains an unresolved issue and, finally, to shape the memory and awareness of its citizens at home, so that they do not need to learn a version of Polish history from museums and monuments in other countries, one that is often distorted.

Introduction

This essay was born out of disagreement – but also out of the need to act. The impulse to write was triggered by three conversations or, more precisely, three brief interactions in which statements were made that struck at the very heart of the debate on remembrance policy, particularly in the context of Poland's relations with Germany. Their impact did not stem from radicalism, but from something far more troubling: the confidence with which they were expressed, despite their controversial nature. They were presented almost as axioms. These were not the words of opponents or the uninformed. On the contrary, they came from people who were well-informed, sympathetic and, at times, even actively engaged in common initiatives. And perhaps that is precisely why these opinions proved so alarming – because they represent a way of thinking present within influential political and media circles. They reinforce the belief that certain processes in historical policy have already come to an end, that there is no room for manoeuvre, and that history – both the factual and the narrated one – has already been written.

These claims – circulating in various forms within public debate – can be summarised as follows: **first**, there is no such thing as a German historical policy, because anything of this sort would be unhealthy; instead, there are countless versions of this policy in Germany, all supposedly 'non-state'; **second**, Poland has missed the most important historical debates, which means it can no longer assert itself in any way other than through the narratives which have already been established, and that, for example, the issue of compensation is closed; **third**, the negative image of the Poles as a nation at best indifferent to the fate of Jews, or even complicit in the Holocaust, is now entrenched and impossible to correct.

Each of these statements reflects a misguided belief – not only factually incorrect, but also harmful. Regardless of the intentions behind them, each of these views carries the underlying message: 'nothing can be done'. And if that is the case, then why act at all? Why make the effort of building institutions, documenting crimes, initiating debates or seeking a place within the European (and global) memory? If the narrative has already been formed, then the only option we have is to accept its content and our own lack of agency.

This text is an attempt to respond to these questions and claims, whilst also representing a firm response to them. Historical policy, if taken seriously, does not recognise the concept of an 'end point'. Every society – supported or even encouraged by the state – constantly constructs its own narrative of the past, negotiates memory and updates meanings. What is considered a stable or established order today may be questioned tomorrow – not only by new

historical discoveries, but also by shifts in language, priorities or political goals. Historical narratives are not sealed books, but rather battlegrounds where meaning is constantly renegotiated.

The structure of this text has been shaped by its main objective – to demonstrate that German historical policy exists and has tangible consequences, and that if Poland wishes to participate meaningfully in the contest over memory, it must actively shape its own narrative.

The first part analyses the very concept of ‘historical policy’ in the German context – its origins, evolution and status in public and academic debate. It shows that this is neither a controversial nor a fleeting term, but rather a tool that the academic and political circles in Germany have used with considerable awareness and effectiveness for decades. It outlines the key definitions, research approaches and conceptual instruments that have emerged around Germany’s remembrance policy.

The second part is devoted to analysing the success of Germany’s historical policy – primarily through the lens of Michał Łuczewski’s theory.¹ It traces the successive phases of this policy – from silence and denial, through ‘normalisation’, to pride in ‘overcoming history’ – as well as the narratives employed: of conversion, ethos and victimhood. It was this long-lasting, consistent and well-designed process that enabled Germany not only to rebuild its moral standing, but to turn it into symbolic, political and cultural capital.

The third part offers a reflection on the possibilities and limitations. It shows that the German model of historical policy – though impressive in many respects – cannot simply be replicated by Poland. The Polish nation’s experiences, collective memories and identity needs are too different. However, this does not mean that Poland can afford to remain passive. On the contrary – it must develop its own long-term model for conducting memory policy, one that is aligned with its history and present-day realities.

The fourth part of the essay focuses on the present and the future. It demonstrates that the historical policy pursued by Germany is not a concluded process. On the contrary – new debates, new challenges and new memory landscapes are taking shape. For instance, the war in Ukraine has triggered a discussion about German colonialism in the East, and this may be a moment in which Poland – if it is sufficiently active – has a chance to embed its own perspective within the broader European discourse.

¹ M. Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne w późnej nowoczesności*, Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, Kraków 2017.

The concept of historical policy in German public and academic debate

For decades, historical policy has been a key subject of scholarly, academic and social reflection in German public debate – both in the context of the Holocaust and the Second World War, and in relation to the German national identity and Germany's place in Europe. It has also become a distinct area of interdisciplinary research, combining history, political science, sociology and cultural studies. Many scholars have explored the origins and evolution of this concept in Germany² – the explanation below draws on their analyses to briefly outline the essence of this phenomenon.

In the broadest terms, historical policy refers to the way in which the past is used to shape national identity, build collective memory and legitimise current political actions. As a tool for shaping a communal identity, this policy also serves mobilisation and legitimisation functions. It is precisely through the selective interpretation of the past that political elites seek to shape the public perceptions of who citizens are, what place they occupy in history, and what their relations with other states and nations are – or ought to be.

Eckhard Jesse, a political scientist and researcher of extremism and totalitarianism, identifies two fundamental connotations of the term. In its neutral sense, historical policy refers to a reflection on the past aimed at understanding the present and the future. In this view, it serves an educational and cultural function, building a national identity through the teaching of history and the collective commemoration of anniversaries. In its negative sense, it refers to the deliberate use of history as a tool of propaganda, manipulation or the legitimisation of current political agendas.

Edgar Wolfrum, a historian from Heidelberg University, has argued that historical policy is a field of activity in which various actors – from the political elites to civil society – engage in shaping historical narratives. In democratic states, it is not the exclusive domain of the state institutions – citizens, non-governmental organisations, the media and even individual civic initiatives also actively participate. The aim is to influence public opinion – through acts of

2 See S. Troebst, 'Geschichtspolitik', Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte, 4 August 2014, docupedia.de; E. Jesse, K. Löw (eds.), *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Berlin 1997; P. Steinbach, 'Politik mit Geschichte – Geschichtspolitik?', Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 28. March 2008, bpb.de; E. Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948–1990*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1999. Polish scholars, analysts and writers have also produced a substantial body of academic, journalistic and literary work examining Germany's memory policy. See, for example: W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć. Współczesne spory w Niemczech o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii, polityce i tożsamości (1989–2001)*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2002; K. Wóycicki, *Niemiecki rachunek sumienia. Niemcy wobec przeszłości 1933–1945*, Wrocław 2004; J. Rydel, *Polityka historyczna w Republice Federalnej Niemiec. Zaszczyty. Idee. Praktyka*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, Kraków 2011; A. Wolff-Powęska, *Pamięć – brzemień i uwolnienie. Niemcy wobec nazistowskiej przeszłości (1945–2010)*, Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 2011.

legitimation, mobilisation, politicisation, scandalisation or discrediting. Wolfrum places particular emphasis on the role of elites: “Political elites attempt to create traditions, shape memories and build identities. In doing so, they employ a range of memory strategies – controversial stagings, integrative and disintegrative rituals, and polarising discourses. In short: they practise historical policy by means of democracy, thereby exerting a long-term influence on both political and historical culture”.

Also noteworthy is the contribution of historian and Slavist Stefan Troebst, who argues in his work that the term *Geschichtspolitik* – though historically loaded (and often pejorative) – no longer refers solely to attempts to instrumentalise the past. In his view, historical policy is not the domain of authoritarian regimes, but a dynamic process of social and cultural negotiation. As Troebst emphasises, most academic debates overlook the fact that ‘modern’ historical policy is not a 20th-century invention or a post-1945 phenomenon, but part of a much longer tradition reaching deep into the past. This means that engaging in historical policy should not be seen as something exceptional or pathological, but as a normal part of how democratic societies function.

Troebst reminds us that practices linked to historical policy existed in the early modern period, and even earlier, with examples including forms of state celebration, the codification of collective memory and the symbolic commemoration employed by European monarchies. Crucially, in his view, contemporary historical policy is not solely the domain of state elites – in pluralist societies, it plays out on multiple levels, involving the media, educational institutions, local communities and civic organisations. This means it cannot be equated with a single narrative or top-down ideological line. On the contrary – in a democracy, historical policy is an area of conflict, competing interpretations and disputes over meaning.

Historian Christof Dipper, in his comparative analysis of historical policies in Europe, identifies three key features common to this phenomenon in democratic countries.³ Each of them helps to better understand how historical memory shapes contemporary politics, culture and society.

1. First, historical policy has become an essential element of political practice across Europe. No modern democratic state can afford to ignore its own past – especially in relation to events that have shaped its identity. It has become the norm to refer to history – both in public debate and in legislation, commemorations or decisions concerning education and remembrance.

³ C. Dipper, ‘Geschichtspolitik im europäischen Vergleich’ [in:] E. Wolfrum (ed.), *Geschichtspolitik in Europa seit 1989. Deutschland – Frankreich – Polen – Russland – Südosteuropa*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2013.

2. Second, European states use a similar set of tools: the law, museums, monuments, symbols and the justice system. They share the aims of shaping the collective memory and educating society. The media – both traditional and digital – play a particularly important role in this process, as do major film productions and exhibitions.

- **The law:** many countries, including France, Germany and Poland, have passed legislation regulating the issues of historical memory. The French *lois mémorielles* address topics such as colonialism and the Armenian genocide. In Poland, the promotion of totalitarian symbols is prohibited; in Germany, as in Poland, Holocaust denial is subject to criminal penalties.
- **Museums and monuments:** in Germany, there are hundreds of memorials dedicated to the Holocaust and the Second World War, intended not only to commemorate the victims but also to educate and foster an identity grounded in responsibility. Similar initiatives are undertaken in Poland, France and Italy.
- **The justice system:** this plays a major role in coming to terms with the past – particularly in post-communist countries. In Poland, this role is fulfilled in part by the Institute of National Remembrance. In Germany, attention should be paid both to the legislation enabling the prosecution of war criminals and also to the legal provisions that, for many years, allowed them to avoid accountability.⁴

3. Third, Dipper highlighted the active involvement of historians. They participate as researchers, government advisers, contributors to public debate and as critics of the instrumentalisation of history. Their engagement in historical policy lends it a scholarly dimension and helps counter simplifications.

Dipper demonstrates that historical policy is not merely a tool for reinterpreting the past, but also a means of shaping the future. Its form depends on the national context, but the set of tools employed – such as the law, remembrance institutions and the engagement of historians – creates a common European model.

⁴ See N. Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit*, C.H. Beck, München 1996 (English edition: *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past. The Politics of Amnesty and Integration*, Columbia University Press, 2002). Frei shows how, in the 1950s and 1960s, the dominant strategy was one of 'integration through amnesty', and the criminal responsibility of those who committed Nazi crimes was systematically limited. This approach culminated in the 1968 amendment to the German Code of Criminal Procedure (*Strafprozessordnung*), which – seemingly technical – introduced a 20-year statute of limitations for the prosecution of murder. Although this provision was introduced in a completely different legal context, in practice it exempted many of the perpetrators of Nazi crimes from accountability. Frei highlights how deeply rooted the social and political reluctance was to genuinely confront the past.

In the German context, the concept of historical policy (Geschichtspolitik) is regarded as a key element in reflecting on the relationship between history and the present. It gained particular importance due to the legacy of Nazism, the Holocaust and the Second World War, as well as the later division of Germany. The term was introduced into public debate by Heinrich August Winkler in 1986, during the well-known *Historikerstreit* – the historians’ dispute – which will be discussed later in this text.⁵ This dispute, which had both academic and political dimensions, centred on the uniqueness of the Holocaust and comparisons between Nazism and other totalitarian regimes. It ultimately concluded with the widespread acceptance of the position emphasising the Holocaust’s unprecedented nature, but also revealed just how ambiguous and controversial the very notion of historical policy can be. Criticising Helmut Kohl’s attempt to ‘normalise’ history (see below), Winkler warned against it being instrumentalised.

The historian and political scientist Peter Steinbach, whom we have already mentioned, argued that the *Historikerstreit* was not merely an academic dispute but had a direct impact on the debate over the German national identity. He showed that historical policy can serve as an instrument of ideological struggle, influencing how the national narrative and culture of remembrance are shaped. In this context, he analysed the debate over the role of the state in shaping historical policy within a pluralist society and considered whether, and to what extent, the state should engage in the interpretation and commemoration of history – particularly with regard to difficult aspects of the past, such as the period of National Socialism in Germany.⁶

The concept of ‘historical policy’ is not the only one used in the debate and often appears alongside terms such as ‘memory policy’ (*Erinnerungspolitik*), ‘policy on the past’ (*Vergangenheitspolitik*), or ‘commemoration policy’ (*Gedenkpoltik*), and at times it is used interchangeably with them. In his comparative analysis, Troebst shows that among these terms, it is historical policy that has gained the greatest conceptual stability in German scholarship – and it should be recognised as the central analytical category. Only *Geschichtspolitik* has developed a durable conceptual and institutional framework, allowing for it to be subjected to systematic study and practically applied in public debate.

5 The debate that took place in West Germany between 1986 and 1987 involved leading historians and intellectuals, including Ernst Nolte, Jürgen Habermas and Heinrich August Winkler. Nolte argued that Nazism was a reaction to Bolshevism and should be analysed within a broader context. Habermas firmly rejected this view, emphasising the unprecedented nature of the Holocaust. For the classic documentation of this dispute, see R. Augstein (ed.), *Historikerstreit. Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*, Piper, München 1987. A selection of texts from the historians’ dispute was also published in Polish: M. Łukasiewicz (ed.), *Historikerstreit. Spór o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii Niemiec*, Aneks, London 1990.

6 P. Steinbach, ‘Darf der pluralistische Staat ‘Geschichtspolitik’ betreiben? Zu einer Kontroverse der jüngsten Vergangenheit’ [in:] E. Jesse, K. Löw (eds.), *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 1997, pp. 79–89.

Therefore, in this text – regardless of whether we use the terms ‘memory policy’ or ‘policy on the past’ – the principal category remains ‘historical policy’, understood not as a tool of ideological coercion but as a democratic practice of reflection on history and its social consequences. In this sense, as Troebst suggests, *Geschichtspolitik* can have both integrative and emancipatory functions – shaping a culture of remembrance through public debate, institutional decisions and the social negotiation of the meanings of the past.

It is precisely in the German context – at the intersection of historical experience, the need to redefine identity and the active engagement of the state – that a model of historical policy has developed which is now regarded as one of the most effective and consistent. Its analysis, particularly through the lens of Michał Łuczewski’s theory of conversion, will be the focus of the following chapters.

The success of German historical policy in the conversion model

The Polish sociologist Michał Łuczewski, in his seminal work *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne w późnej nowoczesności* (Moral Capital, Historical Politics in the Late Modern Period),⁷ presents a view on the origins of the term ‘historical policy’ that differs from that of German scholars. According to him, the concept was defined and developed in Poland much earlier than in Germany. As early as the mid-19th century, the Polish philosopher and educator Bronisław Trentowski used it as a *terminus technicus* in one of his treatises. However, unlike other neologisms such as ‘cybernetics’, ‘philosophy of history’ or ‘messianism’, it was not included in either the Polish academic lexicon or the broader public discourse.

As a result, it was not until the 1980s that the term *Geschichtspolitik*, popularised in part by the historians’ dispute, became firmly established in the German debate. Łuczewski notes that in Poland, the term ‘historical policy’ was not at first used as an analytical category, but as an active, operative concept by Dariusz Karłowicz in the late 1990s.⁸ It did not directly refer to a literal translation of *Geschichtspolitik*, but rather drew on familiar analogies rooted in the Polish language, such as foreign policy or cultural policy. From

⁷ The conversion model and all its implications are described in Chapter II and part of Chapter III, based on the theory developed by its author, and are quoted directly from those sections: M. Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny...*, *op. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 211 and 315. Łuczewski describes, among other things, the circles linked to the Warsaw Club of Political Critique (*Warszawski Klub Krytyki Politycznej*), founded in 1996 by conservative intellectuals including Tomasz Merta, Marek Cichocki, Dariusz Gawin and Dariusz Karłowicz. In their speeches and publications, they sought to present the concept of historical policy as being tied to action and exerting influence, while noting that historical policy was the Achilles’ heel of Polish foreign policy.

the outset, it had a proactive character, with the intention not of analysing and understanding the world, but of transforming it.

Łuczewski defines historical policy as an official, state-directed practice aimed at constructing (objectivising), disseminating (externalising) and implanting (internalising) representations of the past. This means that historical policy involves the actions of memory actors who, through memory media, acquire the community's moral memory capital. This definition allows historical policy to be understood not as a structure or a static condition, but as a dynamic social process. Łuczewski describes it as the art of storytelling aimed at building the moral capital of the community.

1. Fundamental principles of the theory of moral capital

Łuczewski offers a critique of the concept of 'historical truth', suggesting that every form of historical policy inevitably carries a specific moral message. In his view, there are no neutral historical facts – every interpretation serves to construct a particular image of past events. As a result, this policy becomes a tool for building moral capital through the reconstruction of moral narratives about the past – both real and imagined.

Łuczewski compares moral capital to other forms of capital, highlighting its potential to create an advantage and dominance over those who either lack it or possess only its negative form. The ability to impose one's own vision of the past is a key element in the struggle for this capital; and this requires competing with other actors who may have already established their own rules and have a dominant position. Moral capital does not accumulate on its own – its development is a long-term process requiring deliberate action, consistency, and the transmission of values across generations.

Łuczewski further argues that the key feature of moral capital is its ability to transform into symbolic capital – that is, capital which comes to be seen as natural, legitimate and universal. Symbolic capital confers recognition, prestige, respect and dignity upon its bearer and, as such, it can be converted into other forms of capital: economic, political and military. According to Łuczewski, this very transformation is the essence and objective of historical policy. A state that possesses moral capital gains values such as trust, significance, reputation and the ability to act from a position of authority.

2. The superiority of the conversion narrative over ethos-based and return-to-the-origins narratives

In Łuczewski's theory, moral narratives are the primary resource of moral capital. He identifies three types of these narratives: conversion, return to origins, and ethos. The German model was built on the narrative of

conversion – a conscious break with a criminal past, intended to emphasise the moral superiority of the present-day community over its ancestors. After bringing about the Holocaust, Germans became viewed as the perpetrators of an unimaginable crime and lost all their previously held moral capital. In the eyes of the international community, this nation of poets and thinkers (*Dichter und Denker*)⁹ turned into a nation of barbarians and criminals, symbolised by formations such as the SS and Gestapo.

Łuczewski cites Karl Jaspers,¹⁰ who observed that once the crimes of National Socialism were revealed during the Nuremberg Trials (1945–1949), the German nation experienced complete political incapacitation and exclusion from the international community. The country was then burdened with ‘the curse of negative symbolic capital’. German intellectuals described that moment in metaphysical terms, such as: ‘moral savagery’, ‘a descent into hell’, ‘a dreadful eclipse’, ‘a mysterious bond between the German soul and demonism’.

The aim of German historical policy – according to Łuczewski – was to move away from the position of perpetrators and adopt a stance of those who take responsibility for their actions, which would be achieved through the conversion narrative. Its ethical force lies in the fact that it is based on acknowledging guilt, working through it and seeking moral redemption. This narrative traces a path from absolute evil to absolute good. Crucially, it does so not in pursuit of self-interest but out of a sense of responsibility. The conversion narrative makes it possible to portray actions as seemingly altruistic: sacrifice does not stem from interest, but from atonement. The German nation presents itself in a negative light, but it does so in order to stand with the victims and rebuild its moral identity. This kind of approach strengthens the external perception – it is difficult to view it as selfish or cynical.¹¹

The other two narratives – the ethos-based narrative (which Łuczewski associates with Russia) and the return-to-the-origins narrative (which he sees as characteristic of Poland) – focus on heroism, continuity and the suffering of one’s own community. Łuczewski argues that, while both also serve to build identity, they are neither as universal nor as effective on the international stage as the conversion narrative. These narratives are more vulnerable to accusations of nationalism and are more inward-looking, and thus less persuasive.

9 The phrase emerged at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, and its popularity grew significantly throughout the 19th century. Its origins are linked to the era of German Classicism and Romanticism, when Germany was not yet a unified state but was regarded as a centre of culture and humanist thought in Europe. The phrase was soon used as a propaganda tool, emphasising the moral and civilisational superiority of German culture. After 1945, the expression *das Volk der Dichter und Denker* (the nation of poets and thinkers) was sarcastically twisted into *das Volk der Richter und Henker* (the nation of judges and hangmen).

10 K. Jaspers, ‘Zróżnicowanie niemieckiej winy’ [in:] J. Borejsza, S. Kaszyński (eds.), *Po upadku Trzeciej Rzeszy. Niemieccy intelektualści a tradycja narodowa*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1981.

11 Source: M. Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny...*, op. cit., p. 346.

This is because their protagonists are not repentant former perpetrators, but ‘our heroes’ and ‘our martyrs’. Ethos-based and return-to-origins narratives can also be easily undermined – for example, when heroes are revealed to have also been perpetrators, such as when evidence of complicity in the Holocaust emerges. In the case of conversion, however, this risk is lower: admitting guilt and declaring that it has been worked through pre-empts any accusation.

Łuczewski points to both the paradox of this situation and at the same time the strength of the German conversion narrative: the greater the evil committed in the past, the greater the good that may accrue to the nation in the future. The more dramatic the fall, the more significant the redemption. In this perspective, the emphasis on one’s own guilt paradoxically leads to moral gain. In this way, what once constituted the German nation’s greatest historical burden has been transformed into a source of strength, dignity and prestige.¹²

According to Łuczewski, the success of German historical policy lies not only in the strong moral component of the conversion narrative, but also in the fact that it is perceived as a rational, scholarly and critical policy. It is reinforced by the authority of academic research and a deeply rooted social interest in the past.¹³ This association with ‘scientific rigour’ gives it an aura of objectivity and legitimises it both domestically and internationally.

It should be noted at the outset – though this issue will be explored further – that, despite this undeniable success, namely the widespread, global conviction that Germany has learned the lessons of history and overcome its past, opposing claims are being voiced with increasing frequency. Meaning that, while the success is real, it is built on false premises because the reckoning is a myth, and in Germany a different myth still prevails: that of collective innocence.

Chapter ‘Against the sin of omission’ of this text will present Samuel Salzborn’s provocative thesis in detail:¹⁴ “Despite all official declarations about the successful reckoning with the era of National Socialism in post-war German history, the self-critical ‘confrontation with the past’ – in which, as Theodor W. Adorno called for, the past is genuinely worked through and its spell broken

12 See the study by the European Forum at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem on mutual perceptions between Israel and four selected European countries: Germany, France, the United Kingdom and Poland. When asked which countries they considered to be friendly towards Israel, Israeli respondents answered: Germany the most – 53%, Poland the least – 19%. When asked which they viewed as antisemitic: Germany the least at 21%, France the most at 55%, and Poland at 35%. As for whether relations with a given country could be described as ‘normal’: 70% responded positively in the case of Germany (the highest figure) and 38% in the case of Poland (the lowest). *Mutual Perceptions – Israel & Germany, France, Great Britain and Poland*, European Forum at the Hebrew University, hu-ef-barometer.huji.ac.il.

13 During earlier high-profile historical debates in Germany, interest in these discussions was largely confined to a narrow but influential group – the liberal-left intellectual elite. Today, however, it is increasingly shifting to the right wing of the political spectrum, creating the impression that historical policy is now most often discussed by MPs, activists and voters of the AfD.

14 S. Salzborn, *Kollektive Unschuld: Die Abwehr der Shoah im deutschen Erinnern* [Collective Innocence. The Wish to Repress the Shoah in German Collective Memory], Hentrich und Hentrich Verlag, Berlin 2020. Own translation.

by clear awareness – took only a rudimentary form. Over the course of several decades, society transformed from a community of perpetrators during the National Socialist period into a post-war community of memory suppression, bound together by antisemitic projections and fantasies of ethnic self-victimisation”.

3. The phases of German historical policy according to the theory of moral narratives

Łuczewski identifies several distinct phases through which Germany’s historical policy evolved after the Second World War. In the first phase, lasting until the 1960s, the dominant strategy was one of denial and silence regarding responsibility for war crimes and the Holocaust. In West Germany, both society and the political elite, focused on rebuilding the country during the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle) and avoided confrontation with the past. In East Germany, a narrative was constructed portraying themselves as an anti-fascist nation, shifting responsibility for Nazi crimes onto West Germany (as discussed later).

In the West, the government of Konrad Adenauer refrained from any broad reckoning with Nazi criminals, and many former Nazis held high-ranking positions across various levels of the state administration, entrenching a culture of silence. The subject of responsibility was ignored, with the focus placed instead on portraying Germans as the victims of Allied bombings and expulsions.

A telling example of this attitude was Heinrich Lübke, President of the Federal Republic from 1959 to 1969. He concealed his activities during the war, when he had worked for an architectural firm¹⁵ involved in designing facilities for the defence industry, including barracks for concentration camp prisoners, using forced labour. Historical research conducted in the 21st century revealed, for example, that among 58 senior officials in the Federal President’s Office born before 1929, as many as 20 had been members of the Nazi Party, four belonged to the SA (*Sturmabteilung*), and eight to the Hitler Youth.¹⁶ The higher

¹⁵ He was not directly a member of the inner leadership headed by Albert Speer, Minister of Armaments and War Production in Nazi Germany, but he worked for the architectural firm Schlempp, which carried out work commissioned by Speer, including designs for barracks intended for forced labourers and potential prisoners. The allegations concerned his knowledge of, and role in, this process.

¹⁶ At the request of President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, a team of scholars led by historian Norbert Frei analysed the terms in office and biographies of the first federal presidents between 1949 and 1994. This research project was not the first of its kind. In recent years, for example, both the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry of Justice have also examined their own institutional pasts. The findings are similar across the board. In politics, the judiciary and the civil service, former National Socialists returned to positions of authority after the establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949. Source: F. Bohr, ‘Die braune Vergangenheit der einstigen Bundespräsidenten’, *Spiegel Geschichte*, 11 October 2023, [spiegel.de](https://www.spiegel.de).

the official's position, the more likely it was that their biography concealed some involvement during the Nazi era.

This kind of silence and evasion of responsibility was also present among the German public. As early as the 1940s, Karl Jaspers, in his essay on guilt,¹⁷ called for collective conversion, but he held little hope that this wish would be fulfilled, believing that Germany was not yet mature enough to accept responsibility for its crimes.

Resistance to reckoning was also visible in the approach to memorials. Łuczewski cites examples of a policy of silence, such as the history of the former concentration camp in Dachau, liberated by American forces in 1945, which became a global symbol of Nazi crimes. Images of piles of bodies and emaciated prisoners spread around the world, and the American occupation authorities decided to turn the site into a space for the re-education of German society. Soon after, however, local authorities embarked on efforts to minimise the significance of Dachau as a site of remembrance. There were plans to transform the grounds into a work centre for 'asocial elements' and a space for everyday life. Former barracks were used to house displaced persons from the East, and a school, kindergarten and shops were established within the camp's grounds. It was not until 1965, under pressure from international public opinion and former prisoners, that an official memorial was established there, which served as a stronger impetus for change in Germany's historical policy.

Its reorientation began in the late 1950s as a result of several processes. Crucial among them were judicial proceedings against war criminals, such as the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem (1961) and the Frankfurt trials of the Auschwitz camp personnel (1963–1965). At the same time, the radicalisation of the younger generation within the 1968 movement, along with the broadcast of the American miniseries *Holocaust* in 1979,¹⁸ forced society to confront the reality of the Shoah. This period also saw the emergence of social movements, such as the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (*Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste*), which sought to come to terms with the Nazi legacy. These efforts were accompanied by political gestures, including the German-led reconstruction of Coventry Cathedral, financial and military support for Israel, and the historic act of Chancellor Willy Brandt, who in 1970 knelt before the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw.

¹⁷ K. Jaspers, *The question of German guilt* (translated by E.B. Ashton), Fordham University Press, New York 2000.

¹⁸ The TV miniseries *Holocaust* (directed by Marvin J. Chomsky, NBC 1978/79), broadcast in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1979, played a groundbreaking role in raising the collective awareness of Nazi crimes. It was watched by over 20 million Germans, and its broadcast was accompanied by intense media debate, a surge in reports to prosecutors concerning Nazi crimes, and a sudden surge in interest in the Holocaust – including among young people.

In the 1980s, a Germany led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl made an attempt at another shift – a conservative turn (*geistig-moralische Wende*) aimed at the ‘normalisation’ of the German identity. Kohl sought to ensure that German history would not be defined solely by the trauma of Nazism but would also include other aspects of the nation’s past. In one speech to the Bundestag, he stated: “We Germans must come to terms with our history, with its grandeur and its misery, leaving nothing out and adding nothing. We must take our history as it was and is: a central part of Europe’s historical existence at the heart of the continent”.¹⁹ Another of the chancellor’s phrases, the ‘grace of late birth’ (*Gnade der späten Geburt*), was meant to underscore that younger generations of Germans bear no responsibility for the crimes of National Socialism, but that they also do not have the full right to criticise the older generations.

As a consequence of this policy, initiatives emerged to establish new institutions, such as the House of History in Bonn and the German Historical Museum in Berlin, intended to present the history of the Federal Republic as a process of overcoming the crisis. However, this attempt faced strong intellectual and public resistance. Tensions were already high following Ronald Reagan’s 1985 visit to the Bitburg cemetery, where soldiers of the Waffen-SS were among those buried there. These tensions culminated in the aforementioned 1986 *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute), during which Jürgen Habermas accused Kohl’s supporters of relativising the crimes of National Socialism and of attempting to ‘normalise’ German history in order to use it as a foundation for constructing a new national identity. Heinrich August Winkler, for his part, argued that the only proper conclusion to be drawn from the past was the duty of solidarity with the victims of German supremacism – above all, the Jews and the Poles.²⁰

A turning point in the shift of German historical policy came with the speech delivered by President Richard von Weizsäcker on 8 May 1985, in which he described the end of the war as “a day of liberation from the National Socialist system of tyranny”. In doing so, he introduced the narrative of conversion, aiming to present the collapse of Nazi Germany not only as a catastrophe, but also as a turning point that led to the moral revival of the country.

In the 1990s, following the reunification of Germany, a memory policy took root in which the Holocaust remained the central point of reference, though this did not put an end to public controversy. One example was the heated debate in 1998 following a speech by writer Martin Walser, who claimed that

19 Source: J.S. Eder, *Holocaust Angst: The Federal Republic of Germany and American Holocaust Memory since the 1970s*, Oxford University Press, p. 31.

20 See the selection of essays by H.A. Winkler, *Auf ewig in Hitlers Schatten? Über die Deutschen und ihre Geschichte*, C.H. Beck, München 2018.

Auschwitz was being instrumentalised as a 'moral cudgel' against the Germans, expressing frustration at the constant reproach over their guilt and the continual 'display of their shame'. Ignatz Bubis, then chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, called him a 'spiritual instigator' and a 'closet antisemite'. Walser's critics deemed his remarks to be particularly dangerous because he was a highly credible figure – the author of essays on the Auschwitz trials, in which he wrote that "everyone has their share in Auschwitz" and called for that complicity to be examined.²¹

Despite these tensions, Berlin's state historical policy entered the 21st century with a series of major commemorative initiatives. These included the opening of the Jewish Museum in Berlin (2001), a new exhibition at Dachau (2003), the permanent exhibition at the German Historical Museum (DHM) in Berlin (2006), the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche in Dresden (2005), and the unveiling of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin (2005).

The opening of the latter seemed to indicate that the German 'wave of commemorations' had reached its peak, and scholars began to believe that most of the major remembrance projects had already been completed. Yet in 2010, the Topography of Terror museum was opened to the public, and in 2021, the Documentation Centre of the Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation Foundation (a project debated and developed for many years) was also inaugurated. According to its original concept, it would function as a Centre Against Expulsions.²²

Both initiatives confirm the argument that German historical policy is enduring. Its functions and objectives do not disappear but evolve in response to the current needs of the state. There is no 'end of history' to be found here – if a new need is defined in Berlin, the political will to implement another memory project is likely to follow. For this reason, there remains space for new museums and monuments – both on the mental map of the German public and on the geographical map of Berlin and other major cities. And this not only applies to projects focused strictly on German history, such as the planned Future Centre for German Unity and European Transformation in Halle,²³ but also to those that could bring the history of the Nazi occupation of Poland into the broader German awareness. At present – after

21 Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, who, like many German intellectuals, took part in this debate, wrote to Walser: "Do you not understand that you have opened the door for people who have entirely different political goals and are dangerous in a completely different way?" Source: A. Kwiatkowska, *It's not (only) about Erika Steinbach. Three myths in the German discourse on the resettlements*, OSW, Warsaw 2010, osw.waw.pl.

22 For more detail see *Ibid.*, p. 17 and W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć...*, *op. cit.*

23 The Future Centre for German Unity and European Transformation (*Zukunftszentrum für Deutsche Einheit und Europäische Transformation*) will focus on the changes in Germany and Europe after 1989, with particular attention given to the East German experience. The chosen location is Halle (Saale). The centre is scheduled to open in 2028, with its construction estimated to cost around €200 million.

many years of efforts and numerous complications – work is underway on the construction of a monument in Berlin to the Polish victims of German occupation, along with the Memorial and Meeting Place with Poland (see chapter ‘A German house. Controversy over the commemoration of the Polish victims of the Second World War’).

In summary, drawing on Łuczewski’s theory, it is possible to identify elements of all three types of moral narratives within the post-war German culture of remembrance and state historical policy. Germany gradually moved away from a narrative of denial and silence towards an open acknowledgment of guilt, redefining its national identity through the memory of the Holocaust. Crucially, the establishment of the conversion narrative in such a spectacular form as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe was only possible because it had been preceded by the grounding of an ethos-based narrative, represented for example by the House of History of the Federal Republic and the German Historical Museum. Only on this foundation could a return-to-origins narrative emerge – not just at the local level, but nationally and federally – allowing for the commemoration of expulsions, the victims of Allied bombings, or the German opponents of Hitler, and for the creation of dedicated museums and monuments for these groups. The promotion of critical self-reflection became a source of moral capital. Breaking with the perpetrators and their actions, and taking the side of the victims, allowed their descendants to tell a new story – one framed in terms of strength of character and moral transformation.²⁴

Tracing the transformation of these identities by examining memorials, Łuczewski points to Buchenwald, Dachau, the Topography of Terror, the Jewish Museum and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe as **representations of a German identity as perpetrators or places of confrontation with perpetration**. Another group of monuments reflects the ethos-based narrative – **depicting victors and heroes** – and includes the rebuilt Frauenkirche in Dresden, the House of History of the Federal Republic, the German Historical Museum, and, in particular, the German Resistance Memorial Centre (*Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand*).

The latter is a striking example of the evolution of German historical policy. Although today it is a key institution, it is important to remember that, initially, the memory of the conspirators who carried out the 20 July 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler was uncomfortable for German society. In the 1950s, many Germans saw figures such as Claus von Stauffenberg not

²⁴ President Joachim Gauck, speaking at the opening of the Forced Paths exhibition, stated: “By commemorating its own victims, a nation today no longer risks falling into nationalism. The awareness of its own guilt of the century now forms part of German identity”.

as heroes but as traitors. Their actions were marginalised, and their families were often discriminated against, sometimes even denied the benefits granted to the relatives of former Nazis. It was only through generational change and a growing culture of critical reflection that this perception began to shift.

This shift made it possible to open the museum in 1968, marking the beginning of public recognition for the German resistance movement, which over time even came to be idealised. Today, the exhibition at the Memorial Centre documents the full spectrum of opposition to the regime – from military conspirators and members of the White Rose group to the clergy and manual labourers. By presenting their motivations and sacrifices, the institution fulfils a key political function: it symbolically underscores – and arguably overstates – the idea that the democratic Federal Republic of Germany is the heir to the tradition of the resistance to totalitarianism, not the successor to a criminal regime.

The third pillar of German historical policy – viewed through the lens of identity – is the identity of victims, represented by sites commemorating the crimes of communism, such as the Berlin Wall Memorial, part of the exhibition at Buchenwald, or the Documentation Centre of the Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation Foundation.

It is worth noting, however, that significant shifts are also occurring within this category. Victims of the war and the Nazi regime are increasingly remembered today as if they were primarily part of German society: German women, German Jews, German homosexuals, German members of the resistance, and political opponents.²⁵

4. East German narratives

The reckoning with Nazism in East Germany unfolded in a completely different manner than in the West²⁶ From the very beginning, the East German authorities consistently maintained that their state bore no responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich, as it was the heir to the communist resistance movement and constituted an ‘anti-fascist’ state. The consequence of this narrative was to fully shift responsibility for the Nazi past onto West Germany, which was portrayed as the regime’s true successor, filled with former Nazis in high-ranking positions. At the same time, Germans were discouraged from taking a deeper reflection on the public support for Nazism, and the issue of

25 K.M. Zalewski, *The Berlin Republic. Evolution of Germany’s politics of memory and German patriotism*, OSW, Warsaw 2009, osw.waw.pl; H. Radziejowska, M. Fałkowski, ‘Jak wygląda niemiecka wina i pamięć 85 lat po wybuchu II wojny światowej? Mówi o tym sondaż przeprowadzony właśnie w Niemczech’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1 September 2024, tygodnikpowszechny.pl.

26 Based on such publications as: J. Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanies*, Harvard University Press, 1997; S. Talabardon, ‘Jüdisches Leben in der DDR’, *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 8 October 2021, bpb.de.

guilt was played down by claiming that Nazism was an ideology imposed by capitalist elites.

Admittedly, a few trials were held against high-ranking Nazis, but large segments of society – including rank-and-file members of the Nazi Party and officials from the Nazi administration – faced no prosecution unless they were deemed to be opponents of the new regime. This enabled the political instrumentalisation of memory, in which the only ‘true’ victims of Nazism were German communists and other anti-fascist fighters, while what had happened to other groups, including the Jews, was marginalised.

The absence of reparations for the Jews highlights East Germany’s politically expedient handling of memory policy. The memory of the Holocaust was systematically marginalised in this country. Museums and monuments focused primarily on the German resistance movement, especially on communists and socialists imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps. A common practice was to portray the Holocaust not as a crime committed by Germans against Jews, but as the result of capitalist fascism, which was defeated by the workers’ movement. Historical education also largely bypassed the subject or treated it selectively – the main emphasis was placed on the anti-fascist struggle waged by the communists.

Buchenwald – the concentration camp near Weimar – provides one example of the political appropriation of historical memory. After the war, it fell within the Soviet occupation zone and later in East Germany. Between 1945 and 1950, the NKVD transformed it into a Soviet special camp (*Speziallager Nr. 2*), where not only former Nazis (often of lower rank) were held, but also civilians, young people and German political opponents of the new regime, many of whom had been arbitrarily arrested. A large number died in dire conditions, and the subject remained taboo for decades. In 1958, the vast Buchenwald National Memorial (*Nationale Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Buchenwald*) was opened there, which – in line with the official narrative – emphasised the role of German communists as the main victims of Nazism and leaders of the camp resistance movement. In 1990, mass graves of victims of the NKVD special camp were discovered there, which sparked a heated debate about Buchenwald serving two systems of terror.²⁷ Similar reinterpretations took place at other memorial sites, which were turned into symbols of the working class’s struggle against fascism, with little reflection on the fate of Jews or other persecuted groups.

It was only in the 1980s that the East German authorities began to gradually modify their approach to memory policy – partly under international

27 It was only in the 1990s that the site was reconstructed and a new exhibition concept was developed – one that also acknowledged the victims of the communist special camp.

pressure and partly out of a need to improve the state's image. Increasingly, symbolic gestures were made to acknowledge the Jewish victims of Nazism (for example, the 1988 commemoration of the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*), but their significance remained limited. Real steps toward integrating the memory of the Holocaust into the national narrative were taken only in the final months of the country's existence and after German reunification. Even then, for much of East German society, the dominant point of reference in the collective memory remained the struggle against fascism, not German guilt.

After the fall of communism, many East Germans began to see themselves as victims – first of Nazism, then of the communist system. As a result, differences in attitudes toward memory remain visible today between the eastern and western parts of Germany. Although contemporary historical policy in the unified state is based on the West German model (with all its evolution), the legacy of how the past was manipulated in East Germany serves as a reminder that German memory policy has never been entirely uniform, and that for decades, the east of what is now the Federal Republic of Germany avoided coming to terms with the past to the extent this had been undertaken in the west. Even today, differences persist, partly due to the varying educational policies across the federal states.

The claim to implement the German model

The process of Germany building moral capital is not yet over. For years, we have witnessed its historical policy entering a new phase of an ethos-based narrative, centred on the claim of a full and internationally recognised reckoning with its past. This has enabled Germany to position itself as a moral model for other nations, and the approach developed through conversion and self-reflection is no longer merely a proposal – it is increasingly being promoted as a European standard.

In this context, the claim emerges that every nation should follow the German path: a path of breaking with a past full of wrongdoing and moving towards a future founded on righteousness and moral purification. According to Jaspers' concept,²⁸ no nation is free from guilt, which means that, in principle, every country, regardless of its history, can be offered a 'conversion'. No national identity is entirely innocent; it can be assumed that not all members of a given nation were victims, and that the majority were likely passive bystanders, if not outright perpetrators. A critical reflection on history thus becomes

28 K. Jaspers, *The question of German guilt...*, op. cit.

an obligation for all – not only for Germans – and the path of conversion is presented as a universal solution. More than that, in the face of the absolute evil of the Holocaust (which in Germany is regarded as a European negative founding myth), it is seen as the only correct stance.

1. Yeti – the myth of ‘European memory’

The universalism of this narrative reinforces Germany’s claim to play a central role in the European and global discourse on memory. But that is not the whole story. This process also involves the reciprocal legitimisation of German standards at the EU level. In this context, Łuczewski quotes the political scientist Claus Leggewie:²⁹ “Although the Europeanisation of German historical policy may seem pretentious, the fact remains that antisemitism and fascism were pan-European phenomena: the slaughter of the Jews would not have been possible without the broad collaboration of European governments and citizens”, with the Vichy regime, and the pogroms in Kielce and Jedwabne being, for him, the most significant symbols of this.

This narrative is often distorted and used (as discussed in chapter ‘Against the sin of omission’ of this text) to create or at least suggest a ‘symmetry of guilt’: only a high degree of reflectiveness, critical engagement with one’s own past and the identification with the victims make it possible to meet the new standard, to which ‘less reflective’ and ‘less critical’ nations must conform. Countries like Poland are therefore expected to ‘follow the example’ of the German model of coming to terms with the past. The efforts already made by the Polish state and society to confront the darker chapters of their history are overlooked or marginalised in this process.

The conversion model thus becomes part of the European project of reconciliation and the construction of a shared historical memory. The way in which the claim to Europeanise the German model of historical policy functions in practice was discussed e.g. in the *Sigillum Authenticum* podcast³⁰ by the Polish historians and experts Dr Dawid Gralik and Dr Adrian Trzos, who analysed the controversies surrounding the European Parliament resolution on the European historical consciousness adopted on 17 January 2024. The resolution was passed through the ‘own-initiative procedure’, meaning it did not result from a general demand but arose at the initiative of a specific individual – German MEP Sabine Verheyen from the Christian Democratic Union.

Researchers have pointed out that the resolution is clearly political in nature and uses terms that are difficult to define unambiguously, such as

29 C. Leggewie, *Seven Circles of European Memory*, Springer, London & New York 2011, source: M. Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny...*, op. cit., pp. 346–348.

30 A. Wójcik, ‘Odcinek 31: Europejska świadomość historyczna?’, *Sigillum Authenticum* podcast, 22 March 2024, youtube.com.

‘pan-European memory’, ‘collective memory’, ‘European historical memory’ or ‘European identity’. It identifies shared values – including democracy, solidarity and freedom – as the foundations of the European historical consciousness. The aim of the document is to counter phenomena such as fascism, Nazism, Stalinism, colonial thinking, Eurocentrism, antisemitism and anti-Roma racism. The text of the resolution refers to the experiences of the 20th century, classifying them along an East–West divide: for Western Europe, the reference point is the Holocaust and the Nazi regime, while for Eastern Europe, it is Stalinism; the fact that it is precisely Stalinism and not communism is likely due to the continued presence of communist parties in the European Parliament. Although the document is not legally binding, it reflects the position of the European Parliament, which calls on the European Commission and member states to take specific actions – for example, to develop a shared history textbook. The accompanying reports already include specific examples, such as the Polish-German textbook *Europe – Our History*.

While the resolution includes a reference to the freedom of teaching and academic research, it simultaneously restricts that freedom to the framework of values promoted by the European Union. In this context, it is particularly concerning that this reference is combined with the claim that there is no single, indisputable historical truth that can be defended or monopolised. This opens the door to relativism and raises questions about who will decide which interpretations of the past still fall within the boundaries of ‘European values’ – and which do not.

Historians rightly ask whether it is even possible to develop a coherent European historical memory – particularly in light of the vast differences in national experiences, regional tensions, separatist movements and the impact of migration. These concerns focus on the creation of a uniform, pan-European memory and the potential ‘monopolisation’ of interpretations of the key events of the 20th century. This may lead to member states’ sovereignty being undermined, as they may be forced to align their memory policies with EU standards. Many countries, including Poland, have expressed concern that the establishment of a single European historical memory could marginalise complex and multilayered national experiences that do not fit the dominant paradigm.

The vote on the resolution revealed clear political divisions: the left and centre voted in favour, while the right voted against it.³¹ In France, critical voices emerged, warning of an attempt to replace national history with a European narrative. In Poland – despite the resolution’s potential consequences – it

31 For details of the vote see Texts adopted – European historical consciousness – Wednesday, 17 January 2024.

passed with almost no public reaction. This, in turn, exposes the weakness of Poland's historical policy, which is still used primarily for internal political battles rather than to actively shape European memory narratives.³²

Germany's self-presentation as the 'moral leader of Europe' and the universalisation of historical memory carry significant risks. First, the European memory model promoted by Germany presents it as the country that has dealt with its past the most thoroughly. Furthermore, it sidelines less comfortable topics, such as the lack of historical awareness in German society, and avoids full responsibility. Second, in relation to Central and Eastern European states, the German narrative often takes on a didactic tone. Countries such as Poland are encouraged (or instructed) to follow the German path – despite having entirely different historical experiences. This blurs specific responsibilities and relativises the past. The Holocaust was a crime against humanity, and it must not be forgotten that it was organised and carried out by a specific state against a specific nation, among them Polish citizens.

2. The German model does not work for Poland

Germany's historical policy, as a paradigmatic model of reflection on the past is one rooted in a deep sense of responsibility for crimes and in the promotion of democratic values; and it can indeed serve as an important source of inspiration. However, even German scholars themselves point to the limitations of applying this model universally. Germany has a unique history – not only as the perpetrator of one of the greatest crimes of the 20th century, but also as a nation marked by division and later reunification. This particular historical experience makes the German model difficult to transplant onto countries that do not share a comparable past. In the case of nations that were themselves the victims of aggression or colonialism, the dominant narrative is more likely to focus on suffering rather than perpetration. Blindly applying the German model in such contexts is usually either impossible or simply harmful.

Furthermore, it is essential to combat the unfounded narrative, often promoted by radicals, that insists on a supposed 'symmetry of guilt' and on the necessity of going through a process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) in the German style. The only way to oppose this is through an active resistance to attempts to equate Germany's guilt with that of any other nation. It was Germany – as a state and as a society – that failed the test of humanity, by planning and carrying out the industrial annihilation of

32 This topic is frequently raised in articles by Estera Flieger, for example, here: 'Polityka historyczna. Bolesna lekcja od Niemiec', *Plus Minus*, 5 July 2024, rp.pl/plus-minus.

Jews and other nations. Without Germany's actions, the Holocaust would not have been possible – either in Western Europe or in the 'bloodlands'³³ – even though antisemitism had existed there for centuries. Any manifestation of xenophobia and hatred must be condemned. However, equating the Holocaust with general antisemitism is an egregious manipulation. So is equating the guilt of the main perpetrators – the architects of genocide – with their helpers, regardless of the motives behind their actions. Symmetrical narratives of this kind are not only historically inaccurate, they are also deeply immoral.

This does not mean that Poland should avoid addressing the darker chapters of its own history or shirk responsibility. On the contrary – both academic debate and political action must make room for reflection on the mistakes, crimes and complicity of Polish citizens, regardless of their ethnicity. Rejecting the German model simply means that this process must be adapted to a Polish context and Polish values.

Examples of this kind of reflection can be found both in the public discourse and in specific institutional or scholarly gestures. Among the most important are public acknowledgments of Polish co-responsibility for crimes committed against Jews – such as the speeches delivered by President Aleksander Kwaśniewski (at Jedwabne in 2001) and President Bronisław Komorowski (in 2011). President Lech Kaczyński also played a key role in the maturing of Poland's memory policy. In 2009, he apologised for the annexation of Trans-Olza Silesia, calling it a 'sin'; he supported commemorations of the victims of the Jedwabne pogrom; and, as mayor of Warsaw, he participated in anniversary events, clearly emphasising that historical truth – even when uncomfortable – is essential when building a mature national identity.

In the field of academic research, studies on the difficult aspects of the past are being systematically developed – among others by the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences (PAN), the Institute of Political Studies at PAN, and at many Polish universities. The Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) also conducts research projects documenting the crimes committed by Poles against Jews, Ukrainians, and Germans, as well as holding debates on Polish society's attitudes toward minorities. These efforts, though often the subject of controversy, testify to an ongoing reflection on Poland's complex and multidimensional history.

In the educational and civic spheres, several non-governmental organisations deserve recognition, such as the Jewish Historical Institute Association, the Forum for Dialogue Foundation, the "Remembrance, Responsibility and

33 T. Snyder, *Bloodlands. Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Basic Books, 2010.

Future” Foundation, and many others that foster a grassroots remembrance culture – by commemorating the sites of atrocities, organising local debates, and launching educational initiatives at schools.

Moreover, as a nation that was a victim of both Nazism and Communism, Poland cannot adopt the German model without serious consequences for its national identity, since it is rooted in the memory of the heroes, the wronged and the fallen – not in a break from the past. As Łuczewski argues, rejecting this established narrative would deprive Poland of its moral capital. Furthermore, he warns of the danger that a dominant European narrative might emerge in which a tragic history ceases to serve an educational purpose and is spoken of only as a catastrophe. In a framework of this kind, the only ethically acceptable story would indeed become the story of conversion. States that do not adopt this narrative would have significantly fewer chances of attaining moral status within the European community. It must not be allowed that a ‘processed’ past is simply placed on a shelf – it must remain present as a teacher of life.

Against the sin of omission

Let us return to the statements quoted at the beginning of this essay. First, **the argument presented thus far has clearly demonstrated that the claim that a German state historical policy does not exist is a myth.** The Federal Republic of Germany is an active and conscious actor in this field, both domestically and internationally.

All commemorative initiatives mentioned in the text – especially the memorials, museums and monuments – bear the imprint of German state involvement, even if some of them originated from grassroots social initiatives. In fact, any instance where the state is involved – particularly through funding, inviting specific researchers to collaborate, or making institutional decisions – is equivalent to the implementation of state historical policy. Ultimately, it is the state that decides on the shape of the project, the selection of partners and the message which will be communicated. Therefore, the importance of the political decisions that led to the creation or revitalisation of various memorials and other symbolic structures cannot be overstated.

The project to build a monument to the victims of the Nazi occupation of Poland, which will be erected in Berlin, is a stark contemporary example of the vitality of Germany’s state historical policy. The diplomatic disputes over the inscription that is to appear on the monument vividly highlight how

important each word can be in Germany's memory landscape, both politically and symbolically.

However, it is worth reiterating a point already made here: although West Germany's policy on history is deeply rooted in political considerations, it has sought to neutralise this dimension by placing the primary emphasis on the moral aspect. Therefore, if the German model were to serve as an inspiration for Poland, it would be precisely in this sphere, which Łuczewski describes as the "paradox of accumulating moral capital": an effective historical policy cannot be perceived as political, because that would undermine its moral credibility.

The accumulation of moral capital often requires suppressing the political and strategic element and placing moral values at the core. Thus, for a state initiative in the moral sphere to be effective, the state must suppress this dissonance and ensure that its actions are not perceived as political. An effective historical policy must therefore not only be well thought out, but also subtle.³⁴

Secondly, the historical debates initiated and conducted in Germany over the past decades which we have already mentioned prove that they occur cyclically, in waves, every few years or decades. This debunks the myth that it is 'too late' for Poland to participate in the most important historical debates and that it no longer has a chance to appear in the German historical discourse in its preferred way. It is therefore untrue that Poles are incapable of making German society aware of the tragic uniqueness of the German occupation of Poland or of demanding an adequate and just compensation for this.

In light of current events – especially the consequences of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – and ongoing research in Germany regarding coming to terms with the Nazi past, it is clear that Germany is facing at least two more historical debates. Their significance may prove to be groundbreaking, comparable to those past moments that once radically reshaped Germany's historical consciousness. These could be debates of the same magnitude as the one that redefined the perception and commemoration of 8 May 1945 – what used to be a day of defeat and national shame has become a day of liberation, or even of victory.

The first of these upcoming debates may lead to a **confrontation with the myth of a 'complete reckoning' with the Nazi past**, likely reopening difficult topics – including in relations with Poland.

The second will address the issue of **confronting Germany's colonialism and imperialism in the east** – a process already initiated in the context of the

34 M. Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny...*, op. cit., pp. 342–343.

Russian invasion of Ukraine. This includes a revision of the traditional German sense of guilt directed exclusively toward Russians and which omits the other nations of the former Soviet Union – especially Ukrainians and Belarusians – in the context of the Second World War.

Both debates – like earlier ones – may once again reshape or significantly broaden historical consciousness in Germany.

1. Samuel Salzborn and the myth of the ‘complete German reckoning’

The critique of their historical policy most painful for Germans – one that could spark a new debate – has been presented by scholars such as Samuel Salzborn,³⁵ who directly challenges the widespread belief in Germany’s full reckoning with its past. In his book *Kollektive Unschuld: Die Abwehr der Shoah im deutschen Erinnern*, as well as in various press publications on the topic,³⁶ Salzborn questions the idea that Germany has truly come to terms with its National Socialist past, calling it one of the greatest founding myths of the country’s historical policy. In his view, this is a well-functioning myth – deeply rooted in the public consciousness but disconnected from actual social processes.

The belief in an independent and conscious reckoning with Nazism is one of the main pillars of this myth, although – as Salzborn demonstrates – this reckoning was imposed on Germany from the outside, primarily by the Allies. In the postwar decades, it was taken up by a narrow group of committed intellectuals – mainly from liberal-left academic and Jewish circles. It was neither a widespread phenomenon nor one widely accepted by society. Furthermore, the process as a whole was never truly completed – and today it is even being rejected. Salzborn points out that in 1949 25% of Germans still openly identified as antisemites, and in 1952 one-third of the population expressed antisemitic views – half of whom were explicitly against paying reparations to Holocaust victims. According to a 2019 survey by the World Jewish Congress, as many as 41% of Germans believe that Jews talk about the Holocaust too much.

In post-war Germany, the confrontation with the past unfolded according to a pattern described by Salzborn as a drift between the erosion of memory and an obsession with memory. The first two decades were dominated by a paradigm of amnesty: decriminalisation, the mitigation of guilt and the integration of former officials from the Nazi state apparatus into the new administration of the Federal Republic of Germany, often in senior positions. At the same time, in the symbolic sphere, a myth of German suffering was taking shape, particularly around the themes of aerial bombardment and expulsions, supported by both

³⁵ S. Salzborn, *Kollektive Unschuld...*, op. cit.

³⁶ *Idem*, ‘Deutschland und der Nationalsozialismus: Die Lüge von der Aufarbeitung’, *Spiegel Politik*, 6 March 2020, [spiegel.de](https://www.spiegel.de).

the state and society. The films, television series and literature of the 1950s and 1960s consistently constructed a narrative portraying Germans as victims of history. As evidence, Salzborn cites hard data: to date, Germany has paid €75.5 billion in compensation to the victims of Nazism, while €67 billion has been allocated as restitution for expellees, many of whom actively supported the Nazi regime. 3.5 million deutschmarks were spent on the documentation of the expulsions alone in the 1950s, and work on it continued for ten years. This also illustrates the strength of the drive to entrench the image of Germans as victims.

An equally significant gap emerged between public and private memory. While the former, which is institutionalised at the state level, to a very large extent incorporated narratives of German agency and responsibility, family memory consistently portrayed their forebears as innocent victims. Convergence between the two levels of narrative occurred only in the case of the latter. Contemporary research confirms the durability of this pattern: according to MEMO Study, 69.8% of Germans believe that their ancestors were not perpetrators, 35.9% think they suffered, and 28.7% believe they helped the persecuted. Estimates, however, suggest that the actual proportion of those who actively provided assistance did not exceed 0.3%.³⁷

Salzborn also refers to the concept of the 'infantile lie', described by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in their psychosociological study³⁸ examining how former supporters of Hitler coped with the past. This concept is based on the belief that Germans were merely passive participants, 'betrayed by the Führer', and as a result were supposedly victims rather than perpetrators. This simplified perspective was passed down through generations – it was manifested in family photo albums with images in Wehrmacht uniforms, in sentimental souvenirs from the front, and in clubs and associations that carried on cultural forms from the Third Reich era. Despite official declarations of reckoning, the guilt of the Nazi era was, in many families, simply repressed or transformed into narratives of victimhood. Part of the reason for why this happened was due to the lack of personal confrontation with the history of one's own parents and grandparents – whose involvement in the Wehrmacht, SS, and in wartime and administrative operations remained visible for decades in family keepsakes, the language and traditions.

At the same time, as Salzborn emphasizes, roles began to be reversed in the collective narrative – both among the public and on governmental level:

³⁷ A study conducted in 2019 *MEMO study on the culture of remembrance in Germany*, Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft and in 2023 *MEMO Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor 2023*, Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG), Research Institute Social Cohesion (RISC), Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft, stiftung-evz.de.

³⁸ A. and M. Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, München 1967.

Germans were increasingly portrayed as a 'kidnapped nation', the victims of bombings, expulsions, and unjust treatment.³⁹ Alongside the real victims of the Nazi regime, figures began to emerge who legitimised the myth of the moral suffering of the entire nation.

Salzborn points out that Germany is currently trying to impose its model of memory policy as a standard for others, failing to recognise that beneath its surface lies the repression of responsibility and the myth of German innocence. He warns that this form of self-victimisation is becoming the foundation of the national identity, as demonstrated by the growing influence of AfD – the first far-right party in the Bundestag to garner double-digit support. Its representatives question the current memory policy, they express pride in the Wehrmacht, refer to the Holocaust Memorial as a 'monument of shame', and call for Germany to make an about turn in its approach to its past. A survey conducted by the Allensbach Institute shows that 55% of AfD voters believe that Jews have too much influence worldwide.⁴⁰

The belief, passed down through the generations, that their families were victims is especially dangerous, because the children and grandchildren of perpetrators, lacking knowledge of the Holocaust and other crimes, focus emotionally on their own – real or perceived – suffering. Salzborn argues that the repression of one's family's role as perpetrators has later resulted in the denial of guilt, hatred toward Israel, and uncritical solidarity with Palestinians. In the opinion of the journalist Alexandra Senfft, quoted by Salzborn, no historical education will be effective unless it is accompanied by a personal reckoning with one's connection to the past.

Salzborn draws a fundamental conclusion: the German policy of coming to terms with the past remains an unfinished process, and the myth of its success obscures the real issue – a cultural, emotional, and psychological failure to come to terms with history. Instead of closure, there is a distortion of the past, which undermines the foundations of democracy and creates room for revisionism, antisemitism, and populism. Any genuine attempt to fill this gap will not only take a long time but will also face resistance from groups that already question the need for historical confrontation – arguing that excessive reflection leads to a national identity crisis.

2. German colonialism in the East: the perspective of an emerging debate

As we can see, despite many years of educational efforts surrounding the Holocaust, German society has not fully confronted the tragic aspects of its

³⁹ J. Boehler, 'Niemcy popierali politykę Hitlera', *Wszystko co najważniejsze*, 30 August 2019, wszystkoanajwazniejsze.pl.

⁴⁰ T. Petersen, 'Wie antisemitisch ist Deutschland?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 June 2018, source: ifd-allensbach.de.

own past. While the Holocaust has been recognised as a 'crime without precedent', the crimes committed against Slavic nations – the Poles, Ukrainians, and Belarusians – still do not hold their rightful place in German collective memory. Public awareness of these issues is slowly growing, but they are still not regarded as a key element of the country's historical responsibility.

In the German public and academic discourse, there are increasingly frequent calls to revise the traditional understanding of colonialism. For decades, it was primarily associated with overseas activity – for example, German rule in Togo or Namibia.⁴¹ However, there is increasing acknowledgement that colonial practices, ideologies and language were also present in Germany's policy on Eastern Europe – especially in the territories of today's Poland, Ukraine and Lithuania. For decades, Germany has avoided a systemic reckoning with its imperial policy in the eastern part of the continent. Russia's war against Ukraine, along with calls to reassess the strategic mistakes in German policy towards Moscow over the past 30 years,⁴² now opens the door for Germany to once again deeply reflect on its attitude towards the East. It remains unclear whether this will lead to a genuine conversation – or whether, as has happened many times before, the topic will once again be marginalised.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has brought about a significant shift in how the German public perceives Russia and other issues. Ukraine has emerged in German consciousness not only as a victim of war but also as an independent actor – as a state and a society – with whom cooperation may be beneficial for Berlin. As a result, if the long-term isolation of Russia becomes a political reality, cooperation with Ukraine will require a redefinition of previous narratives. This may lead to the opening up of a discussion about German imperialism in the East.

This debate could be initiated for a number of reasons. Firstly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is contributing to the popularisation of knowledge about Ukraine's history, as well as to the exposure of the extent to which it was previously distorted by Russian propaganda. Secondly, there is growing discourse in Germany about a special responsibility toward Ukraine, one that dates back to the First World War. After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918, Germany and Austria-Hungary took control of large parts of Ukraine, establishing a quasi-protectorate governed by General Hermann von Eichhorn. The goal was the economic exploitation of the region, particularly in terms of grain supply. The German administration operated in a manner typical of colonial

41 'Völkermord an Herero und Nama: Abkommen zwischen Deutschland und Namibia', Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 22 June 2021, bpb.de.

42 J. Kukla, an interview with Marko Martin, 'Marko Martin: Niemieckie elity nie rozumieją, że nie można wchodzić w układy z Rosją', *Plus Minus*, 29 November 2024, rp.pl/plus-minus.

powers: it subordinated the local elites, controlled infrastructure and drained local resources.

An even more radical project was developed during the Third Reich. The *Generalplan Ost* (General Plan for the East) envisioned the subjugation, expulsion, and extermination of a significant portion of the Slavic population, as well as the settlement of these territories by German colonists. As Timothy Snyder notes, Ukraine was the central area of the Nazi colonial project, intended to supply food for German society.⁴³

Thirdly, it appears that decision-makers and commentators in Germany are increasingly aware that ignoring history – or misinterpreting it – can have catastrophic consequences for current politics. The propaganda accompanying the Russian invasion has starkly demonstrated how the instrumentalisation of the past can serve as a tool of aggression.⁴⁴

Fourthly, the growing interest of the German public in the history of Eastern Europe suggests that the topic of German colonialism in the region may gain renewed attention. This effort is being led by a younger generations of scholars, who are increasingly active on social media and in the public discourse – they may become the driving force behind another significant shift in Germany's historical consciousness.⁴⁵

An article by Agnieszka Pufelska and Felix Ackermann entitled *Der andere Kolonialismus* (The Other Colonialism), published in January 2025 in the German edition of *Le Monde diplomatique* serves as an important and thought-provoking contribution to the discussion of German colonialism in Polish territories.⁴⁶ The authors present the Greater Poland region as an example of intra-European colonialism, pointing to the consistently pursued policy of colonisation, Germanisation, and racist exploitation implemented in the region by Prussia, the German Empire, and later the Third Reich.

The authors point to the Imperial Castle in Poznań as a symbol of this policy. It was built on the orders of Emperor Wilhelm II and was intended to serve as an architectural manifestation of German rule in the East. The monumental structure, designed in the neo-Romanesque style evoking the mythical golden age of the empire in the 11th and 12th centuries, was meant not only to demonstrate German power but also to visually represent the civilising mission that Germany assigned itself in relation to the eastern lands. This

⁴³ T. Snyder, 'Nazistowskie sny o zniewolonej Ukrainie', *Krytyka Polityczna*, 12 July 2017, krytykapolityczna.pl.

⁴⁴ See A. Kwiatkowska (ed.), *Making up for lost time. Germany in the era of the Zeitenwende*, OSW, Warsaw 2023, osw.waw.pl.

⁴⁵ Various educational initiatives are being launched in an effort to expand knowledge about the history of Ukraine and Ukrainian-German relations – for example, a special history portal has been created by the German-Ukrainian Historians' Commission, available at: ukrainianhistoryportal.org. See also Ostausschuss, salonkolumnisten.com/ostausschuss.

⁴⁶ A. Pufelska, F. Ackermann, 'Der andere Kolonialismus', *Le Monde diplomatique*, 9 January 2025, monde-diplomatique.de.

form of ‘intra-European colonisation’ did not stop at architecture. It also unfolded on the institutional, social and ideological levels. Prussia, and later the German Empire, pursued a systematic assimilation policy towards the Polish population. The culmination of these practices was the work of the Prussian Settlement Commission (1886–1918), who were tasked with buying land from Poles and resettling it with German peasants. The Expropriation Act of 1908 allowed the Prussian state to forcibly confiscate land from Polish owners – an act deeply rooted in the colonial logic of spatial control and the elimination of indigenous influence.

Racist rhetoric toward Poles was widespread and systemically entrenched. They were portrayed as culturally backward, incapable of self-governance, and unfit for the demands of ‘modernity’ and Western civilisation. Especially in propaganda, there was a pronounced fear of ‘racial mixing’ – Polish women were presented as a threat to the German cultural and moral identity due to their potential relationships with German men. This kind of narrative had clear parallels in overseas colonies, where sexual relations and marriages between colonisers and the native population were strictly forbidden.

In another text⁴⁷ the aforementioned researchers point to the dual nature of Prussian racism, noting that it targeted not only Catholic Poles but also Polish Jews. They wrote that the terrifying vision of a Jewish flood from the East – promoted by prominent contemporaries such as Heinrich von Treitschke (a historian and apologist for Prussia and Bismarck) – gained traction in part because it aligned with fears of a Slavic threat. These symbolic framings of the Jews and the Poles as Prussia’s ‘others’ were mutually reinforcing and interdependent. In January 1886, Bismarck confirmed his decision in the Prussian Landtag to expel over 30,000 Poles with no Prussian citizenship from Berlin and the eastern provinces, stating: “We want to get rid of foreign Poles because we already have enough of our own”.

Pufelska and Ackermann point out that Prussia’s colonial policy had solid ideological and intellectual foundations. Thinkers like the abovementioned Heinrich von Treitschke and Paul Langhans promoted not only the idea of an overseas empire but also the notion of a ‘German East’ – a space for Germany’s civilising mission, analogous to Africa. This colonial imagination encompassed both cartography (for example, the *Deutscher Kolonial-Atlas* from 1892) and political discourse. Chancellor Bernhard von Bülow explicitly claimed that the colonisation of the German East was “Germany’s greatest and only true colonial achievement”.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ A. Pufelska, F. Ackermann, ‘Postpreußen’, *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 9 March 2025, geschichtedergegenwart.ch.

⁴⁸ H.-J. Bömelburg, *Friedrich II. zwischen Deutschland und Polen*, Stuttgart 2011, p. 91.

After the First World War, following the loss of its eastern provinces, the term ‘national amputation’ emerged in German public discourse. The desire to regain these territories was not seen merely as an expression of political revisionism but as a continuation and completion of the colonial project. This rhetoric gained new momentum with the rise to power of the National Socialists. According to the authors of the article, colonial patterns of thought – from Frederick II, through Bismarck,⁴⁹ to National Socialism – maintained the continuity in German policy towards the East.

After 1939, the Poznań region was incorporated into the Third Reich as the so-called Wartheland (*Warthegau*). Nazi plans envisaged a far-reaching urban reconstruction of the region in line with the *Lebensraum im Osten* ideology. The colonial logic of subjugation and exploitation was fully and ruthlessly manifested in these plans. Poznań was transformed into a fortress and one of the centres of German settlement. The Imperial Castle was to become Hitler’s residence, and the entire region was subjected to a brutal policy of Germanisation, expulsions and extermination. The Nazis not only planned a biological transformation but also an urban one: the space would be completely redesigned according to German architectural models, thus symbolically and materially severing it from its Polish identity.

Pufelska and Ackermann point out that the bilingual exhibition prepared in 2023 in the former Imperial Castle in Poznań – dedicated to the Nazi plans for the reconstruction of the Warthegau – passed largely unnoticed in Germany. They call for the adoption of a ‘post-Prussian’ perspective on history – one that does not end with the nostalgic reconstruction of the Hohenzollern royal residence in Berlin, but instead critically examines the imperial past of Prussia and Germany in the East. This perspective not only enables a better understanding of today’s Polish-German relations but also prompts deeper reflection on what German colonialism truly entailed.

The text by Pufelska and Ackermann is a powerful contribution to the debate⁵⁰ – evidence that the reflection on German colonialism in the East has already begun. However, it requires further development and a broader presence in education, museums and public discourse. The history of German imperialism does not end in Namibia. It also covers Poznań. Or Kyiv.

49 P. Ther, ‘Soll und Haben. Warum das deutsche Kaiserreich kein Nationalstaat war’, *Le Monde diplomatique*, 13 May 2005, monde-diplomatique.de.

50 It should also be noted that the response to this article was very active and strongly anti-Polish in tone – at least on the platform X (and likely also in other social media). This prompted F. Ackermann to write on 6 February 2025: “The tone of the discussion and the range of arguments raised under this post show that the time has long since come to leave the platform of the self-righteous AfD supporter and other post-national socialists”; see more on x.com/felix_berlinski.

Conclusion. Memory policy as a duty, not an option

Can we hope that a new wave of debate on colonialism and imperialism in the East will gain momentum in Germany? Will it resonate with the maturing – though still too quiet – discussion about compensation to Poland for Nazi crimes?⁵¹ Yes – and action must be taken to trigger that synergy. Not from as a petitioner, but as a partner. Not out of resentment, but out of responsibility. Because history, if it is to be shared, cannot be one-sided. And European memory – if it is to be fair – must also include those who have so far been pushed to the margins.

As demonstrated in this essay, the German model of memory policy is based on selective reckoning. The Holocaust – rightly and necessarily – became the central pillar of German remembrance. But the memory of crimes committed against Poles, the brutal occupation policy, the *Generalplan Ost*, or the systemic plundering of culture remained no more than a footnote. Yet it is impossible to understand the history of the Second World War – let alone German imperialism – without considering Poland, Central Europe and Eastern Europe as victims of an extermination policy. Germany has not only failed to deal with this chapter in a socially and politically mature way, but for the most part has not even included it in its national narrative.

Meanwhile, there is no such thing as the right to forget. In the digital world, it is possible to delete undesired search results.⁵² In memory politics, however, it is not acceptable. Crimes do not lose their gravity over time. And the right to forgiveness is always vested in the victims, never in the perpetrators.

Therefore, one of the key practical conclusions drawn from the above analyses concerns the need for the lasting and systemic integration of knowledge about Poland and Polish-German relations into Germany's public education system. Germany and its Länder, which in practice hold a monopoly over the formation of curricula and educational content in schools, bears a particular responsibility for the images of the past shown to future generations of its citizens. Presenting Poland in school textbooks – not as an optional partner in joint educational projects, but as a permanent component of mandatory history education – should become one of the priorities of Germany's education policy.

This requires not only the revision and updating of curriculum frameworks and teaching materials, but also investment in properly training

51 S. Żerko, 'Krzywdą milionów Polaków krzyżeć będzie, dopóki nie zostanie sprawiedliwie naprawiona', *Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego*, no. 536, 29 December 2023, iz.poznan.pl.

52 In the case of Google, the right to be forgotten (also known as the 'right to erasure') allows individuals to request the removal of information about them from search results. This means that if someone believes that information available online about them is false, outdated or irrelevant, they can ask Google to stop displaying links to that information in the search engine's results.

teachers – especially in the context of the challenges posed by the changing demographic structure of German society. An increasing percentage of students come from families with a migratory cultural background, which further complicates the process of teaching the history of Central and Eastern Europe and the Second World War. In this context, activities targeting educational environments – both at the central and federal state level – take on particular significance. These include efforts to support intercultural competencies, deepen knowledge of the region, and counteract reductionist views of history that marginalise the East European perspective.

Polish institutions, such as the Pilecki Institute in Berlin, are already making efforts toward historical education aimed at German teachers, but these efforts – if they are to be effective – must be incorporated into a broader framework of systemic cooperation. Education remains one of the most important channels for the reproduction of collective memory and, in democratic societies, it is also a mechanism for building mutual understanding. Therefore, if Poland truly aims to be a strategic partner for Germany, its history must be fully included into the core body of historical knowledge conveyed by the German education system.

Unless Poland wants someone else to tell its history, it must create its own mature historical policy – one that employs modern communication tools, builds lasting institutions and strengthens the existing ones, supports historical education, initiates international debates, and funds research and cultural productions. Poland must not fall into the sin of omission – nor into the sin of waste: producing low quality films, supporting misguided promotional campaigns or squandering the limited resources it has. Above all, Poland must conduct its memory policy with the future in mind, not just the past.

This is not about competing with others for victim status, but about restoring justice and completing the historical narrative. It is about including Polish experiences in the European circuit of memory. And it is about ensuring that future generations – in Poland and abroad – can learn history from textbooks and museums in which the Polish voice is present. Finally – Poland must not fall into the illusion that ‘all the debates have already taken place’. Memory policy is a continuous process, subject to change, open to reinterpretation. Today, it is no longer enough to merely react. One must plan – for years and decades ahead. One must be prepared for resistance, for a long journey, and for delayed results. But it is worth it. Because if Germany – the perpetrator of one of the greatest crimes in history – was able, in the eyes of the world, to walk the path from contempt to trust, then it means that anything is possible. However, this is only possible if that path is charted and followed with determination.

Poland does not have to copy another nation's model – nor should it feel obliged to. It should create its own, believing that it has the right to do so, and being convinced that it has the duty to do so.

**Helmut Kohl and the paradigm shift in German
historical policy.
Context of Polish-German relations,
German reunification, and the end of the Cold War**

Marek Cichocki

MAIN POINTS

- German historical policy underwent a significant transformation under Helmut Kohl, a process that may be described as a paradigm shift. These changes took place during the final two decades of the 20th century, reshaping both the German historical and political identity, as well as the country's foreign policy. Kohl's objective was to 'normalise' German identity and establish a new role for Germany in international politics – liberating it from the burden of guilt for Nazi crimes, which had constrained the country's ability to pursue policies aligned with its national interests.
- Particularly in the context of German reunification, the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of an 'end of history' atmosphere in Europe, the model of historical policy shaped by Kohl at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s became an effective instrument of German soft power. Over the past 35 years, Berlin has successfully implemented this model across international, cultural, and academic domains, cultivating a positive image of the country and strengthening its position within the EU, in transatlantic relations, and globally.
- Since 1989, and following Helmut Kohl's first official visit, Poland has been a target of Germany's historical policy as a form of soft power, which has been strongly present in political relations, culture, education, science, and the media. This was initially facilitated by a significant institutional asymmetry between Germany and Poland. Although this imbalance began to narrow from 2004 onwards through the institutionalisation of historical policy on the Polish side, it did not result in a more balanced or partnership-based relationship. Instead, it led to growing competition over historical symbols and narratives, as well as strained political relations.
- From the perspective of 35 years of the Kohl-era model of German historical policy – and taking into account its context (German reunification, the end of the Cold War, and the 'end of history' atmosphere) – it must now be assumed that this model will undergo further significant transformation. The destabilisation and likely structural reshaping of the political landscape established after reunification, alongside a radical shift in the international situation, will lead to a turning point in Germany's current approach to soft power. This will also affect the nature of its historical policy, which until now has been based on the idea of 'normalisation' – anchoring Germany in transatlantic relations and European integration. From a Polish perspective, this is likely to pose a challenge, as it may signal greater openness in Germany towards historical revisionism, particularly in areas linked to transatlantic relations and Central and Eastern Europe.

German historical policy plays a prominent role primarily as an integral element of the country's foreign policy and a key component of its soft power. It therefore has obvious significance for relations with Poland and serves as an important mechanism for the internal reintegration of German society, helping to build its historical and political identity – particularly in the context of the end of the Cold War and the process leading to national reunification.

German historical policy, in all its key functions, reached its most developed form under Helmut Kohl. From the moment he took office as Chancellor in 1982, this Christian Democrat – marked by a distinct sensitivity to historical matters – became its de facto chief architect, shaping it in ways that continue to resonate today. This includes its key institutional manifestations, such as the House of History of the Federal Republic in Bonn, the permanent exhibition at the German Historical Museum in Berlin, the Neue Wache memorial in the centre of the capital, and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. This policy operated in the realm of symbols, memorial sites, and exhibitions, as well as in the state's efforts to shape political and historical awareness and identity. It also had a very tangible, practical impact on how Germany conducted its bilateral relations with other states, including Poland, as well as its European policy within the broader process of EU formation. Kohl was a central figure in the development of this policy. He embodied a personal sense of history and a determination to bring about a fundamental shift in his compatriots' historical consciousness and culture of remembrance. For this reason, Samuel Salzborn, a German sociologist and researcher of remembrance, stated that “with the paradigm shift in memory in the 1980s, Kohl initiated a new phase of rejection of the memory of the Shoah” in German policy.¹ This should be understood as an attempt to fundamentally redefine Germany's post-war historical identity, which had been grounded in guilt, above all through remembrance of the German crime of the Holocaust.

One may therefore agree with the author of *Collective Innocence* that it was in the 1980s and 1990s that a fundamental shift occurred in the paradigm of remembrance culture and policy in Germany, that Helmut Kohl bore the main political responsibility for this change, and that one of its concrete outcomes was the emergence of a new form of national historical policy – one that enabled the deliberate shaping of a new German identity and image. The direction of this shift involved a clear rebalancing of emphasis in historical policy: away from a paradigm in which “National Socialism, and in particular the Holocaust, form the core – the tragic core – of German history”, and towards the belief

1 S. Salzborn, *Kollektive Unschuld: Die Abwehr der Shoah im deutschen Erinnern* [*Collective Innocence. The Wish to Repress the Shoah in German Collective Memory*], Hentrich und Hentrich Verlag, Berlin 2020. Own translation.

that “National Socialism and the Holocaust are moments – horrific moments – in German history, but they must not overshadow the entirety of the nation’s history”.² It is also important that the reunification of Germany – as the central event marking the end of the Cold War from Germany’s perspective – provides the essential context for this entire phenomenon.

We are thus dealing with the simultaneous emergence of three circumstances of fundamental significance: a change in the way historical issues were publicly articulated in Germany, the influence of Kohl’s distinctive personality as a ‘historical politician’ (as Merkel described him)³, and the newly united Germany’s search for new forms of legitimacy and a new type of soft power. In this text, I intend to describe the nature of the shift Kohl introduced in German policy concerning history and memory, his own interpretation of German history – particularly in the context of the 20th century – and to explain why and how these issues shaped his policy towards Poland during the crucial period of 1989–1991.

A new historical policy in the service of the state

Even before Kohl, historical policy functioned as an element of both Germany’s domestic and foreign policy. After a period of silence and ‘denial’ – including Adenauer’s policy of drawing a thick line under the past, which characterised West Germany primarily in the 1950s – the issue of history and memory returned in full force to domestic politics in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴ This shift occurred mainly as a result of the wave of left-wing student protests in 1968 and the actions of extremist terrorist groups such as the Red Army Faction. Among the younger generation in particular, the question of reckoning with the Nazi past – especially within political and industrial elites – became an open subject of dispute and, in some cases, a cause of violence. This drew the attention of the public and the media and engaged the country’s most respected intellectuals and moral leaders. One of the most well-known examples of these controversies was the 1977 kidnapping and murder of Hanns Martin Schleyer, a German industrialist and former member of the Nazi party.

An additional factor shaping the German approach to the past was a clear shift in the 1970s in the debates on the Second World War in the United States and Western Europe, where the crime of the Shoah became the central focus.

2 W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2002, p. 41. See also J.S. Eder, *Holocaust Angst: The Federal Republic of Germany and American Holocaust Memory since the 1970s*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

3 A. Merkel, *Freedom: Memoirs 1954–2021 from the former Chancellor of Germany*, Pan MacMillan, 2025.

4 N. Frei, *1945 und wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München 2009, pp. 38–55.

These internal and external developments contributed to the formation of a specific canon of views and interpretations of the past in West Germany – one that became dominant in public life, in politics (particularly on the left), the media, the education system, and academic teaching. This canon represented a form of consensus that shaped domestic historical policy and firmly excluded extreme views and attitudes from public discourse – especially right-wing positions that referenced Nazi traditions, antisemitism, xenophobia, or were openly anti-democratic and anti-liberal.⁵ Departures from this consensus – whether through critique or attempts at revision – were always fraught with significant risk, confined to select circles, and tolerated only in limited historical areas, such as the expulsion of Germans from Polish and Czechoslovak territories or the loss of parts of former German territory after the Second World War.

From the very beginning of West Germany's existence, historical policy was also present in its foreign policy. This is well illustrated by the course adopted by Chancellor Adenauer towards Israel as part of the *Westbindung* strategy – anchoring the Federal Republic in the West. This approach led, among other things, to the signing of reparations agreements in the early 1950s concerning Israeli citizens and the Jewish diaspora, which were treated as obligations of the state arising from its new international status following the dissolution of the post-war occupation zones. Adenauer's visit to France and his meeting with Charles de Gaulle at Reims Cathedral in 1962, followed a year later by the signing of the Élysée Treaty, are further examples of West German foreign policy being framed through the lens of historical policy. In this case, the aim was to normalise Franco-German relations as the foundation for processes of European integration. Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s – driven primarily by pragmatic and realist assumptions – was also consciously linked with elements of historical policy. This was most clearly demonstrated during Brandt's visit to Warsaw and his gesture at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in 1970.

From the outset, historical policy and the politics of symbols served to enhance the effectiveness of German foreign policy in at least two key dimensions. First, they aimed to consolidate West Germany's position as a credible state fully integrated into Western democratic structures – one that had thoroughly come to terms with its past and had thus adopted a new identity. Second, they sought to shape a new image of West Germany and build

⁵ An interesting picture of how such a consensus regarding Germany's Nazi past functions in the public sphere today is provided by the MEMO Germany studies, conducted by Bielefeld University in cooperation with the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (*Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft*). In considering the formation of this consensus, one must also acknowledge the institutional role played by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*), which has been active since 1952.

its moral capital in foreign affairs, which became a key component of its soft power. The British historian Timothy Garton Ash cites a particularly telling excerpt from Chancellor Brandt's speech in the Bundestag on 28 January 1971, in which he refers to the shift in relations with Poland: "In our relations with Poland we are also thinking, in a broader sense, of German interests when we do all we can to ensure that the word 'Germany' will never again be a symbol of terror and injustice, but instead a sign of hope for reconciliation and peaceful cooperation". This belief in the significance of historical policy as a tool for restoring credibility and reshaping Germany's image would continue to influence Bonn's foreign policy – not only in its relations with France or Israel, but also in relation to Poland. This approach remained in place under both Brandt and his successor, Helmut Schmidt, and eventually gained unprecedented momentum under Helmut Kohl. As Ash comments, "throughout the 1980s the three elements – money, reconciliation, direct German interests – were continually muddled up together in all official German-Polish dealings, and further confused by the domestic political context".⁶

The key influence on Germany's culture of remembrance and its presence in both domestic and foreign policy came, above all, from Helmut Kohl. His impact must be viewed in the context of the reunification of Germany – for which he was the principal architect – as well as broader changes in Europe and global politics ensuing from the end of the Cold War. It is also essential to consider his personal views on 20th-century German history. Kohl's fundamental objective was to reshape German historical identity. This was reflected in his direct involvement in two major historical and exhibition-related projects of the 1980s and 1990s, both of which brought new interpretations of the past into the public sphere. The first was the House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn, whose creation Kohl initiated shortly after taking office – in his first government statement in 1985. The second was the founding of the German Historical Museum in Berlin in 1987, located in the Zeughaus building on Unter den Linden, in the heart of the capital.

Kohl's vision for the new museum in Bonn was to present a permanent, modern exhibition focused on the period since 1945 – showing the history of the state (West Germany) and the divided German nation. The museum was established by an act of the Bundestag, which created an independent foundation, and it was officially opened by Kohl in 1994. Since then, the permanent exhibition has undergone several significant updates – in 2007, 2011, and 2024. However, its core message has remained consistent: to present the country's recent history in such a way that Nazi Germany appears 'only' as the starting

6 T.G. Ash, *In Europe's Name. Germany and the Divided Continent*, published by Vintage, 1994, pp. 301–302.

point for illustrating the democratisation of West Germany and of German society as a whole, regardless of the division between the West and East Germany. This is because the Federal Republic was portrayed as embodying new Western values of democracy and freedom – values that were also offered as a point of reference for nations behind the Iron Curtain. According to the exhibition, this new democratic Germany, emerging from the darkness of the Nazi totalitarian regime, was built on the foundations of Western constitutional values. That is why, at the very beginning of the permanent exhibition, visitors encounter a large, semi-transparent photograph showing a session of the Parliamentary Council, in front of which are placed the ‘relics’ of state founding: a symbolic inkwell, a fountain pen stand, and the pen with which Konrad Adenauer is said to have personally signed the Basic Law on 23 May 1949. Also included is a facsimile of the Basic Law itself, laid out on the black-red-gold tricolour flag.⁷ This visual staging reflected the essence of the new Western democratic Germany – built, like the United States, on the foundation of ‘constitutional patriotism’, a concept popularised in the 1986 debate by Jürgen Habermas. At the same time, an important conceptual element of the exhibition was its framing within a broader German historical narrative reaching back to the first half of the 19th century – that is, to the beginnings of modern German statehood, national identity, and democratic and liberal traditions. The main symbols of this legacy are the Hambach Festival of 1832 and the Frankfurt National Assembly of 1848, the first all-German parliament. Both permanent exhibitions – those of the museums in Bonn and Berlin – served, particularly in the context of German reunification, as a bridge linking the old ‘Bonn Republic’ with the new ‘Berlin Republic’. They provided conceptual models for a shared new narrative of German historical and democratic identity in contemporary Europe. These models reflected the key strategic goals of Kohl’s historical policy – goals that provoked strong criticism from figures such as Samuel Salzborn. For critics such as him, the German chancellor was undertaking a profound reorientation of Germany’s post-war identity for political purposes. By using the instruments of politics and the state, Kohl was constructing a new collective memory for Germans – one in which the guilt and crimes committed by Nazi Germany no longer occupied a central place.

7 T. Hertfelder, ‘Opfer, Täter, Demokraten. Über das Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur und die neue Meistererzählung der Demokratie in Deutschland’ [in:] *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 65. Jahrgang (July 2017), Heft 3, p. 367.

Kohl's politics of symbols and reconciliation spectacle

Helmut Kohl attached particular importance to the politics of symbols and historical policy as key elements of Germany's European and foreign policy. The concept of reconciliation played a central role in this approach. It was, in fact, under Kohl's leadership that reconciliation became part of the German government's political agenda in the 1980s.

Kohl consistently and openly used the idea of reconciliation to achieve practical political objectives in Germany's foreign relations with other countries. Regardless of one's assessment of Kohl as a politician – his great achievement undeniably being the reunification of Germany – it is worth noting that, alongside his remarkable pragmatism and strong belief in his own agency (or even greatness), he also displayed a genuine attachment to Catholicism and patriotism. This clearly distinguished him from much of the German left, both the strand shaped by the interwar confrontation with Nazism and, in particular, the generation rooted in the events of 1968. For the latter, patriotism was often equated with Nazism and openly condemned. For Kohl, this was entirely different. His attitude towards the past and the issue of reconciliation was never cynical – though this does not mean that he denied the political utility of history. He considered these matters, and the moral expectations attached to them, to be politically significant and therefore deserving of seriousness and attention from politicians.

There was another important factor: Kohl viewed historical matters in deeply personal terms, as part of his own life path and fate – bound together with the fate of other Germans. As he himself stated, "I belong to the generation that was old enough to see the war with its own eyes, but at the same time too young to be personally entangled in guilt. I expressed this in 1984 during a discussion with members of the Knesset in Jerusalem, saying that I was grateful for the 'mercy of late birth'... By 'mercy' I also meant the following: the fact that we avoided being implicated in guilt is not a moral achievement of my generation. It is rather a matter of chance: we happened to be born at that moment. This does not give us the right to collectively condemn the generation that lived consciously through the time of Nazi Germany and was not given the opportunity to experience this 'mercy'".⁸

This last reflection led Kohl to believe that when speaking about Germans' involvement in Nazism, one must remember that "part of society supported Hitler because they believed he would lift them out of the misery that the global

⁸ As cited in: W. Pięciak, *Kanclerz obojga Niemiec. Helmut Kohl – szkic do portretu*, Centrum Stosunków Międzynarodowych, Warszawa 1999, p. 17.

economic crisis had brought upon millions of Germans. Most had no sense of what might follow, and by the time they did, it was already too late”.⁹ From this perspective, according to Kohl, the Germans had made a grave historical mistake that no one could deny – but the defeat they suffered, the territorial losses, and the division of their country constituted punishment enough, which they accepted without resistance. And more than that – they had undergone a fundamental internal transformation: “They built a liberal and democratic order for themselves. Through the EU and NATO, they are anchored in the Western community of values. For over 40 years they have proved that they have learned the lessons of history”.¹⁰

Bearing in mind all of Helmut Kohl’s historical declarations, one can better understand the importance he attached to symbolic politics and reconciliation in shaping a favourable image and position for Germany in Europe and the world. He frequently drew on these tools to stage political events in relations with other countries and leaders – events that helped build a new credibility for the Federal Republic. This was not about superficial political theatrics or winning public favour through symbolic gestures, but rather about the execution of a deliberate strategy. Its goal was to restore contemporary Germany’s strong standing in Europe and globally, while also finding the right balance in its approach to national identity. As Wojciech Pięciak, author of numerous books on Germany, observes, Kohl’s actions in the field of history should be seen as a conscious and carefully considered “policy of creating positive symbols of the new Germany. This meant either creating new positive symbols (as at the cemetery of the victims of the Leningrad blockade in 1975, during the meeting in Verdun, or at the mass in Krzyżowa), or assigning new, positive meaning to historically burdened sites – such as the Reichstag, Berlin as the new capital, or the presence of German soldiers in Paris”¹¹ (during the military parade on the Champs-Élysées marking the 50th anniversary of the end of the war). It must also be remembered that all of this served to strengthen Germany’s position in Europe and globally, and to reinforce the legitimacy of German reunification as essential to the unification of Europe as a whole.

A clear example of how Kohl developed his policy of symbols as a policy of *faits accomplis*, and how he was able to combine historical gestures with highly pragmatic policies serving Germany’s national interest, is undoubtedly the case of President Ronald Reagan’s visit to the military cemetery in Bitburg on 5 May 1985. Although the episode ended in a serious international scandal, it can nevertheless be said that the chancellor achieved his intended goals. Kohl

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

liked to portray himself as the direct political and ideological heir to Konrad Adenauer. The famous meeting between Adenauer and de Gaulle in Reims – and their participation in the peace mass held in the cathedral in 1962 – provided Kohl with an obvious model for his own symbolic politics. In 1984, he decided to take a symbolic step of his own in German–French relations by arranging a historic meeting with President François Mitterrand at the Douaumont cemetery in Verdun. Together, they paid tribute to the soldiers who had fallen in the largest and bloodiest battle of the First World War. The gesture was intended to symbolise the definitive end of hostility between Germany and France.

Referring to that highly publicised political event, a few months later, during his visit to Washington, Kohl proposed to President Reagan that they make a similar symbolic gesture of reconciliation together at the military cemetery in Bitburg, located in Rhineland-Palatinate – a region close to the chancellor’s heart.¹² Reagan, surprised by the unexpected suggestion and known for being emotional and idealistic, immediately agreed. Kohl enjoyed a high level of trust in the White House as the West German leader who, in the 1980s, had pushed through NATO’s rearmament programme despite strong opposition from pacifist and left-wing movements in his own country. The joint visit to the Bitburg cemetery and the tribute paid to American and German soldiers buried there from the Second World War ended in a diplomatic scandal when the media revealed that among the graves were also those of members of the SS. This sparked a wave of criticism against the US president, particularly from Jewish communities in the United States and Europe, as well as from Israel. Kohl, however, achieved his political aims: he demonstrated the strength of the bond between West Germany and the United States – one that transcended the legacy of past wartime enmity. In this instance, the power of the narrative of reconciliation in German historical policy proved more effective than the resistance posed by the historical facts themselves.

The objectives of Kohl’s visit to Poland in 1989

It was precisely Kohl’s particular skill in staging political events through the use of symbolic politics and reconciliation – and, in doing so, creating *faits accomplis* – that was also set to play an important role in the five-day visit to Poland, which had been in preparation for some time (essentially since January 1989) by the authorities in Bonn and the communist government of Mieczysław

12 D.E. Lipstadt, ‘The Bitburg Controversy’ [in:] *The American Jewish Year Book*, American Jewish Committee, vol. 87 (1987), pp. 21–37.

Rakowski in Warsaw. The visit was planned as part of the commemorations marking 1989 as the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. However, these plans were unexpectedly overtaken by the major political transformations of the late Cold War period, which accelerated in Poland with the Round Table talks and the formation of Tadeusz Mazowiecki's government. Kohl was determined to make this historic visit take place, seeing it as marking a major breakthrough in Polish-German relations and a powerful gesture of reconciliation. His trip to Poland was also clearly in the interest of the new government in Warsaw – although perhaps less for historical reasons and more because of the severe economic and financial crisis, which made foreign support a necessity. In that regard, Bonn was emerging as Poland's key ally. Among the issues on the table during discussions about the visit were matters such as resolving Poland's debt problem, securing investment loans, and addressing the rights of the German minority in Poland, including dual place-name signage in Silesia and the protection of German memorial sites.

The end of Mieczysław Rakowski's communist government, the elections of 4 June, and the formation of Tadeusz Mazowiecki's cabinet did not, in fact, interrupt preparations for the visit. On the contrary – they provided them with an entirely new context. Mazowiecki quickly appointed a trusted figure, Mieczysław Pszon – editor of the weekly *Tygodnik Powszechny* and a long-time participant in the 1970s and 1980s dialogue between Polish Catholics and German Catholic and Evangelical communities – as his plenipotentiary in talks with Horst Teltschik, Kohl's chief adviser. The two were tasked with finalising the itinerary for the chancellor's visit to Poland. Kohl envisioned an ambitious, multi-day visit (9–14 November) with stops in Warsaw, Kraków, Oświęcim, and possibly also Częstochowa, Gdańsk, and Lublin. The agenda was to include a speech at the Royal Castle, a concert in Wilanów, and meetings with the president, the prime minister, the Primate of Poland, and Lech Wałęsa.¹³ The radical political shift in Poland created the conditions for such wide-ranging plans. The extensive agenda, which also included the formal signing of a package of agreements with the Polish government and the issuance of a joint statement, was designed to underscore the historic nature of the visit. Domestically, it also served as a clear counterpoint to the rather unfortunate visit to Poland by Willy Brandt in 1985. At the time, the former chancellor – an icon of German social democracy and *Ostpolitik* – left behind a deeply negative impression: “he shook the hands of Generals and Party Secretaries. He spoke of reconciliation, peace, normalisation, and stability. But he visited no prisons (in one of which he would

13 Sprawozdanie z VIII rundy rozmów pełnomocników rządów PRL i RFN (14–16 września 1989 roku w Warszawie) [in:] W. Borodziej (ed.), *Polska wobec zjednoczenia Niemiec 1989–1991. Dokumenty dyplomatyczne*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2006, p. 128.

have found Adam Michnik). He laid no flowers on the murdered worker's graves – nor on that of the martyred Father Jerzy Popiełuszko. He declined an invitation to meet his fellow Nobel Peace Prize winner, Lech Wałęsa, in Solidarity's capital, Gdańsk”.¹⁴ This detail is worth recalling, as it sheds light on the domestic political motivations behind Kohl's visit to Poland: the opportunity to present himself as a European leader of the great changes marking the end of the Cold War. His visit coincided not only with the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, but also with the run-up to the 1990 Bundestag elections in West Germany, which, as polls at the time suggested, the CDU might well lose. It was in this context of intense preparations for the Polish visit that the idea emerged of a meeting between Kohl and Mazowiecki, along with the reconciliation mass in Krzyżowa.

‘Polish–German reconciliation’ as an element of Kohl's historical policy

On the symbolic level, the high point of the visit was Krzyżowa, which – within the framework of German historical policy – deserves closer attention. This place became emblematic of reconciliation policy in Polish–German relations, while also focusing many of the key challenges associated with it. For advocates of reconciliation, the mass in Krzyżowa on 12 November 1989 became a historic and symbolic event, marking the beginning of an entirely new chapter in relations between Poland and Germany.¹⁵ This new beginning was to involve not only state-level policy but also relations between the two societies. It was seen as a turning point of similar significance to the transformations that occurred in Germany's post-war relations with France and Israel. The German side – and Kohl himself – were keen to refer to this analogy, emphasising the fundamental importance of Bonn's new policy towards Warsaw. In this way, the chancellor's visit to Poland and the gesture of reconciliation in Krzyżowa – seen as the symbolic culmination of the visit – were presented as a continuation of the policy of reconciliation initiated by Konrad Adenauer, regarded as a cornerstone of post-war Germany. Within this narrative framework, Kohl, who saw himself as the direct successor to the first West German chancellor, came to Poland to bring this policy to its final realisation.

Before Krzyżowa even appeared on the itinerary as the location for the meeting, the original idea for a mass involving Kohl and representatives of the

¹⁴ T.G. Ash, *In Europe's name...*, op. cit., p. 306.

¹⁵ W. Czachur, A. Franke (eds.), *Krzyżowa jako miejsce dialogu polsko-niemieckiego. Szanse na europejską narrację*, Fundacja „Krzyżowa” dla Porozumienia Europejskiego, Krzyżowa 2013.

German minority in Poland pointed to a different site: Góra św. Anny (St. Anne Mountain) and the Franciscan church and monastery complex located there. The proposal emerged during talks between the two governments' envoys – Pszon and Teltschik. However, once the idea became public, it triggered a wave of strong negative reactions in Poland, as this location had been the site of bloody clashes between Silesian insurgents and the German Freikorps during the Battle of Annaberg in 1921. Following the redrawing of borders after the Third Silesian Uprising, St. Anne Mountain, known in Germany as St. Annaberg, remained part of Germany. The proposal appeared controversial for at least two reasons. The first concerned the final recognition of the Polish–German border – a matter that lingered in the background throughout Kohl's visit preparations, although the German side in particular avoided addressing it openly.¹⁶ It would only become a central issue in Polish–German relations after the events of 9 November 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the launch of the German reunification process through the 2+4 international negotiations format. The second reason related to the German minority in Poland, whose rights (alongside issues such as German-language place names and the protection of memorial sites) were, for Kohl, de facto a condition for signing the economic and financial agreements with Warsaw. Bonn treated these matters as inseparable, and Warsaw fully understood the conditional nature of the arrangement.

The idea of holding a reconciliation mass with Kohl's participation at St. Anne Mountain sparked so much controversy in Poland that, once it became public, both sides began shifting responsibility for the proposal back and forth. During his talks with Tadeusz Mazowiecki in Warsaw, Kohl complained that the matter had “done him a disservice, cost him in terms of publicity, and that he had trusted Bishop Alfons Nossol, who had initially assured him there would be no problems. That is why Krzyżowa has become so important now”.¹⁷ In his own summary of Kohl's visit, Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski admitted: “The course of Kohl's visit was also very difficult. Just before the chancellor's arrival, there were misunderstandings related to Bonn's request for his participation in a mass at St. Anne Mountain”.¹⁸ Mieczysław Pszon, meanwhile, portrayed the affair as having been inflated by communists in Poland who were opposed to Kohl's visit – particularly officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the party-controlled press, with the daily *Trybuna Ludu* at the forefront. Despite the dispute over responsibility, it is reasonable

¹⁶ D. Bingen, *Polityka Republiki Bońskiej wobec Polski*, Wydawnictwo Kwadrat, Kraków 1997, pp. 241–244.

¹⁷ Transcript of the one-on-one conversation between Prime Minister Mazowiecki and Chancellor Kohl [in:] *Polska wobec zjednoczenia Niemiec 1989–1991...*, op. cit., p. 159.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

to assume that the idea of St. Anne Mountain as the venue did indeed originate in discussions between representatives of the German government. The nature of the site aligned with Kohl's earlier symbolic politics (as in Bitburg and Verdun). Pszon even claimed that "Kohl was adamant about St. Anne Mountain".¹⁹ It also seems likely that there had been earlier consultations between the German government and Bishop Nossol of Opole, which led Bonn to believe that the idea was sound.²⁰ It cannot be ruled out that, in his talks with Horst Teltschik, Pszon may have initially responded positively or at least did not object to the idea – something that could easily have been interpreted as approval. Clearly, however, Mazowiecki and his team grew concerned about the negative reactions to the idea within Poland, especially from parts of the authorities and press aligned with the communist party, as well as from nationalist and conservative circles, such as the Labour Faction (*Stronnictwo Pracy*) and the Christian-National Union. As a result, Mazowiecki, through Pszon, proposed an alternative: a meeting at Krzyżowa. Selecting Krzyżowa as the site of reconciliation thus became a way to defuse the crisis sparked by the controversy over St. Anne Mountain – one that could have seriously jeopardised the plans for Kohl's visit to Poland. However, this does not mean that Krzyżowa was a random choice.

Krzyżowa as the site of Polish–German reconciliation was, above all, the result of earlier efforts by the Catholic Intelligentsia Club (KIK) in Wrocław. In early June 1989, KIK, in cooperation with Action Reconciliation Service for Peace (*Aktion Sühnezeichen Friedensdienste*), organised an international conference titled 'The Christian in Society'. The event focused on resistance movements against Nazism.²¹ The inspiration for choosing this topic came from the book *Chrześcijanin w Trzeciej Rzeszy* (A Christian in the Third Reich, 1970) by Anna Morawska – an author associated with the Polish monthly *Więź*. The book, which explored the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, held particular significance for both the KIK community in Poland and opposition Protestant circles in East Germany, including Ludwig Mehlhorn. Another important influence was the philosopher and sociologist Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, who taught at the University of Wrocław until 1933. Among his students was Helmuth James Graf von Moltke, the owner of the Krzyżowa (German *Kreisau*) estate. Because of this, and due to Rosenstock-Huussy's social work in the working-class communities of Lower Silesia in the 1920s and 1930s – in which von Moltke and

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 542.

²⁰ Kohl states in his memoirs that the idea of St. Anne Mountain came directly from Bishop Nossol. See: H. Kohl, *Ich wollte Deutschlands Einheit: Erinnerungen*, Propyläen Verlag, Berlin, 1996.

²¹ A. Franke, 'Krzyżowa powtórnie odkryta. Jakie plany wobec Krzyżowej mieli Polacy i Niemcy w latach 1989–1990?' [in:] *Krzyżowa jako miejsce dialogu polsko-niemieckiego...*, op. cit., pp. 21–22.

other future members of the Kreisau Circle were also involved – he is often regarded as the group's spiritual patron.

In Poland, the attention of historians was drawn to Krzyżowa and the group of conspirators associated with von Moltke as early as the 1970s and 1980s by Karol Jonca, a long-time professor at the University of Wrocław. In his research, Jonca explored in depth the topic of anti-Hitler opposition in Nazi Germany. He was also part of a circle that, from the 1970s onward – with support from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, among others – undertook efforts to preserve the remaining structures of the von Moltke estate in Krzyżowa.²² One of the outcomes of the June 1989 seminar was a joint appeal addressed to Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs calling for the establishment of an international conference centre in Krzyżowa, as well as a museum of European resistance movements. This idea was supported by the von Moltke family and, alongside figures from the Wrocław-based Catholic Intelligentsia Club – led by chairwoman Ewa Unger and Michał Czapliński – was shaped from the beginning by individuals such as Ludwig Mehlhorn, a democratic activist from East Germany, Stephan Steinlein, later a German diplomat, and Wolfgang Ullmann, a theologian and politician. Thus, when the controversy over the mass at St. Anne Mountain erupted shortly before finalising the preparations for Kohl's November visit to Poland, the 'backup' plan of Krzyżowa had already reached a fairly advanced stage.

The reconciliation mass

The mass in Krzyżowa took place on 12 November, during the second part of Kohl's visit, which had been abruptly interrupted on the evening of 9 November – the very first day after his arrival in Warsaw – due to unexpected developments in Berlin. Following the announcement of the opening of border crossings – delivered under somewhat unclear circumstances by Günter Schabowski, the new spokesperson of East Germany's ruling Socialist Unity Party – crowds of Berliners rushed to the so-called Berlin Wall, effectively bringing down the decades-long border dividing the two German states in a single night. In response to these developments, Kohl decided to suspend his visit to Poland and return to Bonn. The mass in Krzyżowa, held three days later, thus took place in a radically changed context. One could even say – in an entirely new era. Many politicians in Europe, Kohl foremost among them, began

22 K. Ruchniewicz, 'Opozycja antyhitlerowska i jej recepcja w Polsce' [in:] *Krzyżowa jako miejsce dialogu polsko-niemieckiego...*, op. cit., pp. 81, 83–84.

to realise that the events in Berlin had set off an irreversible chain reaction that would inevitably lead to the issue of German reunification being put on the table. Along with this, a whole series of fundamental questions emerged regarding the future order in Europe, including the recognition of the Polish–German border – a fundamental matter which Kohl had consistently left unresolved.

Despite the unexpected changes unfolding in Europe, the core objectives of Kohl’s symbolic policy remained unchanged – and Krzyżowa was key to achieving them. On this point, Kohl did not waver in his determination. Yet from the very beginning, he maintained a certain level of suspicion towards the intentions of his Polish partners. When, on the evening before the meeting in Krzyżowa, it became clear that the German delegation’s flight from Warsaw to Wrocław could not proceed because of persistent fog, this was interpreted as a possible act of sabotage by the Polish side. In the end, however, the German delegation arrived after an overnight journey by coach.

As Kohl stated in his memoirs: “For me, this was one of the most important moments on the visit’s agenda. Krzyżowa is a powerful symbol of a different, better Germany – even in the darkest chapter of our history. The Kreisau Circle brought together remarkable Germans, men and women, who joined this organisation to devise ways of overcoming National Socialism and establishing a just peace in Europe. (...) It was certainly no coincidence that a large number of the now few surviving members of the Kreisau Circle – most of whom were executed on Hitler’s scaffold – later aligned themselves with the CDU. Nearly all of the 52 signatories of the Berlin founding proclamation, led by Andreas Hermes, had been persecuted by the Nazi regime. The Berlin founding declaration of the CDU – one of two founding documents of my party, alongside the Cologne proclamation – is therefore strongly imbued with the ideology of the Kreisau Circle. This is why Krzyżowa is not only a historically important place for Germany but also, for me, the birthplace of the worldview of Christian democracy. The members of the Kreisau Circle longed for a peaceful Europe that would rediscover its roots in Western culture. I wanted Count Moltke’s estate to become the site of a Polish–German meeting, and for that meeting to be infused with the spirit of reconciliation. Prime Minister Mazowiecki and I intended to launch this process by jointly participating in a German–Polish service”.²³

There was, without doubt, a strong political will on Kohl’s part to make Krzyżowa – the original initiative of a group of Catholic and Protestant intellectuals from Poland, East Germany, and West Germany in the 1970s and 1980s – the foundation of what he himself saw as the idea of Polish–German

23 H. Kohl, *Ich wollte Deutschlands Einheit...*, op. cit.

reconciliation. A place, as he put it, where “everything can begin anew”.²⁴ Mazowiecki, who himself came from the circles of the Catholic Intelligentsia Clubs and the Więż community, undoubtedly supported this idea. However, the driving force behind Krzyżowa – if only for financial reasons – clearly lay with the German side. The goals included restoring the von Moltke estate in Krzyżowa, turning it into a site of remembrance, and establishing an international meeting centre. These objectives were made possible through several key developments: the establishment of the Krzyżowa Foundation for Mutual Understanding in Europe; the transfer of ownership of the Krzyżowa estate (formerly a state-owned agricultural farm) to the Catholic Intelligentsia Club – later passed on to the Foundation; and the allocation of approximately 8 million Deutsche Marks by the Foundation for Polish–German Cooperation.²⁵

At its very core, the policy of reconciliation so strongly declared by Kohl during his visit to Poland in November 1989 harboured a fundamental dissonance – a false note – that would later contribute to the failure of the reconciliation project in Polish–German relations. Krzyżowa itself, as both the site and symbol of this reconciliation, also carried contradictions that could not easily be overlooked. This highlighted the difficulty – and risk – of harnessing a complex past in the service of practical political goals, which can generate further problems rather than pave the way for resolving them. Despite many lofty words, it seems that even Kohl’s main partner in the carefully choreographed act of Polish–German reconciliation in Krzyżowa – Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki – must have recognised that dissonant note, regardless of his personal ties and sympathies with colleagues from the Wrocław Catholic Intelligentsia Club. As Dieter Bingen would observe years later from the German side, in reference to the reconciliation mass in Krzyżowa: “It is possible that the Federal Chancellor, carried away by the symbolism of the place, failed to notice that Mazowiecki gave the impression of being a guest compelled to visit foreign territory, where Silesian Germans were welcoming Kohl as ‘our chancellor’”.²⁶ At the time, everyone watching the handshake between Kohl and Mazowiecki in Krzyżowa could clearly sense that air of unease – although many later made a concerted effort to forget it.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ W. Wieczorek, ‘Przesłanie Krzyżowej’ [in:] W. Pięciak (ed.), *Polacy i Niemcy pół wieku później*, Wydawnictwo Znak, Kraków 1996, p. 127.

²⁶ D. Bingen, *Polityka Republiki Bońskiej wobec Polski*, op. cit., p. 246.



Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Chancellor Helmut Kohl exchange the sign of peace during the Reconciliation Mass in Krzyżowa (12 November 1989).

Four themes of Kohl's historical policy towards Poland

In the 1990s, the policy of understanding and reconciliation was a core element of unified Germany's approach to relations with Poland. It was pursued until 1998 by the governments of Helmut Kohl and then – within a visibly shifting German policy – by the cabinet led by the Social Democratic Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. A particularly important role in these efforts was played by German political foundations, especially the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, which at the time focused, among other things, on cooperation with Catholic circles and sections of the Polish Catholic Church episcopate. Numerous institutions established by the German government or created through bilateral agreements also contributed to this agenda. From the outset, Krzyżowa was an important part of this institutional system supporting Germany's politics of symbolism and reconciliation in its relations with Poland. Yet Krzyżowa never became a significant point of reference for either the German or Polish public. Nor, with the benefit of three decades of hindsight since 1989, can one say that the changes in mutual relations between the two nations may meaningfully be described in terms of reconciliation. Diverging understandings and perceptions of the past, fundamental differences in national interests, contrasting value systems, and a sense – especially on the Polish side – of not being treated as an equal partner, particularly on historically sensitive issues, have repeatedly led (and continue to lead) to open conflict in Polish–German relations. Above all, however, it seems that the politics of symbols and reconciliation at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s – especially when understood as a top-down, pedagogical approach to society in the form of 'civic education', widely regarded as characteristic of West Germany's political culture – ultimately failed to meet the moral expectations placed upon it, particularly by the elites and communities in both Germany and Poland committed to the idea of reconciliation.

It is therefore worth taking a closer look at this phenomenon – the triumph of politics over the moral dimension of reconciliation – using the example of Helmut Kohl's policy of symbolism and reconciliation towards Poland during the turning point of 1989.

First theme: history as a political instrument – does the end justify the means?

Kohl's policy of rapprochement with Poland stemmed from his deeply held personal convictions about German history and his commitment to a specific politics of symbolism. In this respect, he fundamentally differed from his successor, Gerhard Schröder. Kohl linked his personal historical perspective to two political goals that were central from the German point of view: the reunification of the German state and the deeper integration of Europe. In this sense,

his historical policy, together with the imperative of reconciliation, became an immensely important and useful tool.

As previously outlined, Kohl was guided by specific personal beliefs regarding history. His stance could be summarised as follows: although Germans committed horrific crimes during the war – something no one today would deny – there were also other Germans who resisted evil and became its victims. According to Kohl, West Germany – and, on the political stage, the Christian Democrats in particular – represented the tradition of those ‘other’ Germans, who ultimately overcame their own dark history and, in doing so, contributed to overcoming the troubled history of Europe itself. On that basis, they were also entitled to expect others to accept the reality of reunification and the rightful place of a united Germany in Europe. For Kohl, the example of Franco-German reconciliation – with the Élysée Treaty as its political foundation – was also highly significant. He regarded it as a model that, after the Cold War, should likewise be adopted in Polish–German relations. This gave rise to the claim that Poland was to be seen as “our France in the East” – a phrase frequently repeated by Christian Democratic politicians in the 1990s.²⁷

Historical facts did not always have to align precisely with the main narratives and symbols of Kohl’s policy of reconciliation with Poland. They played a more ‘subordinate’ role, and could therefore be simplified or adapted as required. For example, as Kohl constructed his political identity as the direct heir to Konrad Adenauer, he also sought to link his own policy of reconciliation to Adenauer’s legacy. Kohl wished to be seen as Adenauer’s sole legitimate successor in this domain as well. As his adviser Horst Teltschik noted: “With regard to Poland, Helmut Kohl always saw himself as a continuator of Konrad Adenauer, who, already in his first government declaration in 1949, named reconciliation with Poland – alongside reconciliation with Israel and France – as one of the main objectives of German foreign policy”.²⁸ Kohl would later repeat this claim in his memoirs: “In one of his first speeches in the Bundestag, Konrad Adenauer named three countries with which the Federal Republic of Germany, due to its painful past, must develop special relations: France, Israel, and Poland. With France and Israel we succeeded in building new bridges – bridges that turned out to be remarkably durable. In the case of Poland, much still remained to be done”.²⁹

Both of the above statements serve as clear examples of the political constructivism that was characteristic of Helmut Kohl’s historical policy. In reality, the phrase attributed to Adenauer was a loose construction – an interpretation

²⁷ R. Freudenstein, ‘Deutschland und Polen am Beginn des 21. Jahrhundert’, *Politische Meinung* 12/2002, p. 29.

²⁸ H. Teltschik, *329 Tage Innenansichten der Einigung*, Siedler, Berlin 1991.

²⁹ H. Kohl, *Ich wollte Deutschlands Einheit...*, *op. cit.*

rather than a documented statement – and as far as is known, he never officially uttered these words. In his first government address to the Bundestag in Bonn on 20 September 1949, the speech referenced by Teltschik, what actually appears is a strong declaration refusing to recognise the Oder–Neisse line and the loss of Germany’s former eastern territories, combined with the federal government’s readiness to establish peaceful relations with its eastern neighbours, particularly the Soviet Union and Poland. To suggest, therefore, that from the very beginning of the Federal Republic’s existence its authorities had given equal priority to reconciliation with France, Israel, and Poland – and that Kohl, after 1989, was merely fulfilling this ‘inviolable principle’ of German foreign policy – is nothing more than a political narrative constructed for the occasion.

A similarly flexible approach to facts can be seen in Kohl’s earlier claim that German Christian Democracy – led by him – was from the outset deeply shaped by the ideology of the Kreisau Circle, or even that Krzyżowa represented the birthplace of the CDU’s worldview. It is difficult to fully support such a thesis, given that members of the German Christian Democratic Union included individuals deeply involved in collaboration with the Nazi regime – perhaps most strikingly Hans Globke, Adenauer’s right-hand man and co-author of the Nuremberg Laws, and Theodor Oberländer, a federal minister in Adenauer’s government. Moreover, compared with other parties on the German political scene, the proportion of individuals with active pasts in the Nazi Party was particularly high within the CDU – especially at the Bundestag and regional parliament levels. Furthermore, the narrative made no mention of the CDU’s responsibility for obstructing, at both federal and regional levels, the prosecution of those responsible for crimes committed during the occupation of Poland.

The problem with the reconciliation policy that Kohl directed towards Poland in 1989 was that it was built on certain assumptions and objectives regarded as self-evident and non-negotiable. The chancellor had a clear and fixed idea from the outset of what its content and form should be. This vision was shaped almost entirely by the German historical and political agenda, making little or no allowance for the possibility that the Polish side might have different priorities or understandings. As a result, when open disagreements arose – such as in the case of St. Anne Mountain – they were unilaterally interpreted as having been inspired either by representatives of the former communist regime in Poland or by Polish nationalists. This meant that Kohl’s reconciliation policy primarily served Germany’s domestic and foreign policy interests. From this perspective, not only the Polish partner’s point of view but also the past itself became secondary considerations. In the hands of the

chancellor, history became a malleable instrument, subordinated to higher objectives – defined, of course, by the political logic of Bonn.

Second theme: the order of priorities

The ambiguity in the hierarchy of priorities in Germany's reconciliation policy towards Poland in 1989 was clearly illustrated by the mass in Krzyżowa. What, in fact, was the main purpose of this event for the German government? Why did it attach such importance to this particular part of Kohl's visit to Poland – and previously to the idea of the meeting at St Anne Mountain? Why was the meeting considered so significant that, when the flight to Wrocław was cancelled, the German delegation chose to travel overnight by coach from Warsaw to Krzyżowa to ensure that this part of the agenda would proceed? Was the priority truly that single handshake of reconciliation with the Polish prime minister before German television cameras?

The question therefore arises: in Krzyżowa, was the German government's real priority genuine reconciliation with the Poles – or rather the advancement of its own agenda in Poland, namely the issues of the German minority, German-language place names, and the protection of German memorial sites, all framed as conditions for continued cooperation with the Polish government, and particularly as a message to the German electorate? It is worth recalling that the Polish side also made attempts – both before and after 4 June – to introduce elements into the visit's agenda that reflected Poland's own priorities, above all the border and reparations. However, the German side firmly rejected these proposals.³⁰ Kohl's and Teltschik's memoirs, as well as Polish documents from the visit's preparatory phase, clearly suggest that for the German side the mass in Krzyżowa – or, as initially planned, at St. Anne Mountain – was primarily intended as an opportunity for the chancellor to meet the German population of Silesia. The presence of the Polish prime minister further invested the event with the symbolism of Polish-German reconciliation.

As a result, the service held on 12 November in the courtyard of the ruined von Moltke family estate in Krzyżowa was attended predominantly by members of the German minority, many of whom held banners prepared especially for the occasion, welcoming Kohl as 'our chancellor'. The Polish government delegation and members of the Catholic Intelligentsia Club were also present, but the imbalance in representation between the two sides was striking. Moreover, the Polish public – who had long been told by the communist authorities, including through the government spokesperson Jerzy Urban under Mieczysław Rakowski's cabinet, that there was no German minority in Poland and that

30 *Polska wobec zjednoczenia Niemiec 1989–1991...*, op. cit.

any suggestion of its existence was a provocation – was completely unprepared for the images broadcast from Krzyżowa on national television. These images undoubtedly created confusion and uncertainty among the Polish population. They sent a clear message that, for Bonn, the issue of the German minority was a precondition for reconciliation (in reality, it was a condition for providing financial assistance to Warsaw), and they naturally raised questions about what Poland's expectations were with regard to reconciliation – especially as issues such as border recognition or wartime reparations had disappeared entirely from the agenda of Kohl's visit.

This conflation of two matters – placing the still highly sensitive topic of German minority rights, from the perspective of broad Polish public opinion, within the religious context of reconciliation symbolised by the Krzyżowa service – was bound to create an impression of 'moral blackmail', resulting in a highly tense atmosphere. Evidence of an awareness of this uncomfortable ambiguity can be found in the fact that, at the very beginning of the mass, Bishop Alfons Nossol of Opole, who was officiating, asked the German participants to take down their banners.³¹ Under such circumstances, the Polish prime minister had every reason to feel like a guest compelled to attend an event on what appeared to be foreign ground.

Third theme: the search for the 'good Germany'

In Kohl's politics of symbolism, former battle sites between nations were always the ideal stage on which contemporary leaders could shake hands in a gesture of reconciliation. St. Anne Mountain fit perfectly into this concept. Krzyżowa, on the other hand, was not directly linked – either historically or ideologically – to reconciliation between Germans and Poles. Instead, it related to another issue central to Germany's historical policy: the German resistance movement and the plot to assassinate Hitler in July 1944. It is therefore no coincidence that, from the very beginning of plans to establish Krzyżowa as a venue for European and Polish-German meetings, the intention was also to tell the story of 'European resistance movements against Nazi Germany'.

Krzyżowa was meant to bring together two themes: Polish-German reconciliation and the German resistance against Hitler, presenting both as part of a broader European phenomenon – the fight against Nazism. This allowed Germany to step out of the role of sole perpetrator and stand alongside the liberators. This approach to historical reinterpretation was later expressed openly and fully – most notably in 2004 – by then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

31 M. Szurlej, 'Jak doszło do mszy pojednania w Krzyżowej?' [in:] *Krzyżowa jako miejsce dialogu polsko-niemieckiego...*, op. cit., pp. 27–30.

He equated the conspirators who attempted to assassinate Hitler at the Wolf's Lair in July 1944 with the Warsaw insurgents of August 1944, claiming that both groups had fought for the liberation of Europe.³² In Poland, this comparison triggered a wave of criticism and provoked a series of publications uncovering uncomfortable anti-Polish elements in the biographies of the 20 July conspirators, including Claus von Stauffenberg and those around him. Critics argued that within this circle it is difficult to find anyone who had opposed the Nazi aggression against Poland in 1939 or the wars of annexation and occupation launched by Hitler in the early years of the Second World War – at least not until Germany began clearly to lose and thoughts of probable defeat, and the need to find a way out, began to emerge.³³

Krzyżowa therefore intertwined a number of complex issues in a problematic way: Polish–German reconciliation, perceptions of the German resistance against Hitler, and the broader question of the existence of a ‘good Germany’. Dieter Bingen, in his book, complained that Poles were unfamiliar with the history of the German opposition to Hitler and attributed this to the anti-German propaganda instilled in them by the communist authorities. “The resistance movement in Germany was taboo there”, he wrote, adding: “According to the general belief at the time – also among democratic elites – the dissidents from the Kreisau Circle had no direct impact on Poland’s fate”.³⁴ It is also true that, according to the account of Mieczysław Pszon, when during the preparations for Kohl’s visit he first suggested Krzyżowa to Horst Teltschik as a solution to the controversy surrounding St. Anne Mountain, it turned out that the chancellor’s adviser had never heard of the place.³⁵ At that time, the subject of the German resistance movement was familiar only to a narrow circle of historians in Germany and had not yet become a widely discussed social or political issue. The figures considered by a wide public as symbols of resistance and defiance against Nazi Germany were in Germany not Claus von Stauffenberg, but rather former chancellor Willy Brandt, Thomas Mann, or Marlene Dietrich – individuals who, however, for a long time, were also subjected to public ostracism in West Germany as traitors for their wartime stances.

This situation, however, was gradually expected to change thanks to the new historical policy initiated by Kohl as early as the mid-1980s. Key

32 Rede von Bundeskanzler Gerhard Schröder in der Feierstunde zum Gedenken an den Widerstand gegen die Nationalsozialistische Gewaltherrschaft am 20. Juli 2004 in Berlin, *Bulletin der Bundesregierung* 71–2, 20 July 2004.

33 T. Szarota, ‘Zamach Stauffenberga z polskiej perspektywy’, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Plus Minus* supplement, 24 July 2004; P. Semka, ‘Nie musimy czcić Stauffenberga’, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Plus Minus* supplement, 14 February 2009.

34 D. Bingen, *Polityka Republiki Bońskiej wobec Polski*, *op. cit.*, from p. 245.

35 “I told him that all our work would be blown to hell. That we had achieved our goal – and with good results for both sides – and now everything would be wasted because of the obstinacy over St. Anne Mountain. I asked him not to say anything to anyone for the time being, but that we would propose Krzyżowa. He had never heard of Krzyżowa in his life...” (the knowledge of modern history among Germans is appalling). See: *Polacy i Niemcy pół wieku później*, *op. cit.*, p. 543.

components of this policy included the politics of symbols and acts of reconciliation, as well as the search for and promotion of the concept of 'the good Germany' and the reorientation of Germany's post-war historical identity – an identity in which responsibility for Nazi crimes was no longer to be the sole central point of reference. The history of the German resistance against Hitler was particularly well-suited to serve this purpose. Therefore, after 1989 – thanks to the political efforts of the federal government, along with media, diplomatic, and academic initiatives, as well as exhibitions and new museums – this resistance found an important place in the public awareness and collective memory of the reunified German state. It became a form of evidence for the existence of a 'better Germany' that stood in opposition to Nazism in its broadest sense. The production and publicity surrounding the 2008 film *Valkyrie*, about Stauffenberg, can also be seen as a kind of symbolic culmination and success of all those efforts and initiatives, first led by Bonn and later by Berlin.

From the Polish point of view, speaking of the 'German resistance movement' during the Second World War understandably evoked a sense of distance – or even disagreement – especially when compared with the Polish Underground State. The scale of the two phenomena was simply incomparable, just as later comparisons between the democratic opposition in former East Germany and the multi-million-strong Solidarity movement in Poland were also disproportionate. But it was not only a matter of scale – it also concerned fundamentally different motivations. Krzyżowa, in this regard, was a compelling case study and offered a strong pretext for initiating an honest and thorough discussion about the Polish and German experiences of resisting Nazi totalitarianism. Yet such a discussion never materialised, because the issue was closely tied to the matter of Polish–German reconciliation – an overriding political goal advanced by Germany, which was the significantly stronger partner at the time. While this undoubtedly helped Kohl achieve his historical policy objectives, it could not gain broad positive reception within Polish society. This was not necessarily due to ignorance or prejudice, but rather to a widespread sense that this approach amounted to a politically motivated blurring of fundamental differences between the Polish and German experiences under Nazi totalitarianism.

The resistance movement and opposition in Nazi Germany were neither homogeneous in nature – though united in their opposition to Hitler and his policies – nor did they possess a broader social dimension. For this reason, the term 'German resistance movement' may be considered something of an overstatement. Different forms of opposition within Nazi Germany – such as the White Rose student group led by the Scholl siblings, or the figure of Dietrich

Bonhoeffer, an Evangelical pastor – must be treated separately. Bonhoeffer's stance of resistance, in particular, later played an important role in the 1970s among intellectual circles of Polish Catholics associated with *Więź* and the Clubs of Catholic Intelligentsia, largely thanks to the work of Anna Morawska. These were distinct phenomena, unquestionably demonstrating individual courage and genuine defiance.

Something quite different, however, was the more systemic resistance of circles centred around military officers, diplomats, clergy, or the aristocracy. These were groups engaged in opposition to Hitler's policies, attempting to formulate a conceptual counterweight and seeking contact with potential partners for negotiating future peace terms among decision-makers in the United Kingdom and the United States. When speaking of such systemic opposition, one may identify two main currents: the conservative-liberal one, centred around figures such as the monarchist politician Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, Wehrmacht co-founder General Ludwig Beck, and diplomat Ulrich von Hassell; and the Christian-social current, which found expression particularly in the Kreisau Circle, whose leaders included Count Helmuth James von Moltke and diplomat Adam von Trott zu Solz. The first current clearly drew on the political legacy of Otto von Bismarck and his great-power *Realpolitik*, and culturally on the philosophical concepts of Stefan George, while the second was more closely tied to the legacy of the idealist political thought of Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg and to interwar peace movements such as Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi's Pan-European movement.³⁶ These two currents began cooperating from the end of 1941. Within these contacts, differing views clashed over how the war should end and what the future of Germany should look like – until their shared fate was sealed with the failed assassination attempt on Hitler on 20 July 1944, followed by a wave of arrests and executions.

Despite differences in their positions, opposition circles were united by certain shared issues and experiences, including above all the political legacy of the Second Reich (the German Empire unified in 1871), the defeat in the First World War and the sense of injustice inflicted by the Treaty of Versailles in 1918, a critical assessment of the political and social situation of the Weimar Republic, and finally, opposition to the nature of the war and the policies pursued by Hitler. A shared concern was also the question of Germany's future in Europe as a Reich. There was broad agreement that Hitler's war could not be won and was leading the country towards catastrophe. Therefore, everything had to be done to ensure that the Reich survived as a European great power and,

³⁶ K. Hildebrand, 'Die ostpolitischen Vorstellungen im deutschen Widerstand' [in:] *Schriftenreihe zu Widerstandsbewegungen in nationalsozialistischen Deutschland und in Polen während des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, Georg-Eckert-Institut für Internationale Schulbuchforschung, 1977, p. 32.

at the same time, as a third force positioned between the two non-continental powers – Great Britain allied with the Americans and Russia. It was believed that peace could be negotiated with the former, on the condition that Hitler be removed from power, whereas the latter – due to the mortal threat posed by Russian communism to Europe – had to be opposed. In this context, the views of the opposition regarding the place of Poland and the broader region of Central and Eastern Europe in Europe were also shaped. These views drew on the tradition of Friedrich Naumann's *Mitteleuropa* and Carl Schmitt's large-space thinking.³⁷ Poland's right to statehood within borders acceptable to Germany was not questioned, nor was that of other countries in the region; however, it was assumed that their existence would be within a European system integrated by the Reich as the continent's central power – as a geopolitical buffer against communist Russia and an economic base for the German economy. Thus, in the opposition's thinking about the post-war European order, a hegemonic vision of the Reich clearly dominated.

In the case of Krzyżowa, these approaches were in fact more diverse, because alongside traditional reasoning in terms of *Realpolitik*, there were also strongly present idealistic assumptions of social and Christian thought. Therefore, in the concepts of Europe developed by the Kreisau Circle, on the one hand we find: an emphasis on the tradition of the German Reich reaching back to the Middle Ages as a central political and territorial category; plans for post-war Germany within the borders of 1918 or 1937; thinking of Germany in large-space terms; and, for example, the assertion that because of their fragmentation, economic weakness, and their tendency toward nationalist expansionism and revanchism against Germany, the nations and states (mainly Slavic) of Central and Eastern Europe must be included in the German sphere of influence in order to prevent them from being taken over by Russia or Great Britain and the US.³⁸ On the other hand – particularly in the case of James von Moltke – there is a noticeable individual attempt at a different way of thinking, based on the conviction that the experience of war and Nazism represented for Germany a gateway to conversion towards Christian values. However, according to him, the realisation of this scenario required not the survival of the Reich, but its complete defeat, which would open the path to building Europe on new foundations – no longer on the traditional political categories of state and nation, but instead invoking the ideas of eternal law,

37 F. Naumann, *Central Europe*, P. S. King & Son, London 1916; C. Schmitt, *Völkerrechtliche Großraumordnung mit Interventionsverbot für raumfremde Mächte*, Duncker & Humblot, Berlin 2009.

38 R. Bleistein (ed.), *Dossier: Kreisauer Kreis. Dokumente aus dem Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, J. Knecht 1987, pp. 129, 176, 250–252, 344–346.

human dignity, social justice, and family.³⁹ Von Moltke also assumed that as a result of defeat, Germany might lose some of its territories, such as Silesia or East Prussia.

In the context of the main question that concerns us here – namely, whether it was appropriate to link the issue of German opposition to Hitler with the matter of reconciliation in Polish–German relations – the decisive assessment appears to be that of German historian Klaus Hildebrand. Analysing the manifestoes of the two main opposition groups in Nazi Germany, with regard to Central and Eastern Europe, he concludes that “neither group, it seems, assessed the current situation in Europe primarily from the perspective of the nations affected by the [Hitler] war and their needs”.⁴⁰ Recognising that German resistance groups were to serve as the starting point for implementing a reconciliation policy in Polish–German relations undoubtedly suited the aims of Kohl’s historical policy – above all, the search for a ‘good Germany’. At the same time, however, it meant that once again the German historical agenda unilaterally formed the basis for the politics of reconciliation. This was far more convenient and advantageous for the German side than, for instance, attempting to base such a policy on the Polish Underground State, the German occupation of Poland, or the Warsaw Uprising.

Fourth theme: reconciliation without reparation

A key factor weighing most heavily on Kohl’s policy of reconciliation and understanding was the positions taken by the German authorities regarding reparations and compensation for Poland and the Polish people for the losses suffered as a result of the Second World War and the occupation. Kohl consistently pursued the concept of reconciliation without reparation. In this respect, the chancellor was by no means exceptional. He followed the line adopted by all previous governments of the Federal Republic since 1949. Without exaggeration, it can be said that the authorities in Bonn consistently acted to avoid paying compensation to Poland for individual victims of Nazi Germany – Polish citizens. The political shift of 1989 did not bring any change to the German position on this matter. If we add to this the fact that, with only a few exceptions, German war criminals benefited in the Federal Republic from legal and institutional protection by the state, then all these circumstances cast German reconciliation policy towards Poland in a very unfavourable light. Moreover, successive German governments, both before and after reunification, took virtually no action to change this situation.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 278–299.

⁴⁰ K. Hildebrand, *Die ostpolitischen Vorstellungen im deutschen Widerstand*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

Reparation as a general demand in Polish–German relations encompasses a complex set of issues. When speaking of reparations, we may refer to different forms of indirect symbolic and material compensation, restitution of stolen property, rehabilitation of victims, humanitarian aid, or support for reconstruction. However, at the core of this issue lie two primary matters: reparations and compensation, which must be treated separately. The first was tied to the decisions of the victorious powers towards defeated Germany, and thus concerns obligations imposed under international law. The second, as it turned out, became a matter of internal German legislation arising from the provisions of the so-called Transition Agreement concluded between the Federal Republic of Germany and the three Western powers, obliging West Germany in the 1950s to adopt compensation legislation for “victims of National Socialist persecution”.⁴¹ In other words, the Western victorious powers decided to end the occupation of Germany and to resolve the issue of Germany’s pre-war and wartime debts – including the final settlement of reparations – only with the reunification of Germany and the signing of a peace treaty, on the condition that Bonn would properly regulate the issue of compensation for victims of Nazi Germany on its own.

As for the reparations imposed on Germany, the Potsdam Conference of 1945 did not specify their amount and postponed the final, comprehensive resolution of this matter until the conclusion of a peace treaty. This postponement was later often used by West German governments as a convenient argument to deflect Polish claims directed at Bonn.

According to German doctrine, the Bonn government could not undertake obligations on behalf of the entire German state and nation; therefore, the realisation of any claims could only occur within the framework of a comprehensive peace settlement, including the reunification of Germany. At the Potsdam Conference, it was agreed that countries would receive reparations from Germany through the mediation of the major powers – Poland via the USSR, and the remaining countries via the USA and the United Kingdom. Between 1945 and 1953, Germany did in fact pay war reparations in this way, mostly in the form of goods and commodities. Poland fared poorly under these arrangements. The agreement with the USSR stipulated that the Soviets would pass on to Poland 15% of the reparations they received from Germany. Additionally, Poland was burdened by the so-called coal deal, that is, the mandatory resale of coal to the USSR at extremely reduced prices.⁴² Ultimately, in 1953,

41 J. Barcz, B. Jałowicki, J. Kranz, *Między pamięcią a odpowiedzialnością*, Wydawnictwo Prawo i Praktyka Gospodarcza, Warszawa 2004, p. 37.

42 S. Żerko, ‘Reparacje i odszkodowania w stosunkach między Polską a RFN (zarys historyczny)’, *IZ Policy Papers* no. 22(1), Instytut Zachodni, Poznań 2017, pp. 13–14.

Moscow forced Bolesław Bierut's government to officially renounce further claims to German reparations. At the same time, reparations deliveries to other countries also effectively ended under the so-called London Agreement, which concerned German debts from before and after the Second World War. The escalating Cold War meant that neither the United States nor the USSR was interested in further financially burdening West Germany or East Germany with reparations. In this situation, the governments of the Federal Republic of Germany were able to argue that the matter had been essentially resolved by the great powers and that its final settlement would, in any case, be the subject of a future peace conference.

The situation looked different, however, when it came to compensation. In this area, responsibility was clearly assigned by the Allies to the government and legislature of the Federal Republic of Germany. On this basis, in the 1950s, West Germany passed a series of compensation laws, which primarily applied to German victims and Jewish victims who had previously held German citizenship. At the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, Western countries pressured West Germany to provide compensation to their own citizens. In contrast, victims living behind the Iron Curtain – in Central and Eastern Europe, where the most serious crimes were committed during the war and occupation – were completely excluded from this compensation system. The same applied to victims of forced labour in Nazi Germany – altogether approximately 9 million people.⁴³

If anyone took at face value the suggestions that the issue of reparations and compensation would be comprehensively and definitively resolved with the signing of a peace treaty, or that – as normalisation progressed in relations between West Germany and Eastern Bloc states, first in 1970 and then again in 1989 – German compensation legislation would be extended to victims from Central and Eastern Europe, they were bound to feel deeply disappointed. On the issue of reparations, the German authorities maintained that the Polish People's Republic had effectively renounced all claims in this regard in 1953. Additionally, Kohl succeeded in definitively convincing George H.W. Bush that the foundation for German reunification should not be a peace treaty, but rather a 2+4 international agreement. As a result, all the solemn declarations repeated over decades – that the claims arising from losses in the Second World War would be finally settled in a peace treaty – were cast aside in favour of the objective of German reunification.⁴⁴ Moreover, when Bush pointed out that this

⁴³ J. Kranz, 'Rokowania wielostronne z Niemcami – od końca 1998 r. do 17 lipca 2000 r.' [in:] J. Barcz, B. Jałowiecki, J. Kranz, *Między pamięcią a odpowiedzialnością, op. cit.*, pp. 29–41.

⁴⁴ S. Żerko, 'Sprawa niemieckich odszkodowań za II wojnę światową w stosunkach między Polską a RFN do 1991 r.' [in:] *Colloquium quarterly*, Heroes of Westerplatte Naval Academy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, vol. 11, no. 3 (2019), p. 120.

might provoke objections, for example from Warsaw, Kohl engaged in outright manipulation by stating: “We have already paid 150 billion Deutsche Marks to Poland, Israel, and individual people. We will not pay more, fifty years after the war”.⁴⁵ From the rest of the conversation with Bush, it becomes clear that one of the main motives behind Kohl’s push for the 2+4 format and his rejection of a peace treaty was to close the door to any further financial claims against a unified Germany. In fact, as Kohl openly admitted in a telephone conversation with Tadeusz Mazowiecki on 23 February 1990 – literally one day before the Camp David meeting – he said: “I will not take part in negotiations where Germans are seated and a peace congress is judging them. This is not 1954 or 1950. What I want is for us to achieve the unity of Germany in a peaceful way. In a way that ensures our neighbours will not be afraid. That everyone can live safely within their borders. (...) But I am not ready to take part in a conference where, for example, the issue of reparations is raised again. That is not up for discussion as far as I’m concerned”.⁴⁶

And that is precisely what happened, with only minor exceptions to the rule. Subsequent German governments maintained that victims from Poland were simply not eligible for compensation. Consequently, the modest sums that West Germany agreed to pay – in the 1970s, for example, to Polish victims of pseudo-medical experiments (100 million marks), while simultaneously refusing similar support to former Polish prisoners of German camps, and later in 1991 (500 million marks) under the Żabiński-Kastrup agreement (which, under West German pressure, was ultimately intended to bring an end to all Polish compensation claims against a unified Germany) – were always presented as humanitarian aid (*ex gratia*), rather than state reparations for Polish victims. There was, therefore, a glaring asymmetry in Germany’s approach, as payments to citizens of Western countries, to Israel, or to German nationals were always made in the form of actual compensation. This clear distinction was maintained by Berlin even in the late 1990s, during negotiations over reparations for those subjected to forced labour in Nazi Germany.

The category of victims in question was, in fact, never covered by West German compensation legislation. Moreover, neither the German government nor German industry felt responsible for resolving the issue of compensation for former forced labourers in Nazi Germany during the Second World War (the estimated number of forced labour victims was approximately 9 million people, including around 2 million from Poland). It was only in the 1990s, following lawsuits filed in American courts against the Federal Republic of Germany by

⁴⁵ The first Kohl–Bush meeting, Camp David, 24 February 1990.

⁴⁶ Transcript of the telephone conversation with Chancellor Kohl, 23 February 1990 [in:] Tadeusz Mazowiecki, *Rok 1989 i lata następne*, Wydawnictwo Prószyński i S-ka, Warszawa 2012, p. 120.

United States citizens who had been victims of forced labour, that a German-American agreement was reached in 1995 to pay compensation to several hundred of those victims. This case contributed to increasing pressure on the German government (including from the US authorities) to finally resolve the issue of compensation for victims living in Central Europe and the territory of the former USSR. At the same time, beginning in 1998, a wave of lawsuits was filed in US courts against German companies. The Polish government also joined this effort, which is why Poland later became a party to international negotiations with Germany, concluded in the 2000 agreement on the payment of compensation to Polish victims of forced labour. This undoubted success of Jerzy Buzek's cabinet and his team of negotiators was, however, accompanied by an openly expressed attitude of reluctance on the part of the Germans. As noted by Jerzy Kranz, who signed the final agreement with the government in Berlin, "the day I signed the Joint Statement in Berlin remains in my memory as one of relief, stemming from the successful conclusion of long-lasting efforts, but also of distaste surrounding the atmosphere of the closing ceremony. (...) For example, the German organisers were reluctant to correct the Polish flag, which had been hung with the colours reversed. Nor was a representative of the victims from Central and Eastern Europe allowed to speak at the conclusion, and the countries of the region were forced to organise their own press conference, as the press conference of Count Lambsdorff and Secretary Eizenstat envisaged only passive participation of those countries. The entire closing ceremony was marked by elements indicating that the victims from Central and Eastern Europe had ended up there somewhat by accident".⁴⁷ This unfortunate atmosphere also found its epilogue in the scandal concerning the exchange rate adopted by the German side for converting the funds transferred to the Polish Reconciliation Foundation – one that was favourable to the German bank, but disadvantageous for Polish victims.⁴⁸

Summary

In European and foreign policy – both that of West Germany and later of reunified Germany – historical policy has always been a key element of the nation's soft power in relations with other countries. Focused on the political processing of the issue of 'German guilt', it was meant to demonstrate the restored credibility and responsibility of West Germany's policy to the outside world,

⁴⁷ J. Kranz, *Rokowania wielostronne z Niemcami...*, op. cit., pp. 117–118.

⁴⁸ B. Jałowiecki, 'Wykonanie porozumienia z 17 lipca 2000 r.' [in:] J. Barcz, B. Jałowiecki, J. Kranz, *Miedzy pamięcią a odpowiedzialnością*, op. cit., pp. 171–186.

thereby influencing how Germany was perceived by others. It also created institutional and financial instruments of the state that allowed it to shape historical narratives internationally in a way that was favourable to Germany. At the same time, it always played an important stabilising and legitimising role in domestic politics, shaping the political scene, public opinion, and education, while enforcing consensus and marginalising views that challenged it.

Helmut Kohl played a key role in the evolution of German historical policy – both in its internal and external dimensions. From the mid-1980s onwards, historical policy became for him an important tool in reshaping German historical and political identity. The aim was to shift from the memory of the crimes committed by Nazi Germany, which had been a central element of German culture and political identity, towards highlighting the positive domestic traditions of pre-war and post-war democracy and liberalism. This transformed collective identity was clearly illustrated by the permanent exhibitions of the chancellor's two flagship museum projects: the House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn and the German Historical Museum in Berlin. This politically inspired shift coincided with the process of German reunification.

At the same time, Kohl had a tremendous impact on the reorientation of German historical policy in its international dimension. In this context, it coincided with the end of the Cold War and the emergence of the influential Western idea of the 'end of history'. The chancellor's skilful use of symbolic politics and his particular emphasis on the category of 'reconciliation' in relations with other countries aligned with the political and ideological transformations taking place in the post-Cold War world. As a result, this form of historical policy, used as a tool of Germany's foreign policy soft power, proved extremely effective.

Polish–German relations, beginning with Kohl's visit to Poland in November 1989, aside from their economic and geopolitical dimensions, were also fundamentally subordinated to the agenda of his historical policy. This agenda – built on the imperative of reconciliation, understanding, and rapprochement – envisioned the establishment of a relationship with Poland based precisely on that foundation. It relied primarily on German historical symbols, German interpretations of history, and Germany's clear institutional and financial superiority. Its aims were to normalise the historical image of Germany, separate the context of Nazi totalitarianism from the main currents of German tradition and culture, and Europeanise Germany and its history. Additionally, Kohl's historical policy served a key national interest in the context of German reunification: neutralising the issues of reparations, compensation, and redress in Polish–German relations.

The fire over Germany.

**The evolution of the collective memory of
Germany's own victims, and of historical policy:
the example of the Allied bombing of Nazi Germany**

Wojciech Pięciak

MAIN POINTS

- During the Second World War, nearly a third of the German population experienced Allied strategic bombing of cities (*Bombenkrieg/Luftkrieg*). As a result of these raids, between 500,000 and 600,000 people were killed and several hundred cities were destroyed.
- Due to the widespread and traumatic nature of these experiences, after 1945 the memory of these events and the policy towards this aspect of history became omnipresent in Germany, albeit mainly at the local, municipal, and regional levels.
- When, in the late 1990s, reflection on Germany's own victims of the war re-emerged, this trend came to encompass the subject of the *Bombenkrieg* – now on a nationwide scale and reaching its peak around 2002–2003.
- In the course of the debates at that time, a model of Germany's culture of remembrance and historical policy emerged in which, at the federal level, Dresden and the commemorations of successive anniversaries of the air raid on the city – attended by Presidents of the Federal Republic – became the central focus.
- With regard to Nazi Germany and the Second World War, two central elements can today be identified in German collective memory. The first (and dominant) is the memory of the Holocaust; the second is the memory of Germany's own victims (particularly the victims of the *Bombenkrieg*, not least because of the scale of the bombing campaign). This makes it all the more important to analyse how this memory is being shaped.
- The subject of the *Bombenkrieg* also has several Polish aspects, one of which may today serve as an example of the highly successful integration of Polish perspectives into the German debate and historical policy.

The second day of January 1945 promised to be exceptionally beautiful in Middle Franconia – a historical region that both then and now belongs administratively to Bavaria. The sky was cloudless, and the bright sun made the temperature feel higher than it actually was. In Nuremberg, thermometers registered minus eight degrees Celsius.

Nuremberg – the historical centre of Lower Franconia, once a meeting place for the rulers of the German states, a jewel of preserved medieval architecture, and an important industrial hub of Nazi Germany's economy (home to numerous armaments factories) – also became known after 1933 in Germany and around the world as the '*Stadt der Reichsparteitage*', the city of Nazi Party rallies, which were held there until 1938 and at their peak drew one million participants.

January 1945: Nuremberg as a case study of the *Bombenkrieg*

According to the 1939 census, Nuremberg had approximately 430,000 inhabitants; in the following years, this number declined – for example, as a result of mobilisation and the evacuation of children from cities to the countryside. Strictly speaking, this figure refers to residents of German nationality. In the following years, several tens of thousands of additional people arrived in the city and its immediate vicinity. These were forced labourers, mainly from Eastern Europe, assigned to approximately 150 enterprises located in Nuremberg and its surroundings. In their daily lives, they were housed in around one hundred camps, both large and small, scattered throughout the city (with the term 'camp' used in the literature also referring to a single barrack or a guarded residential building).¹

A separate group among them consisted of individuals transferred to German companies from concentration camps – such as the 550 Hungarian Jewish women who, in autumn 1944, were selected by representatives of the Siemens-Schuckert electrical engineering company from among the female prisoners of Auschwitz II-Birkenau. The women were sent to armaments factories in Nuremberg, where they were forced, among other tasks, to assemble bomb fuses. They were housed in barracks built near the city's Southern Cemetery (*Südfriedhof*), which formed a camp facility functioning as a subcamp (*Außenlager*) of the Flossenbürg concentration camp. The women were also

1 Between 1939 and 1945, around 118,000 forced labourers were deployed in Nuremberg and the surrounding area (including prisoners of war subjected to forced labour) nearly 6,000 of whom lost their lives. See, for example, the educational materials for school workshops: '*Zwangsarbeit in Nürnberg 1939–1945*', Pädagogik rund um das Dokumentationszentrum, dokupaed.de.

sent to perform various tasks around the city, such as clearing snow, owing to labour shortages in municipal services.²

Regardless of whether they were Germans or foreign forced labourers, that day – the second of January 1945 – was particularly tense for all of them from the early morning hours onward. The air-raid sirens first wailed at 10:00 a.m., but it soon became clear that the alert did not concern Nuremberg. The same happened the second and third times – at 12:50 and then at 3:51 p.m. – when the alarm was soon lifted again. Yet each time, those who could took shelter in air-raid bunkers, shrapnel trenches dug in city squares, or underground rock tunnels, hoping that this time too the damage and losses would not be too great.³

1. Feuersturm destroys armament factories and the Old Town

Previously, beginning in August 1942, Nuremberg had already experienced 11 air raids. Nine of these took place at night and were carried out by the RAF Bomber Command, while two were conducted during the day by US forces.⁴ Even so, compared to other German cities under attack at the time, Nuremberg could be considered relatively fortunate: during most of these raids, the number of fatalities did not exceed one hundred. The highest death toll came during the raid in August 1943, when nearly 600 people were killed – still a small number compared to, for example, the bombing of Hamburg in July of that same year, which claimed an estimated 30,000 to 34,000 lives.

The city owed its relative good fortune up to that point largely to a combination of circumstances – beginning with weather conditions, which on several occasions hindered the attacks, through to strong anti-aircraft defences (for example, during the raid on 31 March 1944, the Royal Air Force (RAF) lost as many as 95 bombers over the course of the missions across Germany, while in Nuremberg there were 74 fatalities), and finally to the system of rock cut cellars beneath the Old Town. Although Nuremberg's Old Town – densely built-up and largely composed of centuries-old buildings – was highly 'flammable', these remnants of the medieval city offered very effective shelter for residents. And so it would prove once again.

It was 6:33 p.m. when the sirens wailed once again, for the fourth time on 2 January 1945. This time, not without reason: more than half of the approximately one thousand RAF aircraft that had taken off from British airfields that day – primarily Lancaster bombers, supported by Mosquito multirole

2 T. Lechner, 'Das Buchprojekt »Von Auschwitz nach Nürnberg« hat die Erinnerungskultur ins Rollen gebracht', Protestant Church website *Sonntagsblatt*, sonntagsblatt.de.

3 The account of the air raid on Nuremberg on 2 January 1945 is based on: '„Es war die Hölle“: Luftangriff auf Nürnberg am 2. Januar 1945', Nuremberg city website, nuernberg.de.

4 For a list of air raids on Nuremberg and their declared targets as well as the number of victims see: 'Bombing of Nuremberg in World War II', Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org.

aircraft (whose tasks included reconnaissance and target marking) – were headed for Nuremberg.

The first bombs fell at 7:20 p.m. The air raid lasted about an hour. Altogether that evening, 514 Lancasters, arriving in successive waves, dropped 1,825 tonnes of earthquake bombs and 479 tonnes of incendiary bombs on the city. At that stage of the war, German anti-aircraft defences were already very weak – the losses sustained by the RAF bomber squadrons attacking Nuremberg were ultimately minimal: four Lancasters were shot down over Germany, and two more were lost over France due to technical problems.⁵

This time, however, Nuremberg was not so fortunate – at least in terms of material losses. Owing to good visibility provided by the full moon, the Mosquito aircraft were able to mark the targets accurately. The bombs struck the industrial area, including the armaments factories of companies such as MAN (*Maschinenfabrik Augsburg-Nürnberg*, producing vehicles and machinery), TEKADE (electrical engineering and communications equipment), Nüral (automotive parts), and Nürnberger Schraubenfabrik (military communications equipment and related products). The railway infrastructure also suffered, as Nuremberg was an important transport hub.

In addition, the entire built-up area of the Old Town was destroyed (including around 2,000 houses dating back to the Middle Ages), along with large parts of other residential districts. Around 100,000 people lost their homes. Here too, in Nuremberg, a phenomenon occurred that German describes with a term closely tied to that period and its events – *Feuersturm*, literally, “firestorm”, or more loosely translated as a fire tornado or fiery hurricane. This phenomenon arose when individual fires merged into a firestorm which continued to spread through the city for many hours after the raid, consuming further houses, streets, and neighbourhoods.

2. Losses suffered by Nuremberg: twenty-two bombings, seven thousand people killed

Thus, the old Nuremberg ceased to exist – it was transformed into a sea of ruins. The destruction was completed by further air raids, two of which, carried out by US forces on 20 and 21 February 1945, were of similar intensity to the attack on 2 January. The final air raid – involving 143 RAF bombers targeting the marshalling yard and adjacent residential districts – took place on 11 April 1945. The destruction of the urban fabric was so extensive that in the first post-war years there was serious consideration of not rebuilding Nuremberg on its

⁵ For a daily list of Allied air raids and losses in January 1945 see: ‘RAF Bomber Command Diary... Jan 1945...’, WW2AIR-CRAFT.NET, 26 January 2005.

original site at all, but instead leaving the ruins as they were and constructing the city anew elsewhere.

Throughout the war, Nuremberg experienced 22 Allied strategic air raids. It is therefore difficult to believe that the human losses were relatively low: in total, around 6,600 people were killed in the raids, including approximately 1,800 in the attack of 2 January and approximately 1,400 in the raids of 20–21 February (the dead were buried in mass graves at the city's Southern Cemetery, which today serves as a memorial site).⁶

The use of the word 'only' is justified when one considers that in the final months of the Second World War – when German anti-aircraft defences had already been weakened – the Allies were able to carry out air raids methodically and with virtually no losses of their own. Consequently, it was during this period that operations took place in which the highest German civilian casualties from individual raids were recorded (excluding the series of multi-day raids on Hamburg in the summer of 1943).

Such was the case in Dresden (where 25,000 people were killed in the raids of 13–15 February), in Pforzheim (where 18,000–20,000 people – nearly a third of the city's population – died on 23 February 1945)⁷ and in Świnoujście, then an important Baltic port. In the case of Świnoujście, it has never been possible to determine definitively the number of victims of the bombing on 12 March 1945: estimates range from 3,000–4,000 to almost twenty thousand. The discrepancy stems in part from the fact that at the time of the raid, the city and port hosted an unknown but significant number of refugees; this was cited by authors arguing for the higher estimates.⁸

6 The author was unable to establish how many of the 6,600 people killed were Germans and how many were forced labourers or concentration camp prisoners. There must have been casualties among the latter – considering that they made up a significant portion of the workforce in the bombed armaments factories, many of which operated continuously on a shift basis. Statistically, non-Germans accounted for up to several percent of those killed in air raids. It is also known that during the raids of 2 January and 21 February, the aforementioned camp for Hungarian Jewish women was completely destroyed. The prisoners were forced to clear the ruins before being transferred to another subcamp of KZ Flossenbürg, where they were eventually liberated by American forces.

7 Relative to its population, the air raid on Pforzheim resulted in the highest death toll of any bombing raid on a German city. This was due in part to the very dense urban fabric, much of which consisted of *Fachwerkhaus* (timber-framed buildings, known in Polish as *mur pruski*, with a high proportion of wooden structural elements).

8 The victims were buried in mass graves on Golm Hill near the village of Kamminke, which today lies on the German side of the border with Poland. For a long time, this air raid and its consequences remained largely absent from Germany's collective memory, probably because, after 1945, the peripheral location of the site from a German perspective, and the fact that Świnoujście became part of post-Yalta Poland. For some time now, commemorative ceremonies have been held on Golm Hill on the anniversary of the raid to honour its victims.

Bombenkrieg: Allied strategic bombing of Germany – an outline

The air raids on Nuremberg during the Second World War and the experiences of the city's inhabitants during that period represent a typical, even exemplary, case of a German city and its fate during the *Bombenkrieg* (or *Luftkrieg*). These were strategic air raids which, neither in intention nor in practice, distinguished between military and civilian targets (in Polish, the term 'nalot dywanowy' – carpet bombing – is sometimes used; the German equivalent is *Flächenbombardement* or *Flächenbombardierung*).⁹

Such was the nature of Allied air raids during the Second World War, aimed primarily at the territory of Nazi Germany – though occasionally also at significant targets in occupied territories (for example, in France¹⁰ or even in what was then eastern Poland and is now western Ukraine, such as the attack on the Drohobych-Boryslav Oil Basin in June 1944, in which several hundred workers were killed or wounded). British military personnel and wartime doctrine referred to this type of raid as 'area bombing'.

When today a German historian, journalist, or politician uses the term *Bombenkrieg* or *Luftkrieg* during a commemorative event, its meaning is immediately clear – the word itself, etymologically combining 'war' with either 'bombs', or 'air', says it all. In Polish, there is no simple or fully adequate equivalent that conveys not only the concept itself but also the full depth of its meaning.¹¹ Literal translations – such as 'wojna bombowa' (the equivalent of the English 'bombing war') or 'wojna w powietrzu' – convey little to a Polish audience. In each case, the translation also lacks the historical context and

⁹ The most recent state of the debate on the legal, moral, and also military aspects of strategic and tactical air raids during the Second World War (not only those carried out by the Allies) is provided by Professor Sönke Neitzel in his lecture 'Der strategische Luftkrieg im Zweiten Weltkrieg' (available on YouTube), which he gave in Berlin on 4 December 2024. In the author's opinion, Neitzel, born in 1968, is one of the most interesting German historians. Since 2015, he has been affiliated with the Institute of History at the University of Potsdam, where he specialises in military history (he is currently perhaps the only professor of military history in Germany). He is also among the few German historians who delve into the subject of the Allied air raids. Of particular interest to a Polish audience may be the fact that while the first 45 minutes of the event consisted of a lecture, the second 45 minutes were devoted to questions from the audience, the vast majority of which concerned the contemporary context of the *Bombenkrieg*/*Luftkrieg* debate – especially the war in Ukraine, its prospects, and the potential for the conflict to spread further into Europe.

¹⁰ It is estimated that tens of thousands of French civilians were killed in Allied air raids on targets in occupied France, a significant portion of them in Normandy. Prior to the D-Day landings on 6 June 1944, Allied air forces conducted intensive bombings – such as strikes on local infrastructure – aimed at operationally 'isolating' the landing zone. Further heavy raids followed during the Battle of Normandy, as the fighting continued until August 1944, while the Allies expanded and consolidated their foothold. This is discussed, for example, by the British military historian (and currently one of the leading authors on strategic bombing) Richard Overy, in both his articles and his book *Der Bombenkrieg. Europa 1939–1945* (the German edition was published in 2014).

¹¹ German is not the only language that has such symbolic terms. German journalists writing about Poland, for example, face a certain semantic difficulty when in their reports they have to translate into German the term "rzeź wołyńska" (or "rzeź wołyńsko-galicyska"). Although a literal translation (e.g. *Massaker in Wolhynien und Ostgalizien*) conveys the basic meaning, it does not carry the same weight or emotional resonance for German readers as it does for Poles.

emotional resonance that the German term immediately evokes – especially for the older generation who experienced it firsthand.

And it was an experience – something that we, in Polish discussions of German memory, perhaps are sometimes not aware of – that was widespread among the German population during the Second World War. From the perspective of Germans and their family histories, it was also of fundamental importance for the later shaping of individual memory of the Third Reich and the Second World War.

The Allied strategic air raids – conducted from the spring of 1942 on an increasingly large scale, both quantitatively (in terms of the forces involved) and qualitatively (with the increasing intensification of planning, target selection, and methods) – affected virtually all cities within the territory of Germany at the time that lay within reach of Allied aircraft. These included not only major metropolitan centres, but also towns with populations of tens of thousands and sometimes even smaller settlements¹² – in total, several hundred cities and towns.¹³ It is estimated that at least 25 million civilians lived in those cities (making the air raids a society-wide experience), of whom approximately 500,000 to 600,000 lost their lives. This number includes approximately 75,000 German children, as well as several tens of thousands of non-Germans – foreign forced labourers, prisoners of war, and inmates – who were employed in armaments factories and/or housed in camps that were also bombed.¹⁴

Allied bomber forces also suffered losses. Out of 125,000 Bomber Command aircrew, 55,000 were killed,¹⁵ including around 1,500 Poles (members of the four Polish bomber squadrons within the RAF, discussed further below). US losses amounted to approximately 27,000 dead.¹⁶

¹² Even very small towns – as long as they held some strategic significance, such as Anklam in Mecklenburg–Western Pomerania, which had only several thousand inhabitants but housed factories producing parts for Focke-Wulf Fw 190, the Luftwaffe's standard fighter aircraft. See a documentary showing the air raid available on the Norddeutscher Rundfunk website, published in October 2023, on the 80th anniversary of the air raid which killed more than 300 civilians.

¹³ The German language Wikipedia contains a list of German cities that were subject to air raids (the list is incomplete and covers mainly larger towns and cities). The footnotes may also be of interest here, as they refer to an extensive body of regional literature. This shows how intensively the subject has been studied at the level of regional historiography (the literature is, of course, far more extensive than what is cited here).

¹⁴ The proportion of non-Germans who died as a result of Allied air raids seems to correspond roughly to the proportion of non-Germans within the wartime population of Nazi Germany. It is estimated that during the war around 13 million people were sent to forced labour in the territory of Nazi Germany alone (a further 7 million or so performed such labour in the occupied countries). Among these 13 million were both civilian workers and prisoners of war as well as inmates of labour camps. See, for example, the website of the *Museum of Forced Labour under National Socialism in Weimar* which opened in 2024; museum-zwangsarbeit.de. It is worth adding that almost 43% of forced labourers were employed in industries that became targets of Allied air raids.

¹⁵ See for example a British website dedicated to the history of the Bomber Command, internationalbcc.co.uk. Overall, the so-called irreversible losses (i.e. those killed, seriously wounded, or taken prisoner) sustained by RAF Bomber Command amounted to 72% of its personnel. Of all branches of the armed forces involved in the Second World War, a higher mortality rate was probably only recorded among the crews of German submarines – around three-quarters of whom were killed.

¹⁶ See for example 'The Combined Bomber Offensive', The National WWII Museum, 1 May 2024, nationalww2museum.org.

The air raids radically altered the topography and architecture of German cities, as much of their historic fabric was destroyed. To illustrate the scale of the devastation, some German authors compare the effects of the *Bombenkrieg* to historical catastrophes such as the plague in the 16th century or the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century. When cities were rebuilt after 1945, reconstruction of their original appearance was generally abandoned – the priority was to provide housing. Only selected landmarks were faithfully restored, such as the Gothic churches in Nuremberg.

1. Strategic air raids over Germany: concept and implementation

Where did the concept of the *Bombenkrieg* originate? Over the past decades, some German authors have claimed, often in accusatory terms, that it was invented by Sir Arthur Harris, head of the British Bomber Command. However, the concept of using air power as a strategic instrument of warfare had already emerged in various countries after the First World War (and it was also for this reason that no convention prohibiting air raids on non-military targets was successfully concluded at that time). Moreover, during the Second World War, it was not the Allies but the Germans who were the first to carry out bombings that did not distinguish between military and civilian targets – already in 1939 against places such as Wieluń, Warsaw, and many other Polish cities and towns, and later in the war also against, for example, Rotterdam, London, and Coventry (to mention only the best-known examples).

What, then, was the purpose of the Allied air raids? Harris, who indeed developed the doctrine of 'area bombing', argued – based on the experience of the initial pinpoint attacks on targets in Germany in 1940, which had generally proved ineffective – that since it was unlikely that a bomb would hit, for example, a munitions factory with precision, it would be more practical to 'carpet bomb' the entire area (that is, the city) in which strategic targets were located. In addition, the raids were intended to intimidate the population and break morale – this was the concept of 'moral bombing'. It is also important to remember in this context that for a long time, air raids were the only strategic instrument the Allies could use against Nazi Germany on European soil. This situation changed only after the Normandy landings in June 1944 (the landings in southern Italy in the summer of 1943 were not decisive in this regard).

Although, in the end, the assumption proved incorrect that air raids could lead either to a desperate population rising up against Hitler or to a state so devastated by bombing that it would surrender, the view that they nevertheless contributed to the victory over Nazi Germany seems justified. Even if not through their direct effects (such as the destruction of Germany's industrial capacity), they certainly did so by forcing the Reich to devote vast resources

to countering the threat posed by the daily air raids. Historian Sönke Neitzel points out that as much as 41% of the Reich's wartime material resources were directed towards this effort. To put it another way: instead of producing tanks, Germany had to build fighter aircraft to combat British and American bomber fleets. Instead of sending 88 mm guns to the front, where they were highly effective against armoured vehicles, they had to be allocated to anti-aircraft defence (where, incidentally, they also proved effective).¹⁷

The first strategic air raids began in 1942: in April of that year, a thousand-strong force of British bombers attacked Cologne. The aerial offensive gained momentum in 1943, when the Americans joined it. A 'division of labour' emerged: the British flew at night, the Americans operated by day. Initially, the Americans were reluctant to adopt Harris's strategy, preferring precision strikes that spared civilians; however, over time – and partly due to the heavy losses they suffered – they changed their approach and adapted to the British tactics. At the height of the *Bombenkrieg*, bomber forces attacked systematically and continuously, both day and night. Some locations were bombed repeatedly: for example, Duisburg, a centre of the steel industry, was attacked no fewer than 299 times over the course of the war.

2. Shared experience and collective memory

The subject of the *Bombenkrieg* has been extensively covered in German historiography and historical journalism, both at the general and regional levels.¹⁸ By contrast, it remains relatively underexplored in Polish historiography, despite having its own Polish dimensions (which will be discussed below). One gets the impression that Polish contributions on the subject are more likely to be found in the media than in academic historiography (Polish media, particularly in the first decade of the 21st century, followed the topic closely, though primarily through the lens of the intense debates taking place in Germany at the time). When it comes to books on *Bombenkrieg*, Polish readers are largely reliant on translations of works originally published in English or German.

Equally extensive today is the body of German writing (scholarly and popular works, media materials, and fiction) that either fits within the broader theme of the evolving post-war memory of the *Bombenkrieg* in Germany – first

17 'Vortrag Prof Dr Sönke Neitzel Der strategische Luftkrieg im Zweiten Weltkrieg', Tv & Radio Unterwelten, 4 December 2024, youtube.com.

18 For a selected German-language bibliography on the subject from the first decade of the 21st century see, for example, a very interesting study on the reception of the theme of 'one's own victims' (air raids, flight from the Soviet front, and the subsequent expulsions) in German films from that decade: K. Klejsa, 'Drezno i Gustloff – miejsca pamięci niemieckich ofiar II wojny światowej i ich reprezentacje w filmach telewizyjnych stacji ARD i ZDF z lat 2006–2008', Repozytorium Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, dspace.uni.lodz.pl.

divided, and, after 1990, reunified – or describes and interprets this memory and its transformations.¹⁹

This memory, as well as the associated historical policy (that is, the approach to this particular chapter of the Second World War and its broader contexts), has been present in Germany from the very beginning – since 1945. It could hardly have been otherwise, given that the experience of the *Bombenkrieg* was so widespread, so traumatic, and had such long-lasting effects (both material and, for example, psychological) on German society.

It is not the purpose of this text to describe the evolution of this aspect of German collective memory and historical policy (after 1949, separately in West Germany and the communist GDR). Suffice it to say that, both then and now, this evolution has been closely linked both to changing memory of the Third Reich and the Second World War as a whole, and to current political and social contexts.

In this sense, Germans – both residents of West and East Germany and, after 1990, citizens of a reunited state – have continuously ‘written’ (that is, shaped and reshaped) their memory of the *Bombenkrieg*. This is a common phenomenon (and one not limited to Germany). As early as 1925, French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs noted that the memory of individuals depends on their current social environment and does not faithfully reflect what actually happened. Memory, he argued, is not the preservation of the past, but its reconstruction, with the present serving as the starting point. Every society imagines the past according to the prevailing ‘spirit of the times’, thereby altering its image. This remains just as true today.

This is also the case with Nuremberg and other German cities that experienced Allied air raids. The same applies to German historical policy, both at the regional and local levels and at the federal level for example as pursued by the Presidents of the Federal Republic. For them, Dresden became the place where they were called upon to “give everything its fitting name”²⁰.

19 For more on debates about the *Bombenkrieg* at the turn of the 21st century and their context at that time (the return of the discourse of Germany’s own victims) see for example W. Pięciak, ‘Dyskusje historyczne i ich rola w pamięci zbiorowej i stosunkach polsko-niemieckich’ [in:] A. Wolff-Powęska, D. Bingen (eds.), *Polacy-Niemcy. Sąsiedztwo z dystansu*, Instytut Zachodni, Poznań 2004, p. 377 ff. The same text in German: W. Pięciak, ‘Historische Diskussionen und ihre Rolle in der kollektiven Erinnerung und in den deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen’ [in:] A. Wolff-Powęska, D. Bingen (eds.), *Nachbarn auf Distanz. Polen und Deutsche 1998–2004*, Veröffentlichungen des Deutschen Polen-Instituts, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2005, pp. 315–343.

20 This is a quote from a poem entitled *Generalities* by Polish Romantic poet Cyprian Kamil Norwid translated by Patrick Corness (translator’s note).

Nuremberg eighty years on: the culture of remembrance and historical policy at the local level

Let us return, then, to Nuremberg. On 2 January 2025, marking the 80th anniversary of the most devastating of the 22 air raids, the city commemorated all those who had lost their lives as a result of the attacks.²¹ The commemorations were intended to have both an official (municipal) and a grassroots (community-based) character.

Let us take a closer look at these rituals – this local culture of remembrance and local ‘policy towards history’ – also because this model of remembering, interpreting, and narrating the events of 80 years ago may be regarded as typical for many, indeed very many, other places across Germany where such commemorative ceremonies took place (or more precisely: continue to take place). In examining them, we will also occasionally refer to the past in order to outline the changes that have taken place in these rituals, interpretations, and emphases.

For 2 January 2025, the city of Nuremberg first planned a ‘silent ceremony’ (*stille Niederlegung*) in memory of the victims at the Southern Cemetery, beside the bell tower (*Glockenturm*), a stone structure on which three bells are mounted. It stands beside the mass graves in which the victims of the 1945 air raids on Nuremberg are buried and serves as a memorial to them.²²

This tower also has an interesting history, in which shifts in German memory and historical policy concerning this chapter of history seem to be reflected as if in a mirror. The bell tower, built as a municipal project, was unveiled on 2 January 1959 as a memorial (*Mahnmal*) to the victims of the air raids. What may seem peculiar from today’s perspective is that it was built using sandstone blocks that had once formed part of the Nuremberg synagogue. The synagogue, which had stood at Hans-Sachs-Platz, was demolished in 1938.

At the time, the municipal authorities clearly saw nothing inappropriate in this practice. On the contrary, during the unveiling of the memorial, Mayor Andreas Urschlechter (a member of the Nazi Party in 1944–1945 and later a Social Democrat who served as mayor of Nuremberg from 1957 to 1987) explicitly emphasised this detail. He noted that “all the stones that today form this bell

21 ‘Gedenken an Luftkriegsopfer und Weg des Friedens’, *Nachrichten aus dem Rathaus*, no. 1409, 27 December 2024, Stadtportal Nürnberg, nuernberg.de.

22 The second site in Nuremberg that was initially conceived as a memorial (*Mahnmal*) to the victims of the Second World War, but is now perhaps regarded equally – or even primarily – as an open-air space for city events, concerts, etc., is the so-called Katharinenruine – the remains of the medieval Dominican convent. Destroyed during the air raids in 1945, the former convent was not rebuilt; instead, in 1970–1971 it was stabilised and preserved as a roofless ruin. See for example ‘»Es ist wirklich ein magisches Ort«. Die Katharinenruine ist die wohl erhabenste und stimmungsvollste Open-Air-Bühne im Herzen der Stadt’, *Donaukurier*, donaukurier.de.

tower” came from the synagogue which “in 1938, under National Socialist rule, had to [sic] be demolished. These stones survived the years of war and destruction. Their reuse in the construction of this memorial is a symbol and a commitment”.²³

At the time, the mayor did not elaborate on what kind of symbol or commitment he had in mind. However, sixty years later, Alexander Schmidt – a local historian and author of numerous works on Nuremberg’s Jewish community – analysed and assessed these events as follows: “The City of Nuremberg, as the owner of these stones, reused them to build a monument commemorating the non-Jewish victims. This can be interpreted as a redefinition of a perpetrator society into a victim society, while simultaneously repressing (*Verdrängung*) the fate of the Jewish minority. In this way, the bell tower also became a site of Jewish history, specifically, of treating this very history in a manner that can be described as disregard (*Missachtung*) for it”.²⁴ Jim G. Tobias, a local historian as well as co-founder and director of the Nürnberger Institut für NS-Forschung und jüdische Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts, similarly argued that the 1959 approach represents “a model example of ruptured continuity and of false symbolism on the path towards a contemporary culture of remembrance”.²⁵

1. Bells, prayer and a remembrance march

Returning from this digressive, though undoubtedly important, excursion to January 2025: alongside the aforementioned ‘silent ceremony’ at the memorial site – which involved the laying of a wreath on behalf of the city and the ringing of the bells at noon – the flags placed at the graves of the victims (*Ehrenfriedhof der Luftkriegsopfer*, burial field no. 82) were lowered to half-mast.²⁶

The next part of the commemoration took place that evening: it was the ‘Path of Peace’ (*Weg des Friedens; Gedenkweg*), organised jointly by the city and the Christian Churches on an ecumenical basis, specifically through their local parishes. Both the city authorities and the religious communities had previously provided extensive information about the ceremony, emphasising its commemorative character and message of peace.²⁷

23 From: ‘Glockenturm aus Steinen der Synagoge’, Forum für jüdische Geschichte und Kultur (Jüdisches Leben in Nürnberg), mekomot-nuernberg.de.

24 A. Schmidt, ‘Die Steine der Synagoge – zu Vergangenheit und Gegenwart der Erinnerungskultur in Nürnberg’, *Jahrbuch des Instituts für NS-Forschung und jüdische Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Nürnberg 2020, pp. 51–69.

25 J.G. Tobias, ‘Einleitung’, *Jahrbuch des Instituts für NS-Forschung und jüdische Geschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts* 10/2020, Nürnberg 2020, hsozkult.de. This edition of the yearbook is devoted to the current transformations in the memory of the Holocaust and to the rebirth of the Jewish community in Germany after 1945.

26 For an account of the celebrations held on 2 January 2025 in Nuremberg see for example a state television programme, Bayerischer Rundfunk, ardmediathek.de.

27 See for example announcements on the ‘Evangelisch in Nürnberg’ profile on Instagram and Facebook.

This 'remembrance march' began at 6:30 p.m. at the Künstlerhaus (House of Artists, Königstraße 93) and proceeded through the city centre, with stops at the two churches most closely associated with Nuremberg's history. The first stop was the square in front of the grand Gothic St. Lawrence Church (*St. Lorenzkirche*), which today belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was built in the Middle Ages, destroyed during the air raids and rebuilt after 1945. The procession then continued to its final destination: St. Sebaldus Church (*St. Sebalduskirche*).

The St. Sebaldus Church is the oldest church in Nuremberg and the city's first parish. Preserved in the Gothic style, today it also belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Like the St. Lawrence Church, the St. Sebaldus Church was hit during the Allied air raids, although the damage was somewhat less severe. It too was rebuilt relatively quickly after 1945.²⁸ In addition, the St. Sebaldus Church is one of the 'partner churches' of the cathedral in the British city of Coventry and, in this role, is regarded as a 'place of peace and reconciliation'. In 1999, the vicar from Coventry presented the St. Sebaldus Church with a 'Cross of Nails' (*Nagelkreuz*), made from nails that had been used in the construction of the roof truss of the Anglican cathedral, destroyed in a Luftwaffe air raid in 1940 (the nails were collected from the ruins).²⁹

The key points of the 'remembrance march' were chosen deliberately for another important reason – these two churches, *Lorenzkirche* and *Sebalduskirche*, together form a historical axis along which medieval Nuremberg developed: the former in the southern part of the city, and the latter in the northern.

At each of the three 'stations' (a term perhaps evoking the Stations of the Cross, as used in the announcement published by the Evangelical deanery)³⁰, namely in front of the Künstlerhaus and the two churches, participants in the 'Path of Peace' commemorated the victims and prayed for peace in the present day. The event concluded at St. Sebaldus Church around 7:30 p.m. with an ecumenical service (*Andacht*), which ended with a 'blessing for the city' delivered by clergy of various denominations. And if there was one aspect that may have been somewhat disappointing from the organisers' perspective, it was the turnout: only approximately 100 people took part in the march.³¹

28 History of the destruction and reconstruction of Sebalduskirche available on the website of the association supporting the church's renovation – see 'Ein Denkmal Für Den Frieden', St. Sebald Nürnberg, sebalduskirche.de.

29 Such crosses from Coventry cathedral have reached many places around the world; they form part of a tradition of remembrance closely associated with the cathedral. In churches that display such a cross, a prayer for peace – whose text originated in Coventry – is said every Friday at noon. See 'Virtuelle Stadtführung zu Orten des Friedens', Friedensmuseum Nürnberg, friedensmuseum-nuernberg.de.

30 See 'Nürnberg: Gedenkweg mit Ministerpräsident Söder', *Evangelische Zeitung*, 30 December 2024, evangelische-zeitung.de.

31 The author received this information regarding the number of participants from the press office of the Evangelical-Lutheran Deanery of Nuremberg; email correspondence dated 7 January 2025. The organisers of the memorial march

Citizens of Nuremberg also participated in the anniversary commemorations on their own initiative, for example members of the Association of Friends of the Old Town (*Altstadtfreunde Nürnberg e.V.*).³² On Thursday, 2 January, between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m., the association organised hourly guided walks (*Rundgang*) tracing the footsteps of old Nuremberg, the wartime destruction (and its visible remains today), as well as the post-war reconstruction. Meanwhile, at the *Pilatushaus* – a Gothic townhouse dating from the 15th century (named *Pilatushaus* because in the early 16th century it marked the starting point of Nuremberg's Way of the Cross) – which today serves as one of the city's cultural centres, visitors could view an exhibition in early January presenting the devastation of the Old Town during the war.³³

The 80th anniversary of the air raid on Nuremberg and the related commemorative events were covered by both the local press and online portals, as well as by regional media outlets, including the public broadcaster Bayerischer Rundfunk (BR) and Franconian online news services.³⁴ The BR report also included the testimony of a witness to the bombing. "And when I hear the sound of a siren today, during some sort of test alarm, it's something terrible for me – still to this day", said Ingrid Reinwald, who, judging by her age, must have been a child at the time.³⁵

2. Language, emphasis, and the cause-and-effect relationship

With regard to the anniversary commemorations in Nuremberg, it is worth paying close attention to how the organisers framed their invitations and later reported on the events – particularly the choice of words, interpretive frameworks, and contextualisation they employed.

The city's official website, which had previously featured a text and a visual presentation concerning the air raid of 2 January 1945, stated that "the Allied air raids also targeted Nuremberg as an industrial centre and were a response to Hitler's terror, which claimed victims in other countries and among their societies".³⁶ Likewise, a message posted on the city's Facebook profile on 2 January 2025 emphasised the cause-and-effect relationship: "One of the darkest days in

had announced that the Bavarian Minister-President Markus Söder (CSU) would take part, but he was ultimately unable to attend because of other commitments, as the Deanery informed the author. (Söder was born in Nuremberg and had previously attended ceremonies connected with the air raids; for example, he opened an exhibition of photographs of the destroyed city on the 70th anniversary).

³² 'Die Altstadtfreunde Nürnberg', *altstadtfreunde-nuernberg.de*.

³³ 'Als die Altstadt unterging: Rundgang zum 80. Jahrestag des verheerenden Bombenangriffs auf Nürnberg', *NN.de*, 20 December 2024.

³⁴ See 'Verheerender Luftangriff genau vor 80 Jahren: Nürnberg gedenkt', *Franken Fernsehen*, 2 January 2025, *frankenfernsehen.tv*.

³⁵ See a programme by state television, Bayerischer Rundfunk, *ardmediathek.de*.

³⁶ The account of the air raid on Nuremberg on 2 January 1945 is based on: '„Es war die Hölle“: Luftangriff auf Nürnberg am 2. Januar 1945', *op. cit.*

the city's history, 2 January, serves as a warning and a reminder of the victims of the war resulting from the actions of the National Socialist regime".³⁷ Meanwhile, a press release issued ahead of the 'remembrance march' stated that "the organisers wish to commemorate all victims of the war" and also that "they will give a voice to people who, in the present day, have experienced war themselves".³⁸

A similar emphasis can be found, for example, in a post published on Instagram on 3 January by Marlene Mortler, a Bavarian CSU politician associated with Nuremberg (formerly a member of the Bundestag and the European Parliament representing the district of Nürnberger Land). Her post states that 2 January "belongs to the darkest chapters in the history of Nuremberg. It is a reminder for us that we should not forget the victims of war and the horrors of the National Socialist regime. It also reminds us of our responsibility to commit ourselves to peace and reconciliation".³⁹

3. Brühl, Annweiler, Ulm: three pieces of the memory landscape

The history of Nuremberg outlined above in its main contours⁴⁰ may be treated as a *pars pro toto* – a model example, both in terms of the city's fate during the Second World War (typical of German cities) and in the period after 1945, with regard to collective memory, local historical policy, and broader trends in public discourse.

At the beginning of 2025, Nuremberg was by no means alone in this regard. Similar ceremonies – commemorating the 80th anniversary of air raids which, in most cases had resulted in the destruction of a given city or town – were taking place across Germany every few days during this period, and at times, several on the same day. Their dispersed, grassroots, and local nature meant that they occurred (or rather: continue to occur) largely 'off the radar' of major media outlets and national attention.

³⁷ See 'Als einer der dunkelsten Tage in der Stadtgeschichte mahnt und erinnert er an die Opfer des Kriegs infolge des NS-Regimes', FB Stadt Nürnberg, 2 January 2025, facebook.com. The post was accompanied by a gallery of around a dozen photographs showing the aftermath of the raid – a devastated Nuremberg. A similar tone appeared in the comments beneath the post. Remarks such as 'this raid need not have taken place (*'hätte nicht sein müssen...'*); it was a war crime' were met with responses along the lines of 'yes, that's true, it need not have happened, if only the Nazis had not started the war and led our country to ruin' (*'hätte nicht sein müssen, hätten die Nazis keinen Krieg begonnen und unser Land in den Untergang geführt'*).

³⁸ See 'Gedenken an Luftkriegsopfer und Weg des Friedens', *op. cit.*

³⁹ See M. Mortler, 'Dieser Tag zählt zu den dunkelsten Kapiteln in der Geschichte Nürnbergs. Er mahnt uns, die Opfer des Krieges und die Schrecken des NS-Regimes nicht zu vergessen und erinnert uns an unsere Verantwortung, uns für Frieden und Verständigung einzusetzen', [instagram.com/marlene.mortler.csu](https://www.instagram.com/marlene.mortler.csu).

⁴⁰ Only briefly outlined here, since both the history of Nuremberg under the Third Reich and during the Second World War (including the air raids on the city, which have been examined in several academic books as well as numerous popular works by local historians), and its post-war history – that is, the way in which the city dealt with this legacy and history – have already been described in a detailed and multifaceted manner. The latter issue – that of memory and commemoration – had in a sense to be addressed in Nuremberg, not least because the city still contains the remains of the former Nazi Party Rallying Ground (*Reichsparteitagsgelände*). Today, it houses the Documentation Centre Nazi Party Rally Grounds, established in 1994 as a municipal museum.

As for attendance at these ceremonies, it appears – judging from photos and videos – that in smaller towns it was similar to that seen during the commemorations in Nuremberg, or slightly higher (as in Ulm or Fulda). Nevertheless, the events were attended by members of the political elite, socially engaged individuals, and often, it seems, those with centrist or centre-left views. This marks a difference compared with similar commemorations in pre-1989 West Germany, when left-leaning circles tended to avoid such events.

Thus, at the end of 2024, Brühl – a city of 44,000 inhabitants in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia – commemorated its own 80th anniversary. Brühl had been bombed on 28 December 1944. In the seven-minute air raid, at least 180 people were killed. The commemoration included a service at the local Palace Church (*Schlosskirche*), which had been seriously damaged in the bombing and rebuilt after the war. According to a journalist's account, it was “a moving ecumenical prayer for peace that included hymns, psalms, and testimonies from survivors of the raid. During the ceremony, members of the Christian Churches' Working Group (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Christlicher Kirchen*) also spoke about resistance to National Socialist terror, as well as antisemitism and racism”.⁴¹

The following day, commemorations took place in Annweiler. This town of 7,000 inhabitants in Rhineland-Palatinate was bombed on 29 December 1944; the likely target of the raid was the local railway station, identified as a logistical hub. At least 100 people were killed, and the town centre was destroyed, including the municipal Protestant church, of which only the tower survived. On Sunday, 29 December 2024, at 2:30 p.m. (the time when the first bombs fell), the bells rang out from that very church, followed by a service to which the mayor had invited the public.⁴²

In a commemorative article published earlier by a journalist from Annweiler on a local website covering the Palatinate and Baden regions, the concluding remark reads: “Especially the conflicts in Ukraine, Israel, and Syria show that war is coming ever closer to us; people are seeking refuge and safety with us; it is becoming increasingly difficult to preserve peace. Let us pause for a moment, remembering the fallen, and turn our thoughts towards peace and freedom in the world”.⁴³

This reference to contemporary conflicts – such as the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East – was present in many anniversary commemorations

41 H.P. Brodüffel, ‘Bewegendes Gedenken an 182 Todesopfer’, *Rheinische Anzeigenblätter*, 28 December 2024, rheinische-anzeigenblaetter.de.

42 See ‘Gedenkveranstaltung in Annweiler’, Stadt Annweiler am Trifels, 28 December 2024, facebook.com.

43 See J. Bender, ‘80. Jahrestag des Bombardements. Gedenkveranstaltung gegen Vergessen’, *Wochenblatt Reporter*, 17 December 2024, wochenblatt-reporter.de.

honouring the *Bombenkrieg* and its victims. For example, during the ceremonies in Ulm – a city of 130,000 inhabitants in Baden-Württemberg, which was bombed on 17 December 1944 (at least 700 people were killed, and more than 70% of the city was destroyed, including 80% of the old town)⁴⁴ – artist Anna-Louise Bath painted a mural on the wall of a townhouse bearing the slogan ‘Stop bombing civilians’. The unveiling was attended by Iris Mann, the mayor responsible for cultural affairs.

The graffiti depicts a little girl, whom a German viewer would recognise as the heroine of the Brothers Grimm fairy tale ‘The Star Talers’ (German: *Sterntaler*), illustrated in 1862 by Ludwig Richter.⁴⁵ The girl, a poor orphan, shares what little she has with others and is rewarded: stars fall from the sky at her feet and turn into coins – the star talers. However, in Anna-Louise Bath’s mural, bombs fall from the sky onto the girl and onto the medieval cathedral of Ulm (which survived the bombing raid); in the background are buildings resembling Middle Eastern minarets.

“Today, for the 80th time, we commemorate the anniversary of the devastating bombing of Ulm’s old town. Eighty years have passed, yet similar bombings remain a daily reality for many people”, reads a post published on Instagram by ‘Kultur in Ulm’.⁴⁶ Mayor Iris Mann expressed a similar sentiment: the mural is meant to serve as a reminder not only of what happened 80 years ago (“When our city was levelled overnight”) but also of those “who are experiencing something similar today, many of whom have also fled to us here in Ulm”. It is “a sign of our solidarity”.⁴⁷

4. The last witnesses: a child’s perspective

One striking aspect is that the perspective adopted by the mural’s creator – the perspective of a child – also carried a deeper significance in the context of today’s culture of remembrance surrounding the *Bombenkrieg* (perhaps entirely unintentionally, as the artist may simply have wanted to highlight the plight of children, whether in Ukraine or the Middle East).

Indeed, the passage of time – now 80 years – has meant that when living witnesses appear in press or television reports, they are, by necessity, people

⁴⁴ For an anniversary radio programme see for example ‘Bitteres Jubiläum: Die Zerstörung Ulms jährt sich zum 80. Mal’, DONAU 3 FM, 17 December 2024, donau3fm.de.

⁴⁵ The fairy tale is well known in Germany also due to the family film ‘Die Sterntaler’ from 2011.

⁴⁶ See Kultur in Ulm, 17 December 2024, instagram.com.

⁴⁷ See a report by the regional TV channel: ‘80 Jahre nach dem verheerenden Luftangriff auf Ulm: Künstlerin setzt mit Graffiti ein Zeichen’, Regio TV, 17 December 2024, regio-tv.de. On the same day, 17 December 2024, at 8 p.m. the channel also aired a historical programme about the air raid featuring survivors who had been children at that time. The entire programme is available in the broadcaster’s media library: ‘17. Dezember 1944: Der verheerende Luftangriff auf Ulm’, RegioTV, 17 December 2024, regio-tv.de.

who experienced those events as children.⁴⁸ They therefore speak of history as seen through the eyes of children – of what they went through while sitting in shelters beneath exploding bombs, and of how they had to leave those shelters when the air inside began to run out, knowing that stepping out onto the street meant passing through a sea of flames. Through their eyes, readers and viewers can also see what came after – the period of post-war reconstruction, as well as the traumas that resurfaced decades later.

Geriatric specialists in Hamburg – a city that in July 1943 experienced a series of air raids under the codename ‘Gomorra’, in which tens of thousands of people were killed – noted over a decade ago that, in individuals who had witnessed the bombings as children, memories of those events could suddenly ‘erupt’ later in life, for example when an 80-year-old person becomes seriously ill. It was as though the weakening of the body caused an invisible dam – carefully built up over the years – to burst. In addition, psychiatrists in Hamburg studied a group of several dozen individuals who had been children during the bombings, as well as their adult children, and identified the phenomenon of transgenerational trauma.

“The descendants of the ‘children of Gomorra’ in a sense inherit the psychological wounds of their parents from 1943” and are “less resilient to psychological stress than other people”, said psychiatrist Philipp von Issendorff, who led the research (a book documenting the findings was published for the 70th anniversary)⁴⁹. “The more severe the parents’ trauma, the higher the level of anxiety in their children, even decades later”.⁵⁰ Depression and psychosomatic disorders were also more common in this group. The psychiatrists’ conclusion was that wartime trauma was transmitted to the next generation – not only when parents spoke about their experiences, but also when they remained silent.⁵¹

With all this in mind, let us repeat: Brühl, Annweiler, and Ulm are just three selected ‘pieces’ of the jigsaw puzzle that, in those final days of 2024, formed the dispersed and largely local memory of the *Bombenkrieg*.⁵²

48 See for example J. Kanold, ‘Michael Füchtner überlebte und singt mit 82 im Gedenkkonzert’, Südwest Presse, 12 December 2024, swp.de.

49 See U. Lamparter, S. Wiegand-Grefe, D. Wierling (eds.), *Zeitzeugen des Hamburger Feuersturms 1943 und ihre Familien: Forschungsprojekt zur Weitergabe von Kriegserfahrungen*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013.

50 See for example C. Grosse-Wilde, S. Lettgen, ‘Die vererbte Angst. Vor 70 Jahren hat der Feuersturm die Stadt in eine Trümmerwüste verwandelt. Darunter leiden nicht nur Überlebende, sondern auch deren Kinder’, Die Welt, 21 July 2013, welt.de.

51 For more on the air raid on Hamburg from the children’s perspective see W. Pięciak, ‘Gomora nad Hamburgiem’, Tygodnik Powszechny, 5 August 2013, tygodnikpowszechny.pl.

52 For example, also on 28 December 2024, the 80th anniversary of the air raid on Fulda was commemorated. A distinctive feature of the ceremony was the strong emphasis placed on the fact that more than one third of the approximately 700 victims were foreign forced labourers.

The debate over Jörg Friedrich's presentation (2002–2003): a key moment in shaping a new model of German memory of the *Bombenkrieg*

The current model of Germany's culture of remembrance surrounding the *Bombenkrieg* began to take shape after 1990. One could argue that a key turning point came with the presentation of historian Jörg Friedrich and the public debates that followed, reaching their peak in 2002–2003.⁵³ The term 'presentation' is appropriate here, as it involved more than merely the publication of two bestselling books on the air raids. During the course of that debate, the boundaries of collective memory of the *Bombenkrieg* were shaped within public discourse. The context of this debate is also important – it was linked to contemporary cultural developments (books, films) and national-level discussions whose common denominator was the re-emergence of Germans as victims in collective memory.⁵⁴

Let us, however, go back to the year 1990. At the time of German reunification, it may initially have seemed that history had become a closed chapter in the new Federal Republic. It quickly became clear that this was not the case: memory of the years 1933–1945 became the subject of more intense and emotional debates than those of the Cold War era. Consequently, during the 1990s, the view took hold that the Holocaust was the central point of reference in Germany's recent history. Yet the process of re-evaluations did not end there: around the turn of the 21st century, a second point of reference began to emerge in German collective memory – the image of Germans as victims.

Reunification was not, as it seemed in the heady months of 1990, merely an expansion of the 'old' Federal Republic through the addition of a few new federal states. It created something qualitatively new and, in restoring national unity, compelled Germans to reconsider the question of their identity. In 2003, undoubtedly influenced by the debates of the time, Zdzisław Krasnodębski advanced the thesis that it was only after reunification that we came to know the true face of the Germans: not only their priorities in foreign policy, but also their historical memory – a memory that could now be expressed freely,

53 J. Friedrich, *Der Brand. Deutschland im Bombenkrieg 1940–1945*, Propyläen Verlag, 2002 (English language edition: *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany, 1940–1945*, translated by Allison Brown, Columbia University Press, 2008) and *idem*, *Brandstätten. Der Anblick des Bombenkriegs*, Propyläen Verlag, 2003. In Poland, only a translation of the former book was published: *Pożoga: bombardowania Niemiec w latach 1940–1945*, translated by P. Dziel, D. Kocur, J. Liniwiecki, Wydawnictwo MDI Books, 2011.

54 The fourth chapter of this paper (see further: 'Polish aspects of the memory of the Bombenkrieg...') is based on a text by the author that was published 20 years ago in an edited volume on the state of Polish-German relations at the time. The original text, which reflected the situation in 2004, has been substantially abridged and updated. See W. Pięciak, *Dyskusje historyczne i ich rola w pamięci zbiorowej i stosunkach polsko-niemieckich*, op. cit.

without the various constraints that had existed during the period from 1945 to 1990 (or, strictly speaking, from 1949 to 1990).⁵⁵

In broad terms, the dominant thesis in West Germany during the 1950s and 1960s (the communist GDR being a separate matter) was: 'we were victims of the war'. In the 1970s and 1980s, the antithesis gained prominence: 'we were (or rather, our fathers were) perpetrators'. After 1990, a distinctive synthesis began to take shape: 'we were both perpetrators and victims'.

Initially, however, this synthesis took the form of a 'return to thinking about guilt', and it seemed as if Germany had even fallen into a kind of 'national masochism'. Fierce debates arose around Daniel Goldhagen's book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, the idea of the Holocaust Memorial (*Holocaust-Mahnmal*), the Wehrmacht exhibition, the dispute between Martin Walser and the then Chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Ignatz Bubis, the phenomenon of the 'New Right', and finally, reparations for forced labourers, among other issues.⁵⁶

However, by the end of the 1990s, this perspective began to be balanced by a renewed focus on German victims'. The first signs of this trend had appeared earlier, but it became clearly visible to the wider public after the Kosovo War (spring 1999). In the following years, it became part of what was considered politically – and historically – 'correct'. Put differently it became acceptable both in public opinion (*öffentliche Meinung*) and in published opinion (*veröffentlichte Meinung*), and thus within the pre-political sphere. Moreover, this trend developed not only as a matter of rational or intellectual reflection, so to speak, but also as an expression of public sentiment.

1. 1997–1998: Winfried Georg Sebald and the debate over a (non-existent) taboo

As far as the subject of *Bombenkrieg* is concerned, the first turning point came at the beginning of 1998. At that time, a debate swept through Germany about the presence – or, as its main participant argued, the absence – of the topic of the air raids in post-war literature. This relatively modest discussion, still incomparable in scale to the major public debates of the period, was nonetheless significant, although it lasted only a few weeks, in January and February 1998, and took place solely in the pages of newspapers and weekly magazines (the internet was still in its infancy and social media did not yet exist). Although the debate ended quickly, it was clear that the issue it raised touched a nerve – it was painful for many.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Z. Krasnodębski, 'Więźniowie przeszłości', *Rzeczpospolita*, 31 October – 2 November 2003.

⁵⁶ For more on these German debates see W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć. Współczesne spory w Niemczech o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii, polityce i tożsamości (1989–2001)*, Wydawnictwo UJ, Kraków 2002.

⁵⁷ For more on the debate see for example F. Schirrmacher, 'Luftkrieg', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (hereinafter: FAZ), 15 January 1998; R. Schneider, 'Kein kollektives Schweigegebot', *Die Welt*, 28 January 1998; K. Harpprecht, 'Stille, schick-

The debate was triggered by writer W. G. Sebald (born in 1944), who in 1997 delivered a series of lectures on German literature at the University of Zurich. In one of these lectures, he advanced the argument – formulated as a reproach – that post-war German literature had entirely failed to address the issue of the *Luftkrieg*. A year later, he published a book on the subject.⁵⁸ Sebald attributed this to a ‘collective mandate of silence’, which he believed was shaped by a consciousness of guilt and by the material and moral devastation in which Germany found itself after the Second World War.

At first, Sebald’s thesis went largely unnoticed and was mentioned only in the Swiss press. It was only after some time that German journalists took note of it – and an emotional debate immediately erupted in Germany. Writers who might have had something to say on the subject, but in whose works the theme of the air raids was largely absent, suddenly found themselves being ‘called to the blackboard’.

But did an unwritten taboo truly exist in post-war German literature, as Sebald claimed – a form of censorship or self-censorship regarding certain difficult topics? Did awareness of the suffering that Germans had inflicted on other nations prevent them from addressing their own suffering in literature? One can certainly argue about this, citing works of fiction and historical literature devoted to the air raids. However, for our purposes, the debate over whether such a taboo actually existed is of secondary importance. What matters more is that – as demonstrated by Sebald and those who supported his view – many people believed that such taboos did exist, both with regard to the post-war expulsion of Germans (*Vertreibung*) and the air raids.⁵⁹ This belief was (and, to the extent that it persists, still is) rooted more in emotion than in reason.⁶⁰

sallose. Warum die Nachkriegsliteratur von vielem geschwiegen hat’, FAZ, 20 January 1998; T. Hinz, ‘Versuch einer Stellvertreter-Debatte’, *Junge Freiheit*, no. 8/1998; M. Biller, ‘Unschuld mit Grünspan’, FAZ, 13 February 1998.

58 W.G. Sebald, *Luftkrieg und Literatur*, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1999. Polish edition: *Wojna powietrzna i literatura. Wykłady*, translated by M. Łukasiewicz, Wydawnictwo W.A.B., Warszawa 2012 (another edition was published in 2022 by Ossolineum). Sebald died in 2001.

59 The debate, at the time, surrounding Sebald’s thesis also proved fruitful in another respect a few years later: Volker Hage, the literary critic of the weekly *Der Spiegel*, analysed post-war literature and held numerous conversations with writers, only to arrive at a conclusion that differed from Sebald’s: the bombings were indeed a subject addressed in literature, only there are no works which, from the critic’s point of view, deserved particular acclaim. See V. Hage, *Zeugen der Zerstörung. Die Literaten und der Luftkrieg*, S. Fischer Verlag, 2003.

60 It is not difficult to demonstrate that the thesis claiming that the bombings and expulsions were taboo subjects is unfounded. During the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s the theme of ‘one’s own victims’ dominated not only in the private sphere (*Familiengeschichte*) but also in the public sphere. Later the situation began to change due to the ‘1968 generation’ entering public institutions. Yet already in the 1980s, under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the picture once again became less clear-cut than advocates of the taboo thesis would suggest. For example, under Kohl state subsidies for the Federation of Expellees increased significantly (from just a few million marks at the beginning of his chancellorship to several tens of millions annually in the 1990s); the state also subsidised the establishment of new museums under the auspices of individual expellee associations, commemorating their lost homelands. However, attendance at these museums remained low. As regards publications on expulsions or bombings, it is also difficult to speak of a taboo: from the late 1940s onwards historical and literary books were published – of nationwide or regional reach – as well as documentary films and publications issued under the patronage of individual towns, and so forth. The place occupied by all this

2. 1999: the Kosovo War and the return of Germany's war dead

At the same time, alongside the high-profile debates of the 1990s, other discussions were unfolding – less spectacular, yet significant for the family histories of thousands, and at times millions, of Germans, and their current self-understanding.

Thus, during the decade from 1990 to 2000, a *modus vivendi* was eventually reached (after fierce debates and, at times, outright disputes) regarding the organisation and reinterpretation of a number of sites in the former GDR which – like Buchenwald – had first served as Nazi concentration camps from 1933 to 1945, and after 1945 became so-called NKVD special camps (which in essence were also concentration camps). These camps were intended not only for former Nazis, but also for those deemed ‘enemies’ of the Soviet authorities and the emerging political order in the Soviet occupation zone.

In the 1990s, thousands of rehabilitation proceedings were also underway for German citizens – especially, though not exclusively, former prisoners of war – who had been convicted during and after the war by Soviet courts in show trials as (often allegedly) war criminals. This included Germans from areas occupied by the Red Army, who had been sentenced and/or deported to the Soviet Union. In the vast majority of cases, these proceedings – conducted by the Russian authorities – resulted in rehabilitation. The opening of Soviet and Russian archives also enabled German historians to research the fates of German POWs, the last of whom did not return home until the mid-1950s.⁶¹

And then, in spring 1999, came the Kosovo War. That war – particularly the criminal policies of the Serbian authorities – played a major role in changing the attitude of the German left toward the expellee communities and the issue of *Vertreibung* (expulsion). It appears as though the Social Democratic left only then (re)discovered the undeniable tragedy of those people. Since the disputes over Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* in the early 1970s, it had increasingly distanced itself from the expellees, allowing the Christian Democratic CDU/CSU to assume political patronage of the Federation of Expellees.

Alongside this new understanding within German social democracy – and among certain publicists and historians who were not politically aligned with the left but had been shaped by the spirit of 1968 – there emerged a sense of guilt for having, over the previous 30 years, viewed the expellees solely through the lens of revisionism. This was expressed quite openly by Otto Schily, then

entire ‘memory infrastructure’ in public reception is another matter. The question is whether this reflected some kind of taboo, or rather of a decline in interest in history, typical also, for example, of post-1989 Poland in the early years of its renewed independence.

⁶¹ See for example K.-D. Müller, K. Nikischkin, G. Wagenlehner (eds.), *Die Tragödie der Gefangenschaft in Deutschland und in der Sowjetunion 1941–1956*, Böhlau Verlag, 1998.

Federal Minister of the Interior and a member of the SPD (thirty years earlier a radical leftist), when he spoke in May 1999 at the annual Day of the Homeland (*Tag der Heimat*) in Berlin.⁶² Addressing hundreds of expellees, he openly admitted that the left had “unfortunately” preferred not to acknowledge the “crime of expulsion”, whether out of “lack of interest, fear of being accused of revanchism, or out of misguided deference to foreign policy considerations”. Only now, he argued, had the Kosovo War brought back into focus the injustice that had occurred after 1945.

Schily, who received thunderous applause for this admission, also expressed support for the project adopted in March 1999 by the leadership of the Federation of Expellees⁶³ to establish in Berlin a memorial dedicated to *Vertreibung* as a central experience of the 20th century and to its victims: the Centre Against Expulsion (*Zentrum gegen Vertreibung*, implicitly the name referred to the expulsion of Germans and was later changed to the plural form).

In this way, a public debate began that would continue for years, including in Poland. That initial wave of controversy surrounding the Centre (1999–2000) marked the first clear manifestation of a shift in memory paradigms. Other debates soon followed, most notably the discussion surrounding Günter Grass’s novel portraying the suffering of refugees from East Prussia through the example of the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*.⁶⁴ This was followed by another chapter in the debate: the renewed dispute over the ‘Beneš decrees’ and the statements made in spring 2002 by the then Prime Minister of Bavaria, Edmund Stoiber, regarding the ‘Bierut decrees’.⁶⁵

3. Grass and others: “At last, the deaths of thousands have a face of their own”

Grass touched a raw nerve: his novel *Crabwalk* (*Im Krebsgang*) shot to the best-seller lists overnight (250,000 copies were sold in the first weeks), triggering – in line with the dynamics of a media-driven society – a chain reaction and a strong public response. Some of the reactions resembled a long-suppressed cry.

“It is truly a good deed that, after half a century of silence, people are now speaking about the horrible suffering of Germans. At last, the deaths of thousands – freezing and dying by the roadside, torn apart by bombs in destroyed cities – have a face of their own”, wrote one reader in a newspaper. Another

62 U. Fichtner, ‘Nicht eben ein Heimspiel für den Minister’, *Frankfurter Rundschau* (hereinafter: FR), 31 May 1999; A. Graw, ‘Vertriebene applaudieren Schily’, *Die Welt*, 31 May 1999.

63 The text of Schily’s speech: *Das Parlament*, no. 26/1999.

64 G. Grass, *Im Krebsgang*, Steidl Verlag, 2002. English edition: *Crabwalk*, translated by Krishna Winston, Faber and Faber Ltd., 2004. First Polish edition: G. Grass, *Idąc rakiem*, translated by Sławomir Błaż, Oskar, Gdańsk 2002.

65 An anthology of German, Polish and Czech texts published in these countries in 2002 on expulsions etc. was published in 2003: ‘Pamięć wypędzonych. Grass, Beneš i środkowoeuropejskiej rozrachunki’, Biblioteka Więzi and CSM, 2003. The debate reemerged in spring 2003, when the Federation of Expellees renewed its lobbying activity in favour of the Centre following EU accession referendums in Poland and the Czech Republic.

reader wrote: "It is high time that the long-taboo subject of 'the suffering and civilian casualties in Germany during the Second World War, inflicted by the victorious powers' became part of public discussion". While reading *Crabwalk*, especially older Germans seemed to breathe more freely, as if shedding a burden: for them, it was Grass – of all people – who integrated their individual experiences into the public sphere.

Soon, other topics began to emerge – ones widely perceived to have previously been shrouded in taboo. New books were published, along with television reports and documentaries.⁶⁶ Tellingly, the best-selling works of that period shared a similar tone. One example is *Inside Hitler's Bunker: The Last Days of the Third Reich* by Joachim Fest⁶⁷ (the first word of the original German title – *Der Untergang: Hitler und das Ende des Dritten Reiches* – could also be translated more literally as *The Catastrophe*). In the book, the historian recounts the final two weeks of the Third Reich's existence and advances the thesis that Hitler represented not a continuation, but a rupture in German history, and that the German nation became a victim of his deliberate destruction. The books by Grass and Fest were among the 20 best-selling books in 2002. In the wake of this trend, the film *Downfall (Der Untergang)* was released in 2004.

In line with the mechanisms of the media market, documentaries and countless press articles followed. Jörg Friedrich published his works – narratives written in a dramatic, almost literary style, employing emotional and at times biblical language, and resembling an indictment of the Allies for the 'annihilation' (Friedrich's term) of the German people. Following the powerful public response triggered by Friedrich's work, more titles soon appeared, along with documentaries, including those produced by public broadcasters.⁶⁸

4. Memories, films and the great reconstruction

From the perspective of 2025, one can say that it was with the publication of Grass's novel (which was received quite favourably in Poland, likely due to the trust the author enjoyed there)⁶⁹ and the two books by Friedrich that the public 'return' of Germans as victims reached its emotional peak. This was strongly amplified at the time by *Bild-Zeitung*, which then had 12 million readers and addressed the themes raised by these authors in its characteristic style, even publishing excerpts from Friedrich's book. Soon after, the 'return to thinking

⁶⁶ For example, the documentary 'Die Todesfahrt der 'Goya'', ARD, June 2003.

⁶⁷ J. Fest, *Der Untergang: Hitler und das Ende des Dritten Reiches; eine historische Skizze*, Alexander Fest Verlag, 2002. Polish edition: *Hitler i upadek Trzeciej Rzeszy*, translated by M. Dutkiewicz, Świat Książki, 2003.

⁶⁸ For example, the documentary 'Der Bombenkrieg', ZDF, February 2003.

⁶⁹ T. Urban, 'Stilles Örtchen, wahre Grösse. Danzigs Denkmal für Grass', *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (hereinafter: SZ), 4 June 2003; S. Peter, "Im Krebsgang" von Günter Grass erscheint in Polen, FAZ, 3 December 2002.

of Germans as victims' became a broader societal phenomenon, increasingly present across many spheres of public life.

There was, first, the historical plane: new books and memoirs, such as the harrowing *A Woman in Berlin*, published anonymously,⁷⁰ which remained on *Der Spiegel*'s bestseller list for weeks. Then there was the historical-literary plane, which included not only Grass and Friedrich, but also many imitators, some more successful than others. There was also a media plane, involving both national outlets (the press and especially public television), where the four key themes related to Germans-as-victims – expulsion, air raids, rape of women, and captivity – became central to the editorial focus of history departments, and regional media, where reports appeared almost daily on eyewitnesses to air raids or expulsions, the unveiling of memorials, exhibitions, and similar events. There was also discussion of the local-level contacts that ordinary Germans were establishing with Polish and Czech residents of the former *Heimat*. There were stories of how a former mayor of Cologne – also an amateur historian – tracked down in Britain a pilot who had once bombed his city in order to speak with him – not in a spirit of resentment but of understanding (though the two elderly gentlemen ultimately failed to find common ground).⁷¹

There was also an architectural plane: in many places across Germany, especially in the eastern part of the country (the former GDR), significant historic landmarks were rebuilt at the initiative of NGOs and foundations. These were often buildings damaged during air raids and later demolished by the communist authorities. This was the case not only in Dresden, where the rebuilt Baroque Frauenkirche (destroyed in the 1945 raid) was ceremonially reopened in 2005, but also in Leipzig, Potsdam (with the major and still ongoing debate over the reconstruction of the Garrison Church, *Garnisonkirche*), Berlin (the reconstruction of the Berlin palace, *Stadtschloss*), and Frankfurt am Main (the rebuilding of the historic city centre destroyed in the bombings). This phenomenon of the 'great reconstruction' continues to this day.

Finally, there was the political plane – not only in the form of the Centre Against Expulsions project. At the turn of the 21st century, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) undertook various initiatives. One such initiative was a largely overlooked debate in the Bundestag in mid-June 2002, following a motion from the CDU/CSU, calling on the government of Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and the SPD-Greens coalition to take a more active role in commemorating the victims of the air raids – at a time when 60th-anniversary observances were taking place in cities across the country.

⁷⁰ *Eine Frau in Berlin*, Eichbron Verlag, 2003. English edition: *A woman in Berlin*, Virago Press Ltd., 2011. Polish edition: *Kobieta w Berlinie. Zapiski z 1945 roku*, translated by B. Tarnas, Świat Książki, 2009.

⁷¹ 'Gespräche im Geiste der Versöhnung', *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, 9 July 2003.

That debate did not attract much public attention at the time, perhaps because it took place late in the evening in a sparsely attended chamber, or perhaps because there was no significant disagreement among speakers from the different parties.⁷² The CDU/CSU's proposal concerning the victims of the air raids had been preceded by motions in both the Bundestag and Bundesrat regarding the Centre Against Expulsions, as well as by parliamentary debates devoted to that issue (which is a separate story in itself).

5. 2022: Jörg Friedrich's *The Fire* unleashes public emotions

Returning to Grass and Friedrich, the essence of what they did lay in bringing German victims (once again) to the forefront and reintegrating them into the public sphere and collective memory. Yet even if we assume that the taboo they (and many others after them) are said to have broken never actually existed, it is all the more worth asking where their immense success came from. Where did such strong emotions originate? Was it not the case that Germany was, in fact, engaged in a kind of 'relieving debate'?

As regards Grass, such an interpretation would be difficult to sustain. However, with regard to Friedrich, the more closely one examines his work, the more that interpretation appears to be reinforced. Indeed, assessing those events from today's perspective, Friedrich's example clearly showed how the new German memory could veer towards a form of revisionism.

So, what exactly did Friedrich do? First, in December 2002, this historian, born in 1944, who was also once an actor and director producing television documentaries and reports, published a book whose first edition, according to industry sources, sold out within days; in total, over 200,000 copies were sold in the first year. Its title was aptly translated into Polish as *Požoga: bombardowania Niemiec 1940–1945* (the title of the English language edition is *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany 1940–1945*). His second book, or rather a photographic album that served as a visual counterpart to *The Fire*, was released in October 2003. Its title could be rendered in English as *Scorched Sites: Images of Germany Under Bombs*. After publishing *The Fire*, Friedrich embarked on a nationwide tour timed to coincide with the 60th anniversaries of the air raids. His appearances regularly drew large audiences eager to hear his lecture – or rather, his emotional account – of the inferno of the bombings. Judging by the reactions, he won many hearts.⁷³

⁷² 'Antrag der CDU/CSU Fraktion', Drucksache 15/986, 15 May 2003 (available in the Bundestag's archives, bundestag.de). For an account of the debate, see S.F. Kellerhoff, 'Milde am Abend: Der Bundestag debattiert über die Opfer des Luftkrieges', *Die Welt*, 10 June 2003.

⁷³ J. Friedrich, *Der Brand... and Brandstätten...*, op. cit.

All of this took place within a specific context: the final months of 2002 and the early months of 2003 were also a period of intense debate in Germany about the anticipated US intervention in Iraq and the possible involvement of other countries. Earlier, in 2002, Germany had undergone a federal election campaign during which Chancellor Gerhard Schröder – ultimately successful in securing re-election – brought the Iraq issue into political discourse, striking a distinctly anti-American chord. During the winter and spring of 2003, large crowds took to the streets of German cities to protest ‘against the war’ – against the impending conflict in Iraq, and more broadly, against the use of military force in politics. This atmosphere also formed the backdrop in Dresden, where in February 2003 people gathered to commemorate the victims of the February 1945 air raids.⁷⁴ Candles were lit, and in the reconstructed Frauenkirche, a lecture was held entitled ‘Say ‘No’ to War!’. That church stands as a symbol not only for Dresden (much as St. Mary’s Basilica does for Kraków), but for Germany as a whole. The increasingly imminent prospect of a war against Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship took on a particular resonance in the Federal Republic: the present once again intertwined with the past – specifically, with this chapter of history.⁷⁵

The link between the historical debates and the German stance on the Iraq conflict was noted by Anne Applebaum, who wrote: “It’s not wrong for Germans to remember their relatives who suffered, but the tone of the campaigners [for the Centre of Expellees] is disturbing, because they seem, at times, almost to forget why the war started in the first place. Their leader, for example, is the daughter of a Wehrmacht officer, and was born in occupied Poland”. And further: “It cannot be an accident that a wave of unusually virulent, even irrational anti-Americanism has peaked just as Germans have begun, for the first time since the war, to talk about their past in a new way. Germany is reassessing its place in Europe, its role in the world, its postwar subordination to the United States. Germans, or at least some of them, no longer want to apologize for the 20th century..., no longer want to accept the political leadership of the United States”.⁷⁶

Returning to *The Fire*: this book, recounting terrible events, could scarcely be read without emotion. And those emotions, it seems, were the key element in this context.

⁷⁴ ‘Dresdner gedachten der Opfer der Bombennacht’, *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 14 February 2003; ‘Krieg ist mehr als ein ‚Kollateralschaden‘’, *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, 14 February 2003.

⁷⁵ For example N. Seitz, ‘Kein präventives Mitleid. Die deutsche Opfer-Debatte und die Kriegsgefahr im Irak’, *Die Welt*, 16 January 2003.

⁷⁶ *Washington Post*, 15 October 2003 (quotes after the reprinted article published in *Rzeczpospolita* on 17 October 2003). English version quotes: anneapplebaum.com/2003/10/15/germans-as-victims.

Earlier, in the 1990s, during the debate over the publication of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* by Daniel Goldhagen – in which the author accused ‘ordinary Germans’ of an almost hereditary, murderous antisemitism – commentator Stephan Sattler wrote that one reason for the intense reaction to the book was that it appealed more to emotion than to intellect. At the time, even though half a century had passed since the war, Germans still struggled with emotions, particularly where they overlapped with concepts such as ‘history’ and ‘national identity’. Why? Because, as Kurt Biedenkopf, then Minister-President of Saxony (CDU), put it in 1992: “The Nazis inflicted such deep wounds on emotion, so abused the concept of ‘nation,’ that in the post-war period we had difficulty even using the word”. After 1945, Germans long feared emotion – especially public emotion – whether it took the form of national pride, anger, or grief. Sattler noted: “The Goldhagen debate showed that the German question remains open. Only this time, it is no longer a matter of international politics, but of psychology”.⁷⁷

6. ‘Executions’ and ‘crematoria’, or the *Bombenkrieg* as the ‘German Auschwitz’

These comments related primarily to Friedrich’s two books and the reactions they provoked.

Why did Friedrich provoke such strong emotions in Germany, especially when, as historians familiar with the subject argued, *The Fire* broke little new ground? Yet Friedrich’s publication, despite contributing little that was substantively new, triggered a response much like that surrounding Goldhagen’s book, which, although widely criticised, became a bestseller, with the author (like Friedrich later) embarking on a triumphant tour across the country. There were, however, two key differences: Goldhagen’s audience tended to be younger, and his tour ended relatively quickly, whereas Friedrich appeared continuously in cities and towns,⁷⁸ delivering lectures on the air raids – lectures that were, as one attendee noted, deeply emotional in tone.⁷⁹

The Fire was reviewed in virtually all major national newspapers and in many regional ones as well. Having brought the subject into the spotlight, it was quickly followed by a documentary produced by public television, while *Der Spiegel* – attuned to public sentiment – published a series of articles on the air raids (just as it had done a year earlier with a series on the expulsions).

⁷⁷ See the chapter on the debate over Goldhagen’s book in: W. Pięciak, *Niemiecka pamięć..., op. cit.*

⁷⁸ For example, in autumn 2003 Friedrich took part in a series of lectures organised by his publisher during the Frankfurt Book Fair (the album *Brandstätten* [Scorched Sites] had been released shortly beforehand, in keeping with standard publishing practice). He also spoke in Dresden, Karlsruhe, Erfurt and Heidelberg; and attended meetings in smaller towns, sometimes at the invitation of a local bookseller.

⁷⁹ For example, R. Kalb, ‘»Die Bombenwerfer waren Bestien«. Die Diskussion um Jörg Friedrichs Buch »Der Brand« sorgte für erregte Gemüter. Viele Zuhörer brachten ihre jahrelang aufgestaute Wut zum Ausdruck’, *Nürnberger Zeitung*, 5 April 2003.

Before the publication of *The Fire*, Friedrich was unknown to the broader public, although within the community of historians he already held a certain standing, albeit not among its leading figures.⁸⁰ In his youth a Maoist, shaped by the rebellious spirit of 1968, he gained recognition as a historian in 1984 with his substantial study *Die kalte Amnestie. NS-Täter in der Bundesrepublik* [*The Cold Amnesty: Nazi Perpetrators in the Federal Republic*], which examined the post-war careers of former Nazis in West Germany. He was also among the several dozen contributors to the *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, for which he wrote two entries: one on the so-called second wave of the Nuremberg Trials (*Nürnberger Nachfolgeprozesse*), and another on how the Federal Republic dealt with its Nazi past.

He then turned his attention to the subject of the air raids. So intensively, in fact, that it led him to a conclusion – clear to any reader of *The Fire* – namely, the accusation that, put bluntly, Churchill and Roosevelt bore responsibility for a genocide against the German people. A paradox? Not necessarily. Friedrich was not the only figure from a leftist background who, years later, dedicated himself – with a radicalism reminiscent of his earlier convictions – to commemorating German suffering.

In this very radicalism, Friedrich reached for familiar language and concepts – those previously used to describe German crimes. His works provide many examples. The British and Americans, he argued, carried out “executions” of German civilians from the air⁸¹ – driven by a “desire to annihilate” Germany.⁸² Churchill and his officers appeared as madmen “intoxicated by destruction”,⁸³ and the British strategy of using air raids as a tool of war was described as a crime of genocide. He wrote of bombings that “wiped people off the face of the earth” (*Menschen auslöschen*)⁸⁴ and claimed they were “nothing other than sheer massacres” (*blankes Massaker*).⁸⁵ Air-raid shelters beneath burning buildings, he argued, functioned “like crematoria”,⁸⁶ a term he used repeatedly.

The Fire was marked by frequent, vivid, and graphic repetitions – imagery that etched itself into the reader’s consciousness. Friedrich spoke of the Allies

⁸⁰ Jörg Friedrich was a pseudonym; his real name was Friedrich Krabbe. His sister, Hanna Krabbe, a terrorist from the Red Army Faction (RAF), was sentenced to life imprisonment for taking part in the 1975 attack on the West German embassy in Stockholm, during which the terrorists killed two members of staff in an attempt to force the German authorities to release imprisoned RAF members; during the storming of the building a member of the special forces was also killed (in 1996 Krabbe was released on parole after serving 21 years in prison).

⁸¹ J. Friedrich, *Der Brand...*, op. cit., p. 104. Own translation.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

pursuing “mass extermination” (*Massenausrottung*)⁸⁷ or “mass annihilation” (*Massenvernichtung*)⁸⁸ of the German population – terms previously used in Germany in the context of the Holocaust (even though more than 95% of Jews were murdered, whereas, on average, fewer than 2% of the inhabitants of bombed German cities were killed). Friedrich referred to No. 5 Bomber Group – a unit of the British Royal Air Force – as the “British Group for Mass Extermination No. 5” (*britische Massenvernichtungsgruppe Nr. 5*).⁸⁹ He wrote that “shelters turned into places of execution” (*In Hitze und Gas wurden aus den Schutzräumen Hinrichtungsstätten*),⁹⁰ where civilians were “gassed” by carbon monoxide. As Friedrich put it: “In Hamburg or Kassel, 70–80% of the victims were gassed in the cellars” (*vergast*).⁹¹

7. Hitler, Churchill and Roosevelt – and their “frenzied desire to annihilate”

Such language served to construct an interpretation of the air raids as a crime incomparable to any other – “exceptional” (a word used frequently, along with terms such as “unique” or “the greatest during this war”). Friedrich consistently omitted the historical context: the military role that the bombings played in the defeat of the Third Reich. This, too, was a defining feature of his book – one that was criticised repeatedly by German historians.

Furthermore, in *The Fire*, Friedrich presents the thesis that Germany began such bombing campaigns only in 1940, with the attacks on London, after which the British responded in kind, ultimately perfecting the method. According to him, the German bombings of Poland in 1939 and of Rotterdam in 1940 were qualitatively different, as they served military purposes. Friedrich asserted that “the first nation on which the unleashed fury of aerial destruction was tested – systematically and to the point of total annihilation – was the German nation”.⁹² He was, in fact, aware of Wieluń,⁹³ which was bombed by the Luftwaffe on the morning of 1 September 1939 (he mentioned the town in a later book), but clearly this did not trouble his argument in any meaningful way.

Friedrich himself admitted at one point that his aim was not to uncover anything new, but rather to describe the “forms of suffering” endured by civilians during the air raids, arguing that although “much has been written about the *Bombenkrieg*”, there had “long been nothing about the forms

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 354, 361–362.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁹³ For more on the history of the destruction of Wieluń see J. Trenkner, ‘Ziel vernichtet’, *Die Zeit*, no. 7/2003.

of suffering associated with it”.⁹⁴ The result was an emotional, passionately written indictment, in which the accuser was the author of *The Fire* and the accused were – together, side by side – Hitler, Churchill, and Roosevelt.⁹⁵ In a biblical tone and with forceful conclusions, Friedrich repeatedly listed the British prime minister in the same breath as Hitler and, less frequently, Roosevelt, implying that these three men were united by a frenzied desire to annihilate the enemy.⁹⁶

Friedrich by no means denied that Hitler was a criminal and that his regime committed atrocities; after all, he himself had once exposed Nazi crimes and their post-war impunity to the German readership. However, he now appeared to broaden the concepts of ‘crime’ and ‘criminal’, effectively equating the warring sides.

Friedrich’s style resembled Goldhagen’s. Both appealed to emotion and imagination; both wrote in vivid, highly visual language. It was a narrative employing elements of reportage, for example by focusing on individual stories rather than aggregate figures. After all, describing the fate of a named child – poisoned in a shelter into which carbon monoxide had seeped, dying in its mother’s arms with a bottle of milk in its mouth – had a far greater impact than simply stating that 1,500 people died.⁹⁷ Friedrich also gave names to the victims; for example, he wrote that among the 199 people killed in the November 1944 air raid on Rüdeshheim am Rhein, “87 victims were under the age of 18 – the youngest, a newborn Werner Heinrich Mahn, was granted only a single day to see this world”.⁹⁸

The writer did not spare his fellow Germans: he also described how forced labourers, concentration camp prisoners, and POWs – all regarded as ‘*Untermenschen*’ – were denied access to air-raid shelters during bombings. Likewise, Jews were at times thrown out onto the streets by their German neighbours. Camp inmates, such as those in Dachau, were made to defuse unexploded bombs and retrieve corpses or gather human remains from the streets; the same applied to Poles working as forced labourers. As for victims within this group, in Braunschweig – where 90% of the urban fabric was destroyed in 18 raids – half of the 3,000 people killed were forced labourers, prisoners, and POWs. In Nordhausen, 1,300 of the 6,000 victims were inmates of a concentration camp that had no shelters. Friedrich wrote about this while recounting the victims of successive raids on various cities, but it did not lead him to draw

⁹⁴ J. Friedrich, *Der Brand...*, op. cit., p. 543.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 432.

⁹⁶ It is worth noting that *The Fire* sparked outrage and harsh reactions in the United Kingdom.

⁹⁷ J. Friedrich, *Der Brand...*, op. cit., p. 340.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

broader conclusions, particularly of a moral nature. However, he did formulate the judgement that “Germany was laid waste by the British strategic air force and the two American air fleets like no civilisation before it”.⁹⁹

In the closing pages of *The Fire*, Friedrich called for a large-scale public research project in Germany involving a critical examination of municipal and city archives in order to “reconstruct the history of air raids on German cities”. For, until then, he argued, there are not even reliable estimates of the number of victims. Reports about those killed in the bombings of Pforzheim and Świnoujście, reaching into the tens of thousands, warrant classifying these events among the greatest tragedies of the Second World War, and yet – Friedrich wrote – they are almost absent from historiography. Verifying current statistics is thus “an urgent postulate”. Moreover, the writer appealed for the organisation of a project in Germany “as soon as possible” to collect testimonies from all surviving eyewitnesses of the bombings.¹⁰⁰

8. 2003: *Scorched Sites, or Finis Germaniae in pictures*

Less than a year after *The Fire*, Jörg Friedrich published another book: the album *Brandstätten* (which can be translated as *Scorched Sites*), featuring archival photographs accompanied by his own commentaries, in which he expanded upon his earlier theses.

One can imagine that if a young German, whose understanding of history was vague or shaped primarily by family narratives (in which the central message was that ‘Grandpa wasn’t a Nazi’)¹⁰¹, picked up Friedrich’s works at the time, they might have come away with the conviction that the Germans were the victims most deserving of sympathy in that war. Or at the very least, that it was a war in which no side was right, and no side was just.

It could have been worse. A reader of Friedrich’s books – especially one confronted with the visual language of *Brandstätten* [*Scorched Sites*] – might have felt not only empathy for the victims but also, at least initially, hostility towards the Allied airmen when viewing those harrowing photographs. These showed rows of corpses; the remains of a child lying on cobblestones next to

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁰ This brings to mind the project funded by Steven Spielberg to record the video testimonies of Holocaust survivors.

¹⁰¹ Sociological studies on *Familiengedächtnis* by Harald Welzer from 2002 indicated that a distorted view of contemporary history was being passed down from generation to generation within German families. They found that the ‘generation of grandchildren’ widely believed that none of their ancestors had been Nazis or participated in Nazi crimes; rather, their grandparents were thought either to have taken part in the resistance against Hitler, to have helped Jews, or at the very least, to have opposed Nazism. See: H. Welzer, S. Moller, K. Tschuggnall, *Opa war kein Nazi. Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*, Fischer Taschenbuchverlag, 2002. Other studies published in this period produced similar conclusions, for example a study by the Hamburg-based Institut für Sozialforschung (www.his-online.de) or the anthology: J.F. Pyper (ed.), *»Uns hat keiner gefragt«. Positionen der dritten Generation zur Bedeutung des Holocaust*, Philo Verlag, 2002.

a bucket containing the remains of its mother. Bodies consumed by fire in the streets. A pile of skulls on the floor of a burnt-out shelter. The book also included photographs of British commanders whom Friedrich claimed had planned the annihilation of the Germans; of Churchill visiting an airbase; and finally, of captured pilots – likely photographed shortly after escaping from their burning planes – who appeared dehumanised, their eyes bulging with fear or, conversely, displaying youthful arrogance.

The former photographs could make even a relatively insensitive reader feel nauseous. The latter must have stirred anger even in a hardened anti-nationalist German. But not necessarily because, as the publisher claimed, they had been “rescued from oblivion”.¹⁰² Similar images could be found not only in Germany, but also in the state and family archives of the occupied countries. However, photographs of this kind are usually published with restraint – perhaps out of consideration for the viewers’ sensitivity; perhaps because of the emotions they may provoke; perhaps out of respect for the intimacy of death, especially death so cruel. Judging from the texts Friedrich added to the photos in the album, he was aware of this. The publisher, too, appeared to be aware of this, as evidenced by a note at the end of the volume in which it distanced itself from the inclusion of the most gruesome images.

The method of emotionalisation through shocking photographs employed by Friedrich in his album was by no means new in Germany. A few years earlier, a similar technique had underpinned the success of the Wehrmacht exhibition, which toured dozens of cities. It featured photographs that contributed little that was new in terms of content, except that they presented atrocities committed by the Wehrmacht in Yugoslavia and the occupied territories of the Soviet Union in shockingly naturalistic fashion (heaps of corpses, executions). This aesthetic approach ultimately determined the exhibition’s success, if measured by visitor numbers: approximately one million over the course of several years.¹⁰³

Joachim Trenkner, then the Berlin correspondent for *Tygodnik Powszechny*, argued that the very structure of Friedrich’s album “completely turns history upside down”. The successive chapters, entitled “Before” (with idyllic photographs of cities that no longer exist in that form), “The Attack” (i.e., the Allied attack, not the German one), “Defence”, and so on, create the impression that Germany was attacked and had to defend itself. Trenkner wrote: “Let us imagine contemporary young Germans – secondary school graduates or university students – whose level of general education and knowledge, or rather

¹⁰² J. Friedrich, *Brandstätten...*, op. cit., note from publisher printed on the cover.

¹⁰³ The controversy surrounding the exhibition, which confined its treatment of Wehrmacht crimes to the years 1940–1944 and exclusively to Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, is a separate issue.

the lack thereof, was recently revealed by international comparative studies (the so-called PISA studies), causing a mild shock among the older generation (and among politicians responsible for education). Let us imagine that these young people pick up Friedrich's new book. What will they learn from these photos and the captions that distort the course of the war? Well, simply that after the Allied 'attack,' Germany was somehow forced into 'defence'".¹⁰⁴

The controversy surrounding Friedrich's *Brandstätten* [*Scorched Sites*] was not limited to the selection and arrangement of photographs, but also extended to his accompanying commentary. At the very beginning of the book, Friedrich asserted: "Only two societies have experienced large-scale killing by means of bombs as a prolonged experience: the Japanese for six months, and the Germans for five years".¹⁰⁵ He further argued that within the historical consciousness there exists a deeply rooted belief that "this was punishment". Friedrich presented this as though it were the prevailing truth. However, in reality, the Allied bombing campaigns were not acts of punishment – even if such sentiments may have been present among some pilots at the time, including Poles – but rather instruments of war, first employed by the Third Reich itself.

In many parts of *Brandstätten* [*Scorched Sites*], Friedrich sought to convey the message that the air raids on Germany were not merely unique within the history of the Second World War, but within world history as a whole – a singular crime. He wrote: "The images of this *Finis Germaniae* have no equal in the history of human civilization".¹⁰⁶ Throughout the publication, the photographs focus almost exclusively on cities and their civilian inhabitants. The reader does not encounter images of aircraft or tank factories, oil refineries, or military installations. It is as though these targets did not exist, or were never targets of the Allied bombing campaigns.

Friedrich frequently became entangled in contradictions. In one part of his work, he openly acknowledged that it was the *Luftwaffe* that initiated the bombing campaigns – with attacks on Wieluń and Warsaw.¹⁰⁷ Yet only a few pages later, he attempted to relativise these events with the rather peculiar claim that in Poland in 1939 and in the Netherlands in 1940 the Germans used their air force essentially as "vertical artillery", and did so "out of necessity", since German "air strikes accompanied the land campaign".¹⁰⁸

One could also speak of another type of relativisation: on the left was a photograph from Warsaw after the German bombing of September 1939

¹⁰⁴ J. Trenkner, 'Alianccy zbrodniarze', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 45/2003.

¹⁰⁵ J. Friedrich, *Brandstätten...*, op. cit., p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

(showing a girl leaning over her dead sister), while on the right was a photo of two German sisters watering flowers (accompanied by a note that one of them died in the air raid on Paderborn in March 1945).¹⁰⁹ The reader was not informed that the Allies bombed Paderborn in order to avoid greater losses of their own: the town was defended by a garrison that included Waffen-SS troops who refused to surrender, regardless of the civilian cost; approximately 6,000 civilians remained in the otherwise deserted town, of whom 500 died in the raid (this information was included in Friedrich's first book). Thus, the aggressor and the states fighting against it were placed on the same moral plane.

9. What Jörg Friedrich refused to acknowledge

Even in *The Fire*, Friedrich argued that the air raids had little impact on the course of the war and therefore had neither moral legitimacy nor practical purpose. During the ensuing debate, German historians pointed out that this assertion was unfounded – among them Professor Horst Boog, who was then widely regarded as the foremost expert on the *Bombenkrieg*. In his review of *The Fire*, Boog wrote that Friedrich had “refused to acknowledge” historical literature that was inconvenient for him, and that the bombing raids had indeed exerted “a vast negative impact on the German armaments industry and the strength of military resistance”.¹¹⁰

Professor Lothar Kettenacker, then deputy director of the German Historical Institute in London, noted: “The Allied air raids on Germany, carried out with increasing intensity since spring 1942, were not only a response to previous terrorist attacks by the German air force on Warsaw, Rotterdam, Coventry, and London; more likely, they were the British bill presented to Germany for the attack on the Soviet Union”.¹¹¹ This final remark likely refers to the fact that strategic bombing was for a long time Britain's most significant contribution to the anti-Hitler coalition (alongside the Battle of the Atlantic, the protection of supply convoys to the USSR, and campaigns in North Africa and later Italy), and thus functioned as a form of substitute action in lieu of a non-existent second front in Europe.

In *Brandstätten* [*Scorched Sites*], Friedrich no longer repeated the thesis that the bombings had been ineffective. However, the overall message remained contradictory. At times, he acknowledged that the air raids had military effects,¹¹² as they reduced the effectiveness of the German war machine – not

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142–143.

¹¹⁰ H. Boog, ‘Kolossalgemälde des Schreckens’, FAZ, 10 December 2003.

¹¹¹ See the anthology: L. Kettenacker (ed.), *Ein Volk von Opfern? Die neue Debatte um den Bombenkrieg 1940–45*, Rowohlt Verlag, 2003 (the title alluded to that of another anthology, published several years earlier, which brought together contributions to the debate surrounding Goldhagen: *Ein Volk von Mördern?*).

¹¹² J. Friedrich, *Brandstätten...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 224–225.

only by disrupting industrial production, but also by forcing the Reich to keep military assets at home, especially fighter squadrons, trained pilots, and thousands of artillery guns, all of which were sorely missed on the Eastern Front (the scale of this issue has already been discussed). He also acknowledged that “some air operations allowed the Allies to save on the blood toll during their land offensives”; that, for example, the tactical bombings of 1944–1945 – those supporting the ground advance – helped the Allies reduce their losses.

Friedrich then added, as a counterargument, that it was actually to no avail – even without the bombings of German civilians, the Allies would have won the war anyway. At most, the “defenders” (by which the author presumably meant those Germans who obeyed Hitler’s order to fight to the end) might have killed perhaps another hundred thousand Allied soldiers.

After reading *The Fire and Brandstätten* [*Scorched Sites*], one might be inclined to ask the author: what language should now be used – after the publication of his books – to describe the extermination of the Jews? It was not 2% who perished in occupied Europe, but 95%. What language should be used to describe German terror in occupied Poland, including the tragedy of Warsaw, where over 60% of the city’s 1.5 million inhabitants did not survive to see the end of the war? A comparison with Warsaw seems all the more appropriate given that, during the nearly five years of Allied air raids, roughly three times as many German civilians were killed as Polish civilians during the two months of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. What words, then, are left to describe the fate of Warsaw, if Friedrich has already exhausted the strongest possible language?

10. The conclusion of the 2002–2003 debate: the rejection of Friedrich’s interpretation

From today’s perspective, one might say that with the publication of *Brandstätten* [*Scorched Sites*], Friedrich went one step too far. While reactions to his first book were largely positive in Germany, the release of the photo album provoked a rather different response.

Indeed, the reviewer for *Süddeutsche Zeitung* concluded that *Brandstätten* [*Scorched Sites*] belonged in the rubbish bin.¹¹³ Ralph Giordano – a German Jew who believed that the Allied bombings had indirectly saved his life – responded critically to Friedrich’s theses, describing his elevated language as bordering on the overwrought (“If someone wants to try to understand it, that’s their business. My intelligence doesn’t suffice”).¹¹⁴ The publisher’s decision to publish such graphic photographs while simultaneously distancing itself from them

¹¹³ U. Raulff, ‘Vom Bombenhammer erschlagen. Der Feuersturm als Bildersturm: Jörg Friedrichs verstörende Galerie des Luftkriegs und seiner Opfer’, *SZ*, 18 October 2003.

¹¹⁴ R. Giordano, ‘Das mag begreifen, wer will’, *Die Welt*, 1 November 2003.

was widely condemned.¹¹⁵ Wolfgang Benz, director of the Berlin-based Centre for Research on Antisemitism, harshly criticised the selection of graphic images (calling it “voyeurism” that “violates the dignity of the victims”) and the accompanying commentary, suggesting that the album was a “staged production that raises concern and doubt”.¹¹⁶

Julius H. Schoeps, a historian and German Jew, also voiced pointed criticism. He argued that Friedrich “remains silent on cause and effect”, emphasising that “the photographs themselves explain nothing” and should be “placed in historical context”. That context, he noted, was missing. Schoeps also highlighted the absence of explanations concerning the circumstances in which the photos were taken, raising the question of whether some of them might even have been propaganda images. He warned that the album could contribute to the relativisation of German crimes: “German crimes and German suffering are not unrelated phenomena, but they cannot be equated”.¹¹⁷

Even more sharply critical were the *Frankfurter Rundschau* journalists Richard Wagner¹¹⁸ and Matthias Arning.¹¹⁹ Wagner accused Friedrich of becoming a proponent of a “new revisionism”. Both Wagner and Arning linked Friedrich’s books to the notorious antisemitic speech delivered by then-CDU Bundestag member Martin Hohmann. Wagner argued that the same exculpatory role for Germans that, in Hohmann’s rhetoric, was to be played by the Jews – allegedly as the “nation of perpetrators” of Bolshevik crimes – is played, in Friedrich’s work, by the air raids on Germany. The writer’s books, he maintained, are nothing more than an old narrative in a new guise, à la Ernst Jünger, now serving to relieve Germans of their historical responsibility. Wagner wrote that Friedrich’s book *Brandstätten* [*Scorched Sites*] “serves the arguments of the new revisionism on a silver platter”. In conjunction with the growing international controversy surrounding the Centre Against Expulsions, this risked reigniting disputes across Europe over who had suffered more. Arning added that, through books designed to appeal to and provoke emotion, Friedrich grants the wartime generation of Germans a renewed sense of themselves as merely victims of the war – with no guilt of their own.

Meanwhile, two reviewers from the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*¹²⁰ defended the writer, arguing that the album was merely

115 The publisher’s decision was criticised by most reviewers, including those who praised the book.

116 ‘Man gibt die Opfer dem Voyeurismus preis. Der Historiker Wolfgang Benz über »Brandstätten«, das neue Buch von Jörg Friedrich’, *Die Welt*, 27 October 2003.

117 ‘Holocaust und Bombenkrieg sind nicht vergleichbar. Bilder allein vermitteln keine seriöse Aussage: Der Potsdamer Historiker Julius H. Schoeps über Jörg Friedrichs »Brandstätten«’, *Die Welt*, 24 October 2003.

118 R. Wagner, ‘Jenseits der Entlastung. Die Liebe zur Wahrheit und ein neuer Revisionismus’, *FR*, 12 November 2003.

119 M. Arning, ‘Im Namen der Grossväter’, *FR*, 5 November 2003.

120 A. Plathaus, ‘Bilderstreit um Tote’ and H. Ritter, ‘Auge der Geschichte’, *FAZ*, 24 October 2003.

a photographic documentation, showing simply 'how it was'. Both commentators seemed to forget, however, that it was precisely the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that had once been among the media outlets attacking the Wehrmacht exhibition, criticising its aesthetic choices and the kind of simplifying emotionalism that Friedrich himself now employed.

In the end, within the German debate about Germans as victims, this writer turned out to be an exceptional figure – even if it is reasonable to assume that many of his readers and listeners received his words with gratitude. His interpretations, which effectively placed the warring sides on morally equal footing, did not become a new norm within German culture of remembrance (Friedrich, incidentally, did not conceal that this was his goal: in an interview with the British newspaper *The Guardian*, he said: “The second world war is traditionally portrayed as a struggle between good and evil. But it wasn’t as simple as that”)¹²¹. Indeed, it was not that simple. However, the crucial point is that responsibility for the deaths of at least half a million people, including 75,000 children, and for the traumas suffered by those who survived the bombings, lies first and foremost with the Third Reich and its policy of total war.

In the shaping of collective memory and historical policy, the boundaries of acceptable interpretation play a crucial role. In the German debate about the *Bombenkrieg*, it was acknowledged that Jörg Friedrich had overstepped those boundaries, and the rhetoric of his widely popular books did not become the dominant framework of the discourse.

Polish aspects of the memory of the *Bombenkrieg* in the context of historical policy

From the perspective of Polish memory of the Second World War, the topic of the *Bombenkrieg* has at least three important aspects. Two of them remain, to this day, largely unknown – not only in Germany but also in Poland – and, from the standpoint of shaping Polish historical policy, still hold considerable potential. The third aspect, by contrast, is a remarkable example of how a key Polish theme was successfully integrated into the German narrative after 1989.

This concerns Wieluń and the Luftwaffe air raid on the town in the early morning of 1 September 1939. During the first decade of the 21st century, it became an important site of remembrance (German: *Erinnerungsort*), both in Poland and Germany, and indeed a symbol. Today, Wieluń is recognised in both countries – and quite widely so (at least among members of the political

¹²¹ ‘German historian provokes row over war photos’, *The Guardian*, 21 October 2003.

and civic establishment) – as a symbol (alongside Westerplatte) of German aggression against Poland and the outbreak of the Second World War, as well as a symbolic site of German crimes committed against the civilian population of the Second Polish Republic from the very first day of the conflict. In this capacity, Wieluń has entered the canon of commemorative rituals associated with the anniversary of 1 September, as well as the practice of German historical policy, becoming an almost constant feature of the speeches of many German politicians.

1. Wieluń as a symbol of the beginning of the *Bombenkrieg* in Europe

As the victim of a barbaric Luftwaffe air raid on a civilian target – one that had no military justification whatsoever – Wieluń today plays an immensely significant role in German discourse on the Second World War, including in discussions of the *Bombenkrieg*.

One example is particularly telling, as it concerns Dresden, a place of considerable symbolic significance in Germany. Speaking there on 13 February 2020, during the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the Allied air raids on the city, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier offered an interpretation that, viewed from the perspective of the preceding 35 years, could be regarded as the culmination of the German debate about its own victims of the war. The opening sentence of his speech was: “A few months ago, on the morning of 1 September 2019, I stood in the market square of a small town in Poland, Wieluń”, in order “to commemorate the victims of the air raid 80 years earlier”. That air raid, Steinmeier went on, marked the beginning of the *Bombenkrieg* in Europe and served as a harbinger of what was to come.¹²²

The interpretation presented by Steinmeier in that speech can thus be summarised in the simplest terms as follows: the destruction of Dresden marked the end of a path that had begun in 1933. In this view, the German victims of the Allied air raids are seen primarily as victims of the Third Reich and its policies – as a consequence thereof – and only subsequently as victims of Allied actions. Viewed in this way, with this particular sequence and hierarchy of responsibility, the debate over the legal and moral dimensions of the Allied strategic bombing campaign takes on a different character. Moreover, when one analyses the commemorative events held across Germany between the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025, one may reasonably conclude that

¹²² For more on the commemorations held in Dresden on 13 February 2020 see, for example W. Pięciak, ‘Kolejność według Steinmeiera’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 18 February 2020, tygodnikpowszechny.pl. The text of Steinmeier’s speech: ‘Gedenkveranstaltung zum 75. Jahrestag der Bombardierung Dresdens am 13. Februar 1945’, Bundespräsidialamt, 13 February 2020, bundespraesident.de.

the interpretation outlined above is today both widespread and dominant in the country (which does not, of course, mean that it is the only one).

How did it come to pass that the memory of the bombing of Wieluń – an event that, 35 years ago, was scarcely known in either Poland or Germany – rose to such prominence, becoming a matter of primary importance from the standpoint of historical policy? This did not happen of its own accord, and analysing this case and its successive stages would undoubtedly be both a fascinating and worthwhile undertaking.

At this point let us simply note that one person played a key role here: Joachim Trenkner (1935–2020).¹²³ For many years he was a journalist with the German public broadcaster ARD (specifically its then West Berlin station, Sender Freies Berlin); on the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, he produced a documentary about the bombing of Wieluń. From 1997 onwards, he was a regular contributor to *Tygodnik Powszechny* and in 1999 he published a historical article entitled ‘Wieluń, czwarta czterdzieści’ [*Wieluń, 4:40 a.m.*]¹²⁴ – apparently the first piece on the subject to appear in a nationwide Polish newspaper or magazine. Over the following decade, Wieluń firmly entered Polish academic, media, and public discourse (the anthology published in 2009 by the IPN¹²⁵ may be regarded as a snapshot of the academic aspect of this debate). In Germany, meanwhile, the first publication on the subject in a nationwide outlet was – again – an article by Trenkner, published in 2003 in the *Die Zeit* weekly.¹²⁶

These were the ‘foundational moments’ in Poland and Germany from which the integration of Wieluń into the culture of remembrance and the historical policy of both countries began.

2. The Luftwaffe against civilians in September 1939

Wieluń is not the only Polish motive in the debate on the *Bombenkrieg*. Two others have yet to be addressed – both within the academic sphere and in terms of historical policy and popular culture.

The first issue is also linked to Wieluń: the German air raid on that town was by no means an isolated incident during the military operations of September 1939. The Luftwaffe attacked many towns, making no distinction

123 For more on Joachim Trenkner, who died in December 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, see for example two posthumous commemorations: Z. Rybczyński, ‘Nie żyje Joachim Trenkner – publicysta, który nadał rozgłos bombardowaniu Wielunia’, *Wieluń nasze miasto*, 26 December 2020, wielun.naszemiasto.pl and A. Boniecki, W. Pięciak, ‘Przyjaciel z Berlina’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 11 January 2021, tygodnikpowszechny.pl.

124 The text was republished on *Tygodnik*’s website in 2008: J. Trenkner, ‘Wieluń, czwarta czterdzieści’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 29 August 2008, tygodnikpowszechny.pl.

125 J. Wróbel (ed.), *Wieluń był pierwszy*, IPN, Łódź 2009.

126 J. Trenkner, ‘Ziel vernichtet. Wielun, 1. September 1939: Mit der Zerstörung des polnischen Städtchens durch die deutsche Luftwaffe begann der totale Bombenterror des Zweiten Weltkriegs’, *Die Zeit*, 6 February 2003, zeit.de.

between military and civilian targets. This applied not only to Warsaw, which was being destroyed from the air during its siege, but also to numerous small settlements – such as Frampol, then a town of several thousand inhabitants in the Roztocze region (today in Biłgoraj County). The air raid of 13 September 1939 destroyed 80% of Frampol's buildings, while estimates of the number of victims given in different publications range from a dozen or so to as many as 1,500 (sic).

In the context of the September Campaign, such discrepancies are by no means unusual. While it is generally known that in September 1939 the German armed forces proved lethally effective on Polish territory (approximately 200,000 Polish civilians were killed), this remains a subject that still requires further research, despite nearly eighty years having passed since the end of the Second World War.

A comprehensive study of Luftwaffe operations against the civilian population of the Second Polish Republic in September 1939 likewise remains to be undertaken – without doubt, a considerable proportion of civilian casualties can be attributed to these attacks.¹²⁷ Such an analysis, if it were ever carried out, could also make a significant Polish contribution to the further development of the German debate on the *Bombenkrieg*.

3. 'Dresden in retaliation for Warsaw': Polish bombers over Germany

A historian – and perhaps also a film director – is still needed to take up another thread, one that is not entirely unknown (at least among historians), but rather overlooked and therefore largely untapped in terms of its potential. Yet it is a compelling story, at times unexpected, with moments of genuine cinematic drama, and one that reveals major historical processes through the fates of individuals.

It concerns the participation of Polish airmen in bombing raids on Germany as members of the British Bomber Command. While the participation of Polish pilots and Polish squadrons within the British Fighter Command is widely known, awareness that they also served throughout the war in their own bomber squadrons remains limited in Poland and virtually non-existent in Germany. Unlike the Polish fighter pilots, they have not been the subject of feature films – despite the many British and American productions made over the decades about bomber crews. Such productions are still being made – one

¹²⁷ The figure of 200,000 Polish civilian casualties during the September 1939 campaign remains an estimate. For an overview of research on human losses in Poland during the Second World War see, for example, W. Materski, T. Szarota (eds.), *Polska 1939–1945. Straty osobowe i ofiary represji pod dwiema okupacjami*, IPN, Warszawa 2009. However, new findings on the losses of the Polish Army during the 1939 campaign are presented in a study that is still awaiting publication – authored by historians Dawid Golik, Krzysztof Pięciak, and Piotr Sadowski (typescript in the possession of the author).

example is the 2024 miniseries 'Masters of the Air' about American airmen, produced for Apple TV+ (Polish title: 'Władcy przestworzy').¹²⁸

Let us briefly outline this 'Polish chapter' in the history of the *Bombenkrieg*.¹²⁹ Four Polish bomber squadrons – Nos. 300, 301, 304, and 305 – operating from the United Kingdom and under the operational command of Bomber Command¹³⁰ participated in air raids over occupied Europe, including Germany. They took part in many well-known bombing operations – beginning with the attack on Berlin in March 1941, followed by raids on Mannheim, Bremen, Hamburg and Cologne (of the thousand aircraft that attacked the city in May 1942 during the so-called 'thousand-bomber raid', more than one hundred were Polish), as well as many others, including the aforementioned raid on Dresden in 1945.

Like their British and American counterparts, the Polish bomber squadrons suffered heavy losses. The year 1942 marked both the peak of operational activity for the Polish squadrons and their period of heaviest losses: 450 airmen were killed or taken prisoner, and 89 aircraft were lost. Over the course of the war, nearly 1,500 bomber crew members were killed (significantly more than the approximately one thousand soldiers of the Polish Second Corps who died at the battle of Monte Cassino), and several hundred were taken prisoner by the Germans. In 1943, the losses suffered by the No. 301 Squadron were so severe that it was disbanded. The remnants of No. 304 Squadron were reassigned to defend the English coast, and No. 305 Squadron was converted into a fighter squadron. Only No. 300 Squadron continued bombing operations until the end of the war; its final mission was an attack on Hitler's headquarters at Berchtesgaden on 25 April 1945. Polish bomber squadrons participated not only in strategic raids on Germany but also in the Dieppe Raid (a failed Allied landing in 1942), in supplying resistance movements in occupied Europe, in operations over Africa and Italy, in the Normandy landings, in the liberation of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands, and finally in tactical raids on German

¹²⁸ For more on the 'Masters of the Air' TV series see, for example, Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org.

¹²⁹ For more on the participation of Polish airmen in RAF bombing raids on Germany, see, for example M. Nocuń, T. Potkaj, W. Pięciak, 'Berlin za Warszawę', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 7/2004, 15 February 2004; M. Nocuń, W. Pięciak, 'Musiałem myśleć jak maszyna', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, no. 7/2005, 13 February 2005. All of these articles – published to coincide with successive anniversaries of the bombing of Dresden – featured interviews with veterans of the four Polish bomber squadrons that served in RAF Bomber Command and were still alive at the time. It appears that, among Polish media outlets, the history section of *Tygodnik Powszechny* devoted more attention than any other to Polish airmen of Bomber Command – particularly in the early 21st century, when Germany witnessed a particularly intense resurgence of public interest in the theme of its own victims of bombing raids. The author also published an article on the subject in the German daily *Tageszeitung* (earlier, newspapers *Die Welt* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* refused to publish it). See W. Pięciak, 'Berlin für Warschau', *Tageszeitung*, 18 September 2004, taz.de.

¹³⁰ Among the nationally distinct units serving in Bomber Command – alongside the Polish squadrons – were one Czechoslovak squadron and two French squadrons. In addition, airmen of many different nationalities served in British squadrons. At the same time, the Polish squadrons also included, among their ranks, Canadians, Estonians and Norwegians.

territory in 1945. It should also be noted that eight Polish fighter squadrons took part in the *Bombenkrieg* while serving within Fighter Command – their pilots escorted Allied bombing missions.

The history of the Polish airmen who took part in the *Bombenkrieg* is rich in fascinating individual stories (unfortunately, unlike in the case of, for example, Holocaust survivors or veterans of the Warsaw Uprising, no comprehensive project was undertaken to record the testimonies of these airmen while they were still alive; the accounts that remain are, by necessity, scattered and only rarely accompanied by visual material). It is also full of dramatic and unexpected episodes – the kind that lend themselves naturally to cinema. One example is the allegedly suppressed story (as the evidence suggests) of a mutiny said to have occurred in February 1945 in No. 300 Squadron, when its airmen – many of whom came from the eastern territories of the Second Polish Republic – received orders to take part in the bombing of Dresden shortly after learning of the decisions made by the leaders of the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Soviet Union concerning the fate of Poland at the Yalta Conference.¹³¹

This story still holds considerable untapped potential, both from the perspective of Polish historical policy and as a contribution to the international debate.

Dresden and federal historical policy on the *Bombenkrieg*: a summary

In Polish discussions, the question is sometimes raised (or indeed posed as an accusation) as to whether Germans are rewriting their history today. The answer is simple: of course they are. History – or more precisely, historical memory and collective memory – is constantly being ‘rewritten’, that is, reinterpreted. This is, in itself, an inevitable and entirely natural phenomenon. Every society imagines the past through the lens of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*, changing both its image of the past and the emphasis it places upon it. The relevant question, therefore, is not ‘whether’ Germans are rewriting their history, but how they are doing so – and what consequences this has for society and politics.

This applies not only to interpretations of the past, but also to the present, when references to history (‘lessons from history’) are sometimes invoked to legitimise – or conversely, delegitimise – particular decisions, for example in international politics. A classic example is the repeated use, prior to 24 February

¹³¹ Accounts by veterans of their experiences during the early months of 1945 – including the alleged mutiny in No. 300 Polish Bomber Squadron – were collected, for example, in a journalistic and historical article: P. Wilczyński, ‘Za co jeszcze walczyć?’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 8 February 2011. tygodnikpowszechny.pl.

2022, by politicians from various parties of arguments and interpretations drawn – often quite one-sidedly – from history, especially from Hitler’s aggression against Stalin, to justify Berlin’s conciliatory policy towards Putin’s Russia.

The same applies to the debate surrounding the *Bombenkrieg*, and to memory and historical policy in this field. These too, are not static or fixed; they evolve, respond to changing domestic and international contexts, adopt new tools and rituals, and place emphasis on different aspects of the past.

I have been following the German debate on the *Bombenkrieg* for over 30 years – since the autumn of 1994, when, during a stay in Dresden, I had the opportunity to conduct a series of long and in-depth interviews with people who had survived the bombing raid of February 1945.¹³² Some of them were already adults at the time, while others were small children – nevertheless, for all of them, that attack proved to be a formative experience that transcended generations. What they all shared were the intense emotions that accompanied those interviews. Similar emotions emerged a few years later – this time on a national scale – when Jörg Friedrich’s books first served as a catalyst for, and later as a point of reference in the discussion about interpretations of the *Bombenkrieg*, forms (or rituals) of remembrance, and, ultimately, the language used to discuss it in the public and political sphere.

1. Dresden as a central site of memory of the *Bombenkrieg*

As a result of a combination of factors over the past 35 years following German reunification, Dresden emerged as the most prominent site in this debate (with Hamburg occupying second place).

In particular, the fact that after 1990 broadly defined far-right circles (from the intellectual nationalist-right to openly neo-Nazi groups) appropriated Dresden, transforming subsequent anniversaries of the Allied bombing into their own rituals and commemorations under the slogan of a ‘Bombing Holocaust of the German nation’, created a situation in which both Dresden’s residents and its politicians were, in a sense, forced to respond. They also had to find their own rituals, language, and culture of remembrance – in opposition to those promoted by extremists. And this indeed came to pass over time, with the ‘human chain’ (*Menschenkette*), becoming the defining symbol of successive commemorations, attracting tens of thousands of participants on the evening of 13 February.¹³³

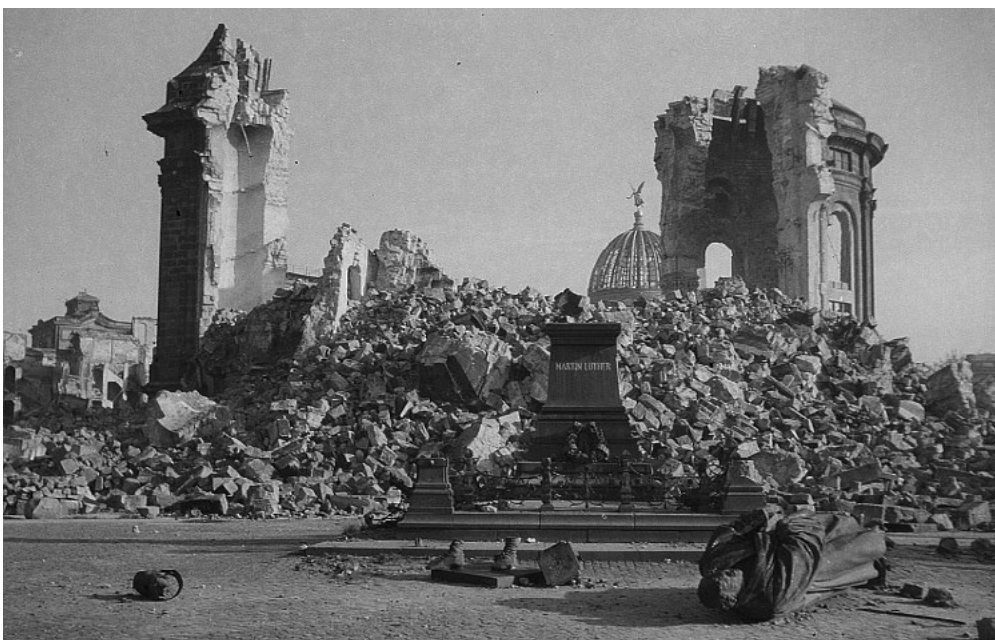
¹³² A historical feature entitled ‘Requiem dla miasta Drezna’, based on these interviews, was published in *Tygodnik Powszechny* in February 1995 and later appeared in an expanded version in a book by the author of this book: W. Pięciak, *Jak obalano Mur. Niemcy 1988–96*, Kraków 1996, pp. 272–302.

¹³³ The way in which these new rituals and this culture of remembrance developed in Dresden is a topic in its own right. A comprehensive account of the subject can be found, for example, in an exceptionally detailed study by the Dresden-based sociologist Claudia Jerzak, published in February 2024 on the Deutschland Archiv portal (formerly a printed

Photograph by Wojciech Konończuk, 2025



Photograph by Richard Peter, wikipedia.org, 1945



■ The reconstructed Frauenkirche in Dresden, with its original masonry clearly distinguishable from the restored structure (2007).

■ The damaged statue of Martin Luther in front of the ruins of the Frauenkirche in Dresden (1945).

It was also Dresden that became the place where, after 1989/1990, policy towards the history of the *Bombenkrieg* was shaped at the highest – federal – level. First through Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who, while travelling in December 1989 for negotiations with East German Prime Minister Hans Modrow, chose the city as the venue for the meeting and for a major policy speech. It continued through the Presidents of Germany, who took part in the commemorations held there.

These included Richard von Weizsäcker (CDU) in February 1991,¹³⁴ Roman Herzog (CDU) in February 1995¹³⁵ (Helmut Kohl also attended the commemorations marking the 50th anniversary of the bombings, but – as he emphasised – not as Chancellor but as an ‘ordinary participant’), followed by Horst Köhler (CDU) in October 2005, when he took part in the reopening ceremony of the reconstructed Frauenkirche,¹³⁶ then Joachim Gauck (CDU) in February 2015¹³⁷ and Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD) in February 2020.¹³⁸ On each of these occasions, they had to find the appropriate words to articulate the most authoritative interpretation offered by the state and its historical policy.¹³⁹

historical periodical, now only online). The study covers the period from 1945, through the era of communist East Germany, to the present day. See C. Jerzak, ‘Der 13. Februar 1945 im kollektiven Gedächtnis Dresdens. Gedenkrituale und Wandel der Erinnerungskultur’, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 13 February 2025, bpb.de.

- 134 President von Weizsäcker took part in an ecumenical service at the Catholic cathedral in Dresden on 13 February 1991 and delivered a speech in which he devoted considerable attention to the ongoing Gulf War – specifically Operation Desert Storm, conducted by an international coalition under the auspices of the UN to liberate Kuwait from occupation of Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi regime. At a time when numerous demonstrations against the operation were taking place in German cities (Germany supported it politically and logistically, but did not participate militarily), von Weizsäcker supported the actions of the allies and also sought to justify them by drawing on the history of the Second World War, arguing for the necessity of defeating a dictatorial regime by force. The text of Richard von Weizsäcker’s speech: ‘Ansprache am Ende des ökumenischen Gottesdienstes in der Dresdner Kathedrale’, Bundespräsidialamt, 13 February 1991, bundespraesident.de.
- 135 The text of Roman Herzog’s speech: ‘Ansprache von Bundespräsident Roman Herzog zum 50. Jahrestag der Zerstörung von Dresden im Zweiten Weltkrieg’, Bundespräsidialamt, 13 February 1995, bundespraesident.de.
- 136 The text of Horst Köhler’s speech: ‘Ansprache von Bundespräsident Horst Köhler zur Eröffnung der Dresdner Frauenkirche’, Bundespräsidialamt, 30 October 2005, bundespraesident.de. The ceremony marking the reopening of the rebuilt Frauenkirche, held on 30 October 2005, was also attended by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and Angela Merkel, who was already preparing to assume office. It was a moment of political transition: a snap Bundestag election had been held on 18 September 2005, and the CDU/CSU received just over half a percent more votes than the SPD. As a result, a ‘grand coalition’ between the CDU/CSU and the SPD was formed, and by late November 2005, Merkel took office as Chancellor.
- 137 The text of Joachim Gauck’s speech: ‘Gedenkveranstaltung anlässlich des 70. Jahrestages der Zerstörung Dresdens’, Bundespräsidialamt, 13 February 2015, bundespraesident.de.
- 138 The text of Frank-Walter Steinmeier’s speech: ‘Gedenkveranstaltung zum 75. Jahrestag der Bombardierung Dresdens am 13. Februar 1945’, Bundespräsidialamt, 13 February 2020, bundespraesident.de.
- 139 Johannes Rau (SPD), who served as President of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1999 to 2004, did not deliver a speech in Dresden, although together with Chancellor Schröder, he took part in the commemorations of the 55th anniversary, which took place in the nearly reconstructed Frauenkirche, see ‘Themennachmittag Dresden am Sonntag’, Presseportal, 13 February 2000, presseportal.de.

2. A prelude: Helmut Kohl at the ruins of the Frauenkirche

Thus, on 19 December 1989 – during that turbulent period when, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, demonstrators in East German cities had already exhausted the political and emotional potential of the slogan ‘Wir sind das Volk!’ (‘We are the people!’), and when new slogans such as ‘Wir sind ein Volk!’ (‘We are one people’) and ‘Deutschland einig Vaterland!’ (‘Germany – one fatherland’) were beginning to dominate – Chancellor Helmut Kohl arrived in Dresden and chose the ruins of the Frauenkirche as the backdrop for his address. The church had been destroyed in February 1945 by Allied bombing and left in ruins by the authorities of the GDR, who transformed it into a tool of anti-Western propaganda – a monument to ‘Anglo-American bombing terror’. Later, in the 1980s, the ruins became a place where Dresden residents gathered each year on 13 February to commemorate their loved ones – not yet as an act of opposition, but already as a step beyond the official framework.

The speech Kohl delivered there on 19 December 1989 was probably one of his shortest (it lasted 15 minutes), but also one of his most important. He later described that day as “my key experience (*Schlüsselerlebnis*) on the road to [Germany’s] national unity”, and even as the most difficult speech of his life.¹⁴⁰

Speaking not only to the tens of thousands gathered in front of the Frauenkirche, with their enormous expectations, but also to Western allies and former adversaries beyond the Iron Curtain (as well as several hundred German and foreign journalists), Kohl thanked the demonstrators who had taken to the streets of towns and cities across the GDR in the autumn of 1989. He emphasised that genuine peace is impossible without freedom.

Then came a declaration that was, one might say, directional for what would happen in the following months; directional also in the sense that it channelled the powerful public emotions of the GDR: “My goal remains – if only the historic moment allows it – the unity of our nation”. Kohl emphasised that he understood the concerns of Germany’s neighbours and took them seriously – their fears as well as their desire for security.

He then invoked the *genius loci*: “Here, in front of the ruins of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, at the memorial site for the inhabitants of Dresden who lost their lives back then, I have just laid a wreath of flowers – also to remember the suffering and death in this beautiful old German city. In 1945 I was 15 years old – which I want to say to the young people who are here in this square – and I was then a pupil, still a child. Later, I had the chance to grow up in West Germany, in my homeland, the Palatinate, and I belong to that generation, then still young,

¹⁴⁰ Helmut Kohl devoted an entire chapter of his memoirs published in 1996, towards the end of his term in office, to his visit to Dresden in December 1989: H. Kohl, *Ich wollte Deutschlands Einheit. Dargestellt von Kai Diekmann und Ralf Georg Reuth*, Propyläen Verlag, 1996, pp. 215ff.

which after that war swore to itself – just as we do now, here – ‘Never again war, never again violence!’. And standing here today before you, I would like to expand that vow, I would like to say to you: in the future from German soil there must always come peace – that is the goal of our policy!”¹⁴¹ (it seems that he was addressing not only the people gathered in the square in front of the Frauenkirche, but also those who would subsequently analyse his message in European and world capitals).

3. German presidents in Dresden: the interpretative model of the *Bombenkrieg* in federal policy

While Helmut Kohl chose Dresden – precisely Dresden¹⁴² – to serve as the historical-symbolic backdrop to his political message (including the part directed at an international audience: that no one should fear a newly reunified Germany, because it had drawn the proper lessons from the history of the Second World War), the subsequent representatives of the Federal Republic mentioned above came there on the occasion of the anniversary of the February 1945 air raid (or, in Köhler’s case, because of an event linked to it).

When the speeches of von Weizsäcker, Herzog, Köhler, Gauck and Steinmeier are analysed as a whole – delivered, it should be recalled, over a period of 30 years, between 1991 and 2020 – several common interpretative elements emerge. First and foremost, emphasis on the sequence of events – the bombing of Dresden as a consequence of the war unleashed by the Third Reich. “We know who started this murderous war”, said Joachim Gauck in 2015. “We know it. And that is why we neither want to forget, nor will we ever forget those who fell victim to the way Germany conducted this war. We do not forget this when we commemorate German victims here today”. Another common element is the condemnation of war (and more broadly: the use of force) as an instrument of policy, while at the same time acknowledging that the use of force is sometimes necessary; after all, that is how Nazi Germany was defeated.

In this interpretation, the victims of the Allied bombing raids are presented primarily as victims of the Third Reich’s policies, one of whose consequences was the *Bombenkrieg*. In other words, Adolf Hitler and his criminal policies

¹⁴¹ The text of Helmut Kohl’s Dresden speech from 19 December 1989: ‘Rede des Bundeskanzlers auf der Kundgebung vor der Frauenkirche in Dresden’, Bulletin 150–89, Bundesregierung, 22 December 1989, bundesregierung.de.

¹⁴² When travelling to the GDR for talks with Modrow, Kohl could just as well have met him in Leipzig – perhaps an even more obvious choice, since at that time Leipzig was seen as the key city of the democratic autumn revolution in the GDR. Instead, Dresden was chosen – and it appears this was no coincidence. The city had already been agreed upon as the venue as early as 5 December, during discussions between the head of the Federal Chancellery and the office of the GDR Prime Minister. From the outset, the official programme for Kohl’s visit included a ceremony commemorating the victims of the Allied air raids at the ruins of the Frauenkirche. See, for example, the commemorative feature from December 2019 on the Mitteldeutsche Rundfunk website: ‘Helmut Kohls historische Rede in Dresden’, MDR, 16 December 2021, mdr.de.

become the principal cause of the suffering endured by innocent Germans – whether those sheltering from air raids, fleeing the advancing Red Army in winter, or displaced from their homes after the war.

This marks a significant shift in emphasis, both in relation to interpretations such as Jörg Friedrich's (according to which, let us recall, the blame was to be shared equally by Hitler, Churchill, and Roosevelt), and in comparison with the prevailing public sentiment prior to 1989. To some extent, it also departs from the mood that prevailed during the peak of the debates surrounding the 'return of one's own victims' at the turn of the 21st century, when certain manifestations of that discourse resembled an emotional indictment directed either against the Allies or against the countries from which Germans had been expelled (for which the language of public debate employed an accusatory term coined before 1989: *Vertreiberstaaten*).

The consensus among the presidents is also evident in the assertion that the suffering of innocent Germans should not be exploited or used as a form of counterbalance to the crimes committed by Germany and the suffering inflicted on others. Yet it was precisely in this direction that nationalist and far-right circles sought to push the debate when they questioned the number of victims established by the historical commission appointed in 2004 by the mayor of Dresden, which concluded that there had been approximately 25,000 victims. Such claims were also said to have appeared within the ranks of Alternative for Germany (AfD); for example, in February 2020, the party's co-chairman Tino Chrupalla declared that, in his view, 100,000 people had died in Dresden.¹⁴³

Looking back, one could say that it was precisely this attitude that President Roman Herzog anticipated when, during the 1995 commemorations, he declared: "The suffering of nations during this war must not be set against one another in order to confront them with each other". He continued: "This is a year of mourning [i.e. the year 1995]. A year of remembrance. A year of contemplation and reflection. The conclusion we draw from this is: not to trade suffering back and forth, but to seek understanding. And to remember, because it is a warning for all time".

Expanding on this point, all the speeches delivered by the presidents in Dresden contained references to places such as Coventry, Rotterdam, Warsaw, and cities in the Soviet Union – places that had been the targets of German air raids. A noticeable effort has also been made to ensure that foreign guests from countries that were once at war with Germany took part in the commemorations. Invitees from the United Kingdom – including members of the royal

¹⁴³ See, for example '„Goebbels war damit erstaunlich erfolgreich“. Ein Interview von Klaus Wiegrefe mit dem Militärhistoriker Rolf-Dieter Müller', *Der Spiegel*, 9 February 2020, [spiegel.de](https://www.spiegel.de).

family, Bomber Command veterans and the mayor of Coventry – attended all of these ceremonies. Guests from other countries also attended, particularly from the United States, including the US ambassador. Over time, representatives from Poland also began to attend. For example, the rededication of the Frauenkirche was attended by a member of the Polish resistance from Gostyń, a former prisoner of the Third Reich, who had organised a fundraising campaign for the reconstruction of the church.

It is worth noting that the Polish dimension of these speeches has become increasingly prominent over the years, taking on a concrete form through a reference to Wieluń. The town was mentioned for the first time by Joachim Gauck in his 2015 speech – Wieluń being cited as one of many towns destroyed during the war (Gauck referred both to cities devastated by German air raids and to German cities destroyed by the Allies).¹⁴⁴

In Frank-Walter Steinmeier's 2020 speech, the fate of Wieluń became the very point of departure – the interpretative framework that shaped the entire historical and political argument that followed. Steinmeier advanced the following thesis: "The attack on Wieluń was the prelude (*Auftakt*) to the brutal *Bombenkrieg*, in which civilian populations in cities were placed in the crosshairs. The German Luftwaffe on one side, and British and American bombers on the other, destroyed hundreds of cities in nearly every European country over the course of this war..."¹⁴⁵

He went on to say: "We have gathered here today to remember the air raids on Dresden 75 years ago. We commemorate the victims of the *Bombenkrieg* in this city, in Germany, and across Europe. And we also commemorate all victims of genocide, war, and violence".

At the time this book was being completed, preparations were underway for the commemoration of the 80th anniversary of the Dresden bombings. Volunteers were being recruited to serve as stewards responsible for organising the 'human chain'. The chain was planned to stretch for four kilometres, and, as usual, at least several thousand participants were expected. Official statements emphasised that the stewards would be responsible only for organisation, while the police would be responsible for security.

¹⁴⁴ Quote: "So viele Städte haben im Krieg schreckliche Bombardements erlitten. Städte, die von den Deutschen angegriffen wurden: das polnische Wieluń, Rotterdam, Belgrad, London, Leningrad oder Coventry. Auch Städte, über denen alliierte Piloten ihre Bomben abwarfen: Kassel, Darmstadt, Essen, Lübeck, Berlin, Würzburg, Swinemünde oder Pforzheim. Doch es sind Hamburg und vor allem Dresden, die zum Symbol für die Leiden der deutschen Zivilbevölkerung im Bombenkrieg wurden – wegen der Zahl der Opfer und wegen der ungeheuren Feuersbrünste".

¹⁴⁵ Quote: "Der Angriff auf Wieluń war auch der Auftakt zu einem brutalen Bombenkrieg, in dem die Zivilbevölkerung in den Städten ins Fadenkreuz geriet. Die deutsche Luftwaffe auf der einen, britische und amerikanische Bomber auf der anderen Seite zerstörten im Verlauf des Krieges hunderte Städte in fast allen Ländern Europas. Sie zogen eine bis dahin noch nie dagewesene Spur der Verwüstung, die von Großbritannien über Deutschland bis nach Russland reichte. Als dieser Krieg im Mai 1945 mit der Befreiung Europas vom Nationalsozialismus endete, da lagen weite Teile des Kontinents unter Asche und in Trümmern".

At the time, large public gatherings in Germany were taking place in a particularly tense atmosphere, following the deadly attack on the Christmas market in Magdeburg. As usual, demonstrations by neo-Nazi groups were also expected – a year earlier, in February 2024, approximately 800 people had taken part. They were met by a counter-demonstration numbering several thousand participants; some of whom would likely have endorsed the demand – voiced repeatedly by far-left groups – to abandon the Dresden commemorations altogether.¹⁴⁶

4. Barack Obama in Buchenwald and Dresden: the US legitimises the German narrative

When discussing presidential visits to Dresden, it is also worth recalling the events of June 2009 – although in this case the president in question was not the head of Germany, but of the United States. The short yet symbolically rich visit paid by Barack Obama – who at the time had been in office for less than six months – can be analysed in the context of historical policy. It appears to be a textbook example of historical policy in practice – in this case, as pursued by Obama and Chancellor Angela Merkel.¹⁴⁷

At the beginning of June 2009, Obama – in whom many Germans placed great hopes, seeing him as a counterbalance to his predecessor George W. Bush, who was not held in high esteem in the Federal Republic – delivered a speech at Cairo University addressed to the Muslim world. It was intended as a gesture of reconciliation and a new beginning in relations between the United States and Muslim-majority countries. From Cairo, Obama travelled to Normandy to take part in the 65th anniversary of the Allied landings. On the way, however, he stopped in Germany to visit the memorial site at Buchenwald, the former Nazi concentration camp that operated from 1937 to 1945.

On the surface, then, the visit to Germany appeared to be retrospective in nature, but it seems in fact to have been a political signal directed at Israel and the Jewish community in the United States. The visit to Buchenwald was intended to counterbalance the visit to Cairo, where Obama had criticised Israel's policy towards the Palestinians, and to convey the message that, while seeking to engage more closely with the Muslim world, the United States was not forgetting its obligations to Israel – obligations rooted, in part, in history.

¹⁴⁶ Such a demand was also voiced at the time by activists from Grüne Jugend, the Green Party's youth organisation. On criticism of the Dresden commemorations from a far-left perspective see, for example D. Muschenich, 'Umstrittenes Gedenken. Wie der Opfer der Bombardierung Dresdens vor 79 Jahren gedenken? Gar nicht, fordern Kritiker:innen – auch weil das für Neonazis anschlussfähig sei', *Tageszeitung*, 13 February 2024, taz.de.

¹⁴⁷ On Barack Obama's historical policy with regard to the memory of the Second World War, his visit to Germany in 2009, and his remarks about "Polish camps" see, for example W. Pięciak, 'Błogosławiona wina Baracka Obamy', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 5 June 2012, tygodnikpowszechny.pl.

The President's advisers clearly regarded such a counterbalance as necessary, as the correspondent of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* observed: "During the lecture in Cairo, no one in the audience applauded when Obama spoke of the fate of millions of Jews in Europe, but there was thunderous applause when he spoke of the suffering of the Palestinians".¹⁴⁸

Who proposed that, during his brief stopover in Germany, the President should spend the night not in Leipzig or Weimar, near Buchenwald, but further away in Dresden? The German press reported that the suggestion came from the US delegation preparing the visit, which preferred Dresden. At the same time, German journalists also reported that when Obama's tight schedule was being arranged, it was actually the German government that had lobbied for a joint visit by both leaders to the Frauenkirche, the symbol of the city.¹⁴⁹

During their visit to the church, Obama and Merkel prayed, lit candles, and listened to musical performances by an organist and a trumpeter. According to a report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, the US President signed the book of prayer intentions with the following words: "My best wishes to the congregation and People of Dresden, for symbolizing the possibility of reconciliation, reconstruction and hope. God bless you"¹⁵⁰.

Obama then flew by helicopter from Dresden to Buchenwald – a place of particular personal significance to him because his great-uncle (his grandmother's brother), had taken part, as a US army soldier, in the liberation of Ohrdruf concentration camp, one of the subcamps of KL Buchenwald. Together with Angela Merkel, he toured the memorial site at Buchenwald, guided by several former inmates, including Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel. (It is worth noting that the history of Buchenwald did not end in 1945 with its liberation by the Americans. After the US army withdrew from Thuringia, which fell within the Soviet occupation zone, the Soviet security service, the NKVD, established one of its so-called special camps on the site of the former concentration camp. It remained in operation until 1950)¹⁵¹.

The fact that, during this brief visit centred primarily on Buchenwald, Obama also found time to visit Dresden and stop at the Frauenkirche was – one

148 U. Schmid, 'Obama verneigt sich vor den Holocaust-Opfern', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 5 June 2009, nzz.ch and *idem*, 'Steife Freundschaftsschwüre in Dresden', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 5 June 2009, nzz.ch.

149 'Obama will Dresdner Frauenkirche besuchen', *Der Spiegel*, 3 June 2009, spiegel.de and 'Obama besucht nun doch die Frauenkirche', *Merkur.de*, 3 June 2009.

150 C.P. Müller, S. Locke, P. Schilder, 'Obama in Deutschland. Himmel und Hölle', *FAZ*, 6 June 2009, faz.net.

151 For an overview of the four stages in the history of Buchenwald – first as a Nazi concentration camp (from 1937 to 1945), then as an NKVD special camp (1945–1950), followed by its role as a memorial site reflecting the GDR's interpretation of history (1949–1989), and finally as a site where a *modus vivendi* had to be found to accommodate all of these layers of history – see W. Pięciak, 'Buchenwald. Historia poczwórna', *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 6 May 2007, tygodnikpowszechny.pl. For more on NKVD camps see, for example, K. Wóycicki, *Niemiecka pamięć. Rozrachunek z przeszłością NRD i przemiany niemieckiej świadomości historycznej*, Instytut Historii Nauki PAN, Warszawa 2011, pp. 117ff.

may assume – of comparable symbolic, political, and emotional significance for Germans to that which a visit by a US president to the Warsaw Rising Museum and Powązki Cemetery would be for Poles.

It is reasonable to assume that Obama did not make this gesture unknowingly. At the time, after the ‘deep freeze’ in relations between Berlin and Washington during George W. Bush’s presidency, the United States was keen to rebuild good relations. From the perspective of historical policy, however, Merkel’s invitation to Obama to visit the Frauenkirche was a masterstroke: the US president legitimised the German narrative of the Second World War, in which central place is accorded to the remembrance of both the victims of the Holocaust and Germany’s own victims. “Dresden close to Buchenwald” – the headline used by the conservative newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* – was more than a simple geographical description of the places Obama visited.¹⁵²

“The politics of collective memory – impossible to quantify, hard to measure with the methods of survey research, yet still very real – is a major ingredient of the political arena, the public discourse, and the policy setting in every country. It circumscribes the acceptable. It defines such key ingredients as pride, shame, fear, revenge, and comfort for a large number of a country’s citizens”. This is how two American political scientists, Andrei S. Markovits and Simon Reich, described the issue in their book *Das Deutsche Dilemma*, published in English as *The German Predicament*, which examines the links between history and the foreign and security policy of contemporary Germany.¹⁵³ If one were looking for an example of how multifaceted the relationship between politics (both domestic and international) and history, together with the emotions associated with it, remains today, and of how the latter can be used to shape contemporary policy, Obama’s journey along the route Cairo–Dresden–Buchenwald (and on to Normandy) appears to be a textbook example.¹⁵⁴

5. Continuation

In German collective memory – specifically the part concerning the Third Reich and the Second World War – two central elements can be identified today. The first is the memory of the Holocaust, which is dominant both in the public sphere and in historical policy.¹⁵⁵ The second is the memory of Germany’s own

¹⁵² P. Schilder, ‘Obama in Deutschland: Dresden nahe Buchenwald’, FAZ, 5 June 2009, faz.net.

¹⁵³ A.S. Markovits, S. Reich, *Das deutsche Dilemma. Die Berliner Republik zwischen Macht und Machtverzicht*, Alexander Fest Verlag, 1998, p. 30. English language edition: *The German predicament: memory and power in the new Europe*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1997, p. 9.

¹⁵⁴ For more on this combination of historical and political aspects see, for example G. Nonnenmacher, ‘Obama-Besuch. Geburtshelfer Europas’, FAZ, 5 June 2009, faz.net and J. Ross, ‘Barack in Buchenwald’, *Die Zeit*, 4 June 2009, zeit.de. Let us emphasise here that the title of the article published in *Die Zeit* is not a particularly apt editorial choice.

¹⁵⁵ Although not everyone shares this view. For example, sharp criticism of Germany’s culture of remembrance was voiced – on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau prisoners – by Michel

victims, represented by a number of different groups. These include victims of the *Bombenkrieg*; those who fled the advancing Soviet front; victims of the post-war expulsions; women who were raped; prisoners of war who died in captivity (both in the Soviet Union and in Allied custody – the key term here is *Rheinwiesenlager*); victims of NKVD camps in the Soviet occupation zone; and others. A particularly prominent place in this ‘memory landscape’ is occupied by the *Bombenkrieg*, if only due to the scale of the phenomenon (where the term ‘victim’ may, in this context, refer not only to those who lost their lives).

It is also worth noting, if only in passing, that the meaning of the term ‘own’, in the expression ‘one’s own victims’, is evolving. Whereas in earlier debates the category of ‘German victims’ was commonly understood to refer to the victims of bombings or expulsions, a survey conducted in Germany in 2024 by the polling company Ipsos (commissioned by the Pilecki Institute) identified an interesting trend: contemporary Germans are increasingly inclined to regard German Jews as their own – that is, as German – victims.¹⁵⁶ This issue undoubtedly warrants further research. It is therefore all the more important to observe how the memory of one’s own victims – and the politics associated with it – continues to evolve.

Returning, then, to the main argument: it is precisely Dresden that illustrates the current interpretative foundation of Germany’s federal historical policy regarding the *Bombenkrieg*. Today, at the end of the first quarter of the 21st century, this foundation is – one could argue – a development and continuation of the assumptions already present in the speeches of the German presidents in 1991 and 1995. In its present form, it represents a (temporary) culmination of the evolution of memory and historical policy surrounding the *Bombenkrieg* – a long-term process that began in 1945 and has remained predominantly regional and decentralised, becoming federal only occasionally.

Friedman, a journalist and former Vice President (2000–2003) of the Central Council of Jews in Germany. In an interview with the newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, he described German remembrance culture as “a black hole” in which “there are bright spots, such as the millions who make an effort to preserve memory, who lay *Stolpersteine* [stumbling stones commemorating Jewish neighbours – WP]. But there are also millions who turn the culture of remembrance into a terrible brown hole: perpetrators are portrayed as victims, and only the Allied bombings are spoken about”. For a summary of the interview by the DPA news agency, see ‘Holocaust-Gedenktag: „Kaum etwas aus der Geschichte gelernt“ – Friedman beklagt deutsche Erinnerungskultur’, *Die Welt*, 22 January 2025, [welt.de](https://www.welt.de).

- 156 As many as 59% of respondents stated that among the victims of the Holocaust, it was their fellow citizens – i.e. German Jews – who had perished in the greatest numbers (in fact, approximately 165,000 German Jews were murdered). Analysing the survey, which also identified a number of other trends, Hanna Radziejowska and Mateusz Fałkowski of the Berlin branch of the Pilecki Institute wrote: “All of this may reinforce [in Germany] a tendency to assess that the greatest victim of the Second World War was the Germans themselves, albeit concealed under various socio-demographic categories”. See, H. Radziejowska, M. Fałkowski, ‘Jak wygląda niemiecka wina i pamięć 85 lat po wybuchu II wojny światowej? Mówi o tym sondaż przeprowadzony właśnie w Niemczech’, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 1 September 2024, tygodnikpowszechny.pl. For more on the survey see also ‘Sondaż na zlecenie Instytutu Pileckiego w Berlinie. Niemiecka wina i pamięć 85 lat po wybuchu II wojny światowej’, The Pilecki Institute, instytutpileckiego.pl.

Temporary because, as already mentioned, this is by no means a static phenomenon but a dynamic one. Even if – with the passing of the generation that experienced the *Bombenkrieg* and was often marked by it for the rest of their lives – individual, familial, and collective emotions have subsided, the memory of the *Bombenkrieg* and its forms of commemoration remain alive and continue to evolve. Moreover, some argue that they continue to influence German attitudes and behaviour with regard to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, its possible consequences for Europe as a whole, Germany’s support for Kyiv and its policy towards the aggressor state.¹⁵⁷

It is therefore not a closed chapter. Its continuation is still unfolding – not only in Dresden, but also, and perhaps above all, in towns and cities throughout Germany.

¹⁵⁷ In December 2024, in an essay published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Professor Felix Ackermann from Fernuniversität in Hagen, put forward the thesis that it is the memory of the “devastating air raids on German metropolises, as well as the personal experiences of fleeing from the front” during the Second World War that continues to shape Germans’ perception of conflict in Europe, exerting a paralysing effect and hampering a realistic assessment of issues such as Germany’s policy towards Russia. See F. Ackermann, ‘Zukunft, die nicht vergehen will’, *FAZ*, 12 December 2024. In the online edition the title was: ‘Die Angst der Deutschen vor dem Dritten Weltkrieg’, *faz.net*.

**Overcoming trauma, reclaiming identity.
The reconstruction of historic monuments
in Germany**

Wojciech Konończuk

Monuments are not merely documents. No less important than their static, monumental character is their evocative power, expressed in several forms. The most significant of these is their direct, emotional and artistic impact... Finally, there is their broad and important didactic influence, when a monument enables us to understand past events and when, through it, we learn the history of a nation.¹

Prof. Jan Zachwatowicz
Head of Historic Architecture Department, Warsaw Reconstruction Office,
General Conservator of Monuments

MAIN POINTS

- Following reunification, Germany challenged the post-1945 paradigm which held that there was neither a need, nor a justification, nor even the possibility to reconstruct historic buildings and urban layouts destroyed during the Second World War. After 1990, the prevailing view echoed the situation in post-war Poland – that the German state could not accept the destruction of a significant part of its tangible cultural heritage. It came to be recognised as an integral element of the national identity and a necessary factor in rebuilding the shared symbolic memory of society.
- In many German cities, particularly in the eastern part of the country, the period following reunification saw the launch of a process of monument reconstruction which, in terms of scale, has no parallel in Europe after 1989. It was most extensive in Dresden, Berlin and Potsdam – cities that had suffered not only from wartime destruction but also from the urban planning policies of the East German authorities. At that time, efforts began to define a new identity. The success of the reconstruction of Dresden's old town had a particularly strong impact on the nationwide debate. It became an inspiration for ongoing discussions in both eastern and western Germany about the need for reconstruction and about reclaiming a local identity as expressed through historic architecture.
- The issue of reconstructing monument became an important element of the policy pursued by successive federal governments, beginning with Chancellor Helmut Kohl. This reflected a broad, though not full, consensus among political elites recognising the need to draw on tradition and material heritage. As a result, the renovation and reconstruction of historic buildings became

¹ J. Zachwatowicz, 'Program i zasady konserwacji zabytków', *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki i Kultury* 1946, no. 1–2, p. 48.

a significant component of federal programmes directed primarily at the eastern federal states. Over the past 35 years, Germany has spent tens of billions of euros on projects for the reconstruction of historic buildings.

- The principal driving force behind the reconstruction of historic buildings was German society itself. Through well-developed grassroots initiatives, the German public conducted lobbying campaigns that often successfully influenced the authorities' decisions regarding specific buildings or architectural ensembles. These activists were supported by a substantial share of citizens, in particular the local communities in places where reconstruction was planned.
- The reconstruction of certain important buildings which were embedded in Germany's historical memory generated social and political tension. In many cases, it sparked years of emotionally charged debate and controversy, which were often nationwide in scope. The most significant disputes concerned the reconstruction of the Berlin Palace and the Garrison Church in Potsdam. The central question in these debates was whether monuments marked by 'negative memory' should be rebuilt. They also addressed the place which the difficult past should be assigned in contemporary German identity and the ways in which national history can, or cannot, be expressed, along with the potential consequences of doing so. In each case, the disputes ultimately ended in victory for supporters of reconstruction.
- The reconstruction of historic buildings gave rise to a debate on Germany's responsibility and guilt and, though this was not a primary factor, it carried a moral dimension. Above all, though, it stemmed from a desire to heal 'historical wounds' and to reclaim a fragment of the 'old, good Germany'. At times, it also reflected a belief in the destroyed innocent cities' narrative and in the possibility of atonement. Another important motive was the aim of improving the aesthetic quality of an urban space and of renewing or restoring historical memory at the local or national level, particularly where reconstruction concerned a building of federal significance.
- The greatest challenge was to restore the architectural 'order' in Berlin, a city for decades divided by the wall into two independently developing urban entities. After 1990, the German capital had to redefine itself and, to a considerable extent, reinvent itself. The concept of historical reconstruction played a key role in this process, most prominently articulated by Hans Stimmann, who was in charge of Berlin's urban planning for 16 years. The city had sought a new way to express its identity and found it through an attempt to reconcile its

architectural traditions with modernist innovation. As a result, the decision was taken to reconstruct many historic buildings, particularly along the Unter den Linden boulevard and on Museum Island, while new developments were based on the historical urban layout and local typology, with limits imposed on the height of new buildings. Over more than three decades, a new Berlin has emerged, and it is one of the most compelling cities in contemporary Europe.

- On a smaller scale, monument reconstruction progressed in West Germany, where post-war rebuilding took a different form than in the East and where the historical urban layout was most often preserved. In recent years, however, the process has also begun to gather momentum there, driven by the positively received 'Dresden effect' and the successful reconstruction of part of Frankfurt am Main's old town. This has become a reference point for other western German cities, encouraging their authorities to take similar decisions and prompting new debates on further reconstructions.
- After more than 30 years, large-scale monument reconstruction has transformed the appearance of many German cities. Generous investments from federal and Länder budgets, as well as EU funds, have led to the removal of the material traces of the Second World War and to the comprehensive renewal and revitalisation of historic centres. In many cases, this has restored architectural harmony and enhanced tourism and investment appeal. The changes brought about by monument revitalisation are an important indicator of Germany's social, identity and architectural transformation, as well as of its approach to its own historical heritage. Despite many successes, however, the process of reconstruction in Germany remains incomplete and will continue in the future, albeit on a more limited scale.

Introduction

Monuments and entire ensembles of historic buildings play an exceptionally important role in constructing, consolidating and preserving an identity at the local, national and state level for every nation. Architectural heritage, alongside art, literature and other forms, constitutes its material expression and in this sense forms an important component and instrument of memory policy. Efforts to protect the traces of the past have been a significant factor in the development of national liberation and opposition movements in various parts of the world, from the Baltic states and Armenia and Georgia in the Soviet Union to the East German opposition and the anti-colonial movement in India.

Today as well, in developed Western societies undergoing rapid social, cultural, ideological and technological change, it is possible to observe a growing concern for the protection and preservation of monuments and increasingly also for the reconstruction of those which were destroyed in the 20th century or even earlier. Monuments serve as specific 'anchors' that help preserve memory and identity at the local, national and federal state level. Perhaps the clearest contemporary demonstration of this was the shock in France after the fire at Notre-Dame Cathedral and the urgent efforts to ensure it would be meticulously reconstructed. During the ceremony marking the reopening of the restored cathedral in December 2024, attended by the entire French political elite, President Emmanuel Macron expressed this directly: "This cathedral is a metaphor for what our nation is".

Nazi Germany brought about the outbreak of the Second World War and committed unprecedented crimes during the war, costing tens of millions of lives. It also carried out the large-scale destruction of material culture in the countries it occupied, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe. Members of the anti-German coalition, seeking to defeat the Third Reich, launched carpet bombings of German cities, which left many of them in ruins and devastated a vast number of monuments of major importance to European culture and, above all, to the strength and expression of German national identity. Although some were rebuilt as soon as hostilities ended, especially in the western part of the country, there were no efforts at reconstruction in most cases. This reflected the dominant conviction in both German states at the time, albeit one rooted in different premises, that it was necessary to 'break with the past' and to 'build a new Germany'. In East Germany, the destruction of many surviving buildings even continued after 1945.

Many fundamental processes have taken place in Germany since 1990. One of them has been an effort to 'heal the wounds' of the tragic 20th century, including through the large-scale reconstruction of individual monuments and

entire historic ensembles. This forms part of a broader phenomenon of ‘repairing’ and harmonising the architectural fabric of German cities, above all in the eastern federal states. Over the past 35 years, most of the historic heritage has been restored and many destroyed monuments have been rebuilt, which was often accompanied by difficult public debates. Nowhere else in Europe after 1989 has seen a reconstruction of monuments in terms of scope, ambition and financial resources comparable to that undertaken in Germany. In this sense, the country has been the continent’s largest reconstruction site. It appears that only two other states, Hungary and Poland, have also seen a significant reconstruction of historic buildings since the fall of communism, though on a decidedly smaller scale.²

In Western European countries and the United States German reconstruction and the reinterpretation of approaches to material heritage have already generated an extensive body of literature. In Germany itself, researchers have devoted considerable attention to these issues over the past two decades.

The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the process of monument reconstruction in Germany after 1990. The first part examines the scale of destruction suffered by German cities during the Second World War and the fundamentally different approaches which the two German states took to post-war reconstruction.

The second part outlines the attitude of the reunified Germany towards its material heritage at the level of the federal and state governments, and of society. Its five subsections present the cases most significant for assessing the reconstruction process, including measures undertaken in Dresden, Berlin and Potsdam, as well as revitalisation and reconstruction projects in selected cities in eastern Germany and examples of reconstruction in the western federal states. Each section discusses the key public debates and controversies that emerged in the course of these processes.

The third and final part brings together the principal findings of this study. It also argues that the reconstruction process, which gained momentum and a certain ‘confidence’ since German reunification, reflected a German aspiration to go back to ‘normal’, a desire to overcome historical trauma and to reclaim its identity at both the local community and national level, as well as a renewed sense of pride in being German.

2 Hungary is implementing the National Hauszmann Programme, which envisages the reconstruction between 2016 and 2030 of several buildings on Budapest’s Castle Hill that were destroyed during the Second World War. The cost of the project is estimated at approximately €2 billion. V. Gulyas, R. Jefferson, ‘A Rogue Leader’s Plan for the Heart of Budapest’, Bloomberg, 26 March 2022, [bloomberg.com](https://www.bloomberg.com).

Germany's Postwar (Non-)Reconstruction

1. Monuments in ruins

As a result of Allied bombing, known as the *Bombenkrieg*, and ground fighting, most large German cities were partially destroyed. Cologne, Nuremberg, Hamburg, Dortmund and Dresden suffered particularly severe losses, with large parts of their historic centres very heavily damaged.³ Munich, Leipzig and Berlin were affected to a lesser degree, although around 40–50% of their buildings lay in ruins. Smaller towns and cities remained in better condition or were even untouched, especially those without major industrial facilities or without a significant role as transport hubs.

According to post-war estimates, 20% of all residential buildings in Germany were destroyed. The scale of destruction varied depending on the region and the number and importance of the strategic targets located there. North Rhine-Westphalia suffered the greatest losses, with around 25% of its buildings devastated, while Thuringia experienced the least damage at 3%.⁴ There are no detailed data on the proportion of German monuments which did not survive the war, but it is known that many symbolic structures were among them, including churches, palaces and public buildings. German historical heritage suffered greatly, although to a much lower extent than that of Poland, Ukraine or Belarus. The scale of the destruction of the cities, towns and villages in the lands of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, with their centuries-old cultural heritage, had no parallel in modern European history.

The two German states that emerged after the war adopted different approaches to the problem of destroyed heritage. East Germany opted for a break with history and, with few exceptions, clearly opposed the reconstruction of ruined city centres, at times even demolishing damaged monuments that could have been restored. The alternative was a new socialist architecture.

In West Germany, reconstruction was also approached with limited enthusiasm, as it was widely regarded at the time as 'old-fashioned'. However, attitudes varied depending on the region or even the city, owing to the democratic local self-government system. Reconstructions did take place, and in most cases, unlike in East Germany, the historical urban layout was preserved.

³ R. Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe 1939–1945*, London 2013, p. 233.

⁴ Ch. Halbmeier, C. Schröder, 'The Long-Term Implications of Destruction During the Second World War on Private Wealth in Germany', *Journal of Economic Growth* 2025, no. 30, p. 162; *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey: summary report (European War)*, 30 September 1945, p. 6; F. Jacobs, 'The horrors of World War II air war, in one stark map', *Big Think*, 6 February 2023, bigthink.com.



■ Lübeck Cathedral in flames during the Allied air raid of 29 February 1942, in which part of the old town was destroyed.

■ View of the ruined city centre of Cologne with the cathedral almost intact, 24 April 1945.

Thus, East and West Germany shared the same approach, albeit for different reasons, which involved generally refraining from historical reconstruction, distancing themselves from the past and an effort to develop new identities. A rebuilding of historic centres on the scale seen in Warsaw or Gdańsk was unequivocally rejected. In neither of the two German states did anyone after the war utter words comparable to those spoken in 1946 by Jan Zachwatowicz, head of the Department of Monumental Architecture at the Bureau for the Reconstruction of the Capital and General Conservator of Monuments from 1945 to 1957:

As we cannot accept the stripping away of our cultural monuments, we shall reconstruct them, we shall rebuild them from their foundations, in order to pass on to future generations, if not their authentic substance, then at least their exact form. (...). A sense of responsibility towards future generations demands the reconstruction of what has been destroyed, a full reconstruction carried out in conscious awareness of the tragic conservation falsehood involved. For monuments are not needed solely by connoisseurs, but are evocative documents of history in the service of the masses.⁵

2. East Germany – architecture as an expression of socialism

Communist East Germany viewed the wartime destruction as an opportunity for the new political system. As a rule, the government refrained from reconstructing the vast majority of historic buildings, including many of nationwide symbolic significance such as the Hohenzollern Palace in Berlin and the Frauenkirche in Dresden. They even completed the demolition of partially damaged structures and entire quarters of old town buildings that could have been restored.

The East German government's fervour to build socialism entailed the introduction of a new architecture intended to serve as one of the instruments of social revolution.⁶ Cities were to be thoroughly reshaped in a socialist spirit imposed across the Eastern bloc. This required a break with Germany's past, including its architectural heritage. The most frequently rebuilt monuments were churches. The Zwinger palace complex in Dresden was one of the few secular buildings selected for reconstruction.

On 27 July 1950, the East German government adopted 16 principles of urban planning which stipulated that cities must manifest the socialist system and its 'progressive traditions'. In the following years, these principles would

⁵ J. Zachwatowicz, 'Program i zasady konserwacji zabytków', *op. cit.*, pp. 48, 52.

⁶ K. von Beyme, 'Reconstruction in the German Democratic Republic' [in:] J.M. Diefendorf (ed.), *Rebuilding Europe's bombed cities*, New York 1990, p. 191.

shape the character of the main urban centres. In 1951, a five-year National Reconstruction Plan was adopted, providing for the redevelopment of 53 destroyed cities. Each would feature a large central square with broad avenues intersecting it, designed to accommodate political demonstrations. The model clearly drew on Stalinist architecture in the Soviet Union. The first and flagship example was Stalinallee in East Berlin, constructed between 1949 and 1960 and renamed Karl-Marx-Allee in 1961 – the name it retains today.

The traditional roles of city centres were reversed. Their commercial and functional purposes were marginalised so that they could become political and administrative hubs of civic activity. This led to the loss of spatial coherence in cities rebuilt in accordance with ideological directives.

From the 1960s onwards, East Germany shifted towards modernism. The most striking example was the construction of large-panel prefabricated apartment blocks built according to a similar design, which can still be seen today from Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky to Magdeburg on the Elbe. In many cities, these buildings replaced the destroyed bourgeois townhouses in historic centres and inner-city districts. Beyond making different urban centres resemble each other, this created the impression of disharmony and a lack of a sense of warmth.

In the early post-war years, partially damaged churches were rebuilt on the initiative of religious communities. This usually took many years and applied to many, though by no means all, places of worship. The fate of East German religious buildings is illustrated by the case of Rostock, where four major Gothic churches had stood before the war. St Mary's Church survived the war largely intact. St James's Church was not rebuilt, and its ruins were demolished between 1957 and 1960. At St Peter's Church, the tower collapsed and was only rebuilt in 1994, while the vaulting fell in and was replaced many years after the war with a new wooden structure. Finally, St Nicholas's Church stood as a secured ruin until 1976, when its reconstruction began, which was completed in 1994.

The eastern section of the Unter den Linden boulevard in Berlin was one of the flagship East German reconstruction projects. This saw the restoration of several public buildings: the baroque Zeughaus armoury between 1948 and 1965, the State Opera between 1951 and 1955, the Neue Wache between 1957 and 1960 and the main building of Humboldt University between 1949 and 1962. The intention was to fill the reconstructed buildings with the ideological content of the new system. In 1953, at the opening of an exhibition at the Museum of German History housed in the Zeughaus, Fred Oelßner, the Central Committee secretary for propaganda of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED), declared: "Today we are opening an exhibition devoted to Karl Marx in the

former Zeughaus. Let it serve as a symbol of the victory of Marxism over the Hohenzollern legend”.⁷

The fact that the buildings on Berlin’s Museum Island had been 70% destroyed meant they posed a major financial and conservation challenge. Reconstruction of some of them began in 1950 and lasted several decades. The best-preserved Kaiser Friedrich Museum partly reopened in 1954 as the Bode Museum, fully reopening in 1987. The most severely damaged Neues Museum was not rebuilt during the East German period, having to wait until German reunification for its reconstruction.

Furthermore, East Germany was engaged in the process of a destructive iconoclasm which even included significant monuments. In 1960, the damaged Gothic church in Wismar was blown up, leaving only its 80-metre tower. In 1962, Dresden’s oldest church was demolished. This was justified ideologically by First Secretary Walter Ulbricht’s assertion that “the socialist city has no need of Gothic churches”.⁸ Residential architecture also fell victim, as illustrated by the demolition of Schloss Putbus on the island of Rügen in 1962. Perhaps the most drastic case was the 1968 demolition of the 13th-century University Church in Leipzig, which had survived the war intact. These are only a few examples. The removal of the ruins of churches that could have been rebuilt continued.

From the 1970s onwards, East Germany experienced a certain ideological ‘thaw’, which made it possible to embark on the reconstruction of selected sections of historic city centres. The best-known example was the Nikolaiviertel in Berlin, which dates back to the Middle Ages and which was rebuilt by 1987 to mark the 750th anniversary of the city’s founding. However, only some buildings were faithfully reconstructed with most receiving no more than a historical gloss.

In 1975, reconstruction began on Berlin Cathedral, which had been severely damaged in 1944. The design was simplified and included a significant reduction in the height of the four corner towers with their domes. The Denkmalskirche, a memorial church serving as the burial site of members of the Hohenzollern family and attached to the cathedral on the northern side as a large apse, was demolished for ideological reasons. Renovation of the cathedral was not completed until 1993. Symbolic of the ambivalent character of East Germany’s later historical policy was the 1980 decision to restore the equestrian statue of Frederick the Great, dating from 1851, to its place on Unter

7 M. Colla, ‘Prussian Palimpsests: Historic Architecture and Urban Spaces in East Germany, 1945–1961’, *Central European History* 2017, vol. 50, no. 2, p. 199.

8 M. van der Meulen, ‘The Construction of a National Patrimony? Restoration of Gothic Cathedrals and Churches in the Polish People’s Republic’ [in:] B. Buettner, W.J. Diebold (eds.), *Medieval Art, Modern Politics*, Berlin–Boston 2025, p. 141.

den Linden. The monument had survived the war but was removed to storage in 1950 and, from 1963, stood in front of Charlottenhof Palace in Potsdam.

3. West Germany – reconstruction in a modernist form

After 1945, there were debates in Poland over whether destroyed monuments could be rebuilt, partially reconstructed or even left in ruins as historical memorials; Warsaw's Old Town was included in these discussions. Professor Jan Zachwatowicz was among those who, as it turned out, successfully argued that reconstruction was possible. His colleague, Professor Piotr Biegański, co-organiser of Warsaw Reconstruction Office and Chief Conservator of Monuments in Warsaw from 1947 to 1954, later recalled: "Looking at Warsaw, we often had doubts as to whether this reconstruction could really be carried out and whether it was feasible at all".⁹

Given the immense conservation and financial challenges facing a devastated country, the reconstruction of Warsaw's Old and New Towns, as well as the buildings along the Krakowskie Przedmieście and Nowy Świat streets, was pioneering on a global scale. Years later, Zachwatowicz recalled: "We undoubtedly fascinated, but also shocked, the conservation community in Europe by reconstructing historic buildings in their original form. Our concept of preserving the Old Town as a symbol of Warsaw's history, as our anchor of national identification, initially gave rise to many doubts in the conservation world".¹⁰

Similar debates in post-war West Germany led to different conclusions. The concept of monument reconstruction was mostly criticised. This stemmed not only from the scale of the challenge, as the western part of the country, owing to its greater industrialisation, suffered more extensive destruction. 90% of the old town buildings in Cologne, Münster and Nuremberg were destroyed, as were 70% in Frankfurt am Main and 50–60% in Hamburg, Stuttgart and Düsseldorf. The dominance which the opponents of historical reconstruction – the 'modernists' – had over its supporters, the 'conservatives', also reflected a conviction that a break with the tainted past was necessary in order to avoid creating the impression of a continuity with the previous German state. The West German debate is well captured by the words of Otto Bartning, one of the most influential German architects of the 20th century and a theorist of modernist architecture and co-founder of the Bauhaus, who stated in 1946 that "reconstruction is not possible for technical and financial reasons – what am I saying? – it is not possible for spiritual reasons".¹¹

⁹ 'Odbudowa Starego Miasta w Warszawie – w obronie dziedzictwa narodowego', *Dzieje.pl*, 21 June 2017.

¹⁰ 'Jan Zachwatowicz. Udaremnił zamach Niemców na kulturę polską', *Polskie Radio*, 4 March 2025, polskieradio24.pl.

¹¹ T. Markiewicz, 'Burzyć czy rekonstruować', *Ochrona Zabytków* 2006, no. 4, p. 105.

The post-1945 West German discussion of whether or not to rebuild is reflected in the dispute over the Goethe House in Frankfurt am Main, completely destroyed in 1944 along with most of the Old Town. Leading architects and art historians opposed its reconstruction, arguing that “destroyed heritage cannot be reconstructed, it can only be created anew for new tasks in a new form”. In a widely discussed article, the well-known publicist Walter Dirks firmly protested against the idea of rebuilding, stating that “the acceptance of fate is an attitude worthy of Goethe”.¹² Reconstruction was supported by such figures as Hermann Hesse and Karl Jaspers. After nearly two years of debate, in which arguments about ‘falsehood and deception’ clashed with those about ‘authenticity’, it was decided that the building would be faithfully reconstructed, and this was completed in 1951.

This was, however, an exception to the predominant rule. In most cases in West Germany, the progressives prevailed, opting to renew cities in a modernist spirit, thus abandoning reconstruction. Interestingly, even during the Third Reich, when debates took place within Nazi circles about the future reconstruction of cities bombed by the Allies, influential voices had already emerged calling for a break with the past and rebuilding in a ‘new spirit’.¹³

In 1947, dozens of German architects, planners, artists, intellectuals and journalists signed a document entitled *An Appeal: Fundamental Demands*, calling for a rebuilding of German cities which would not be guided by old forms but rather for “new tasks and in a new form”. The manifesto asserted that the “visible collapse” of Germany was merely an expression of spiritual decline and called for a “new architectural beginning for a new era”. This, in turn – as they claimed – required refraining from reconstructing destroyed historical heritage. In the surviving small towns, described as the “last remnants of German history”, it was necessary to “find a living unity between the old structure and modern residential areas and industrial buildings”.

The manifesto *An Appeal: Fundamental Demands* was a call to create modernist architecture as part of the reconstruction of German cities, in order to break with the past and not to create a ‘false continuity’. Some planners even saw the destruction of major cities as an opportunity, arguing that vast industrial urban centres had become a “moribund social form of human organisation”.¹⁴ In a paradoxical way, the approach to urban planning in West Germany shared a common element with that being applied in East Germany,

¹² H. Riebsamen, ‘Es lag die Welt in Scherben’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 August 2009, faz.net.

¹³ R. Leick, M. Schreiber, H.-U. Stoldt, ‘A New Look at Germany’s Postwar Reconstruction’, *Spiegel International*, 10 August 2010, spiegel.de.

¹⁴ O. Bartning et al., ‘An Appeal: Fundamental Demands’, *Art in Translation* 2023, vol. 15, no. 1; J.M. Diefendorf, ‘New Perspectives on a Rebuilt Europe’ [in:] J.M. Diefendorf (ed.), *Rebuilding Europe’s bombed cities*, op. cit., pp. 6, 8–9.

since both viewed it as a form of social engineering aimed at improving living standards. This dominant approach in West Germany resulted in a model of urban reconstruction which included historic city centres and usually preserved the pre-war street layout and original building scale, but which erected new structures based on contemporary designs completely unrelated to their predecessors, with modernist façades and interiors designed in line with the latest engineering solutions.¹⁵ Cologne, Nuremberg, Hamburg and most other large West German cities were rebuilt according to these principles. Post-war planners initially also opposed preserving the old urban fabric, including narrow old town streets, but they ultimately had to yield to strong public pressure.

One exception to this West German model of reconstruction concerned historic churches, often Romanesque or Gothic, which were largely rebuilt in accordance with their original designs. This followed lengthy debates and disputes in which architects and planners advocated constructing entirely new buildings. Pressure from local communities, who believed that churches should remain symbols of historical heritage, proved to be the decisive factor. Some, including St Alban's in Cologne, the Aegidienkirche in Hanover, the Hauptkirche St Nikolai in Hamburg, the Franzosenkirche in Halberstadt and Berlin's Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church and Klosterkirche, were preserved as war memorials.

A similar situation applied to historic town halls, city palaces and buildings of exceptional artistic significance, which were also usually reconstructed. Examples of these included the mansions in Karlsruhe, Stuttgart and Würzburg, as well as Charlottenburg Palace in West Berlin. The latter, a magnificent baroque palace that had suffered severe wartime damage, faced the risk of sharing the fate of the City Palace and Monbijou Palace, whose ruins were demolished by the authorities of East Berlin in 1951 and 1959 respectively, despite protests from residents and art historians. Decisive in saving Charlottenburg was the determination of museum officials, and its faithful reconstruction had been completed by 1957. In West Germany, however, some partially ruined residential buildings were demolished. Perhaps the most high-profile case was the removal of the ruins of the Brunswick Palace in 1960.

The general tendency against the reconstruction of historic buildings did, though, have exceptions. The largest city to decide on rebuilding a significant part of its historic centre while largely preserving its original appearance was Munich. Thanks to efforts by residents and the local authorities, many monuments were first saved from complete demolition and then fully or

15 K. Oshemkova, 'Cologne. Reconstruction as preservation of urban identity', PRAGMATIKA.MEDIA, 6 June 2022.

partially reconstructed to their pre-war form.¹⁶ The process was completed in 1958, although the reconstruction of several of Munich's most important monuments continued much longer. In the case of the Residenz, the seat of the Bavarian kings, work was not completed until the 1980s. As a result, Munich gained a reputation as one of the most carefully rebuilt and harmonious cities in Germany.

Partial reconstruction also took place in Münster in North Rhine-Westphalia, where by 1958 the buildings along the Prinzipalmarkt were meticulously rebuilt using original materials, an undertaking unique in Germany. The restoration of other major monuments required more time: the baroque Erbdrostenhof Palace was completed in 1968 and the late Romanesque St Paul's Cathedral was completed 30 years after the war. Other examples of successful comprehensive and faithful reconstruction include Freiburg and Freudenstadt, both in Baden-Württemberg.¹⁷ This did not alter the broader trend, however, as modernism prevailed in the post-war reconstruction of West German cities and left a lasting mark on their appearance.

The gradual departure from the previous dogmatic and ideological approach to monuments in East Germany in the 1970s coincided with the rehabilitation of traditional urban layouts in West Germany. As a result, more projects involving the reconstruction of historic buildings were launched at that time than in the first three post-war decades. Symbolic projects included the market square in Hildesheim in Lower Saxony, rebuilt between 1984 and 1989, and part of the old town in Frankfurt am Main.¹⁸ At the same time, greater appreciation and protection began to be extended to late 19th- and early 20th-century townhouses, previously regarded as buildings of limited value. As a result, some were renovated, including in Kreuzberg in West Berlin.

The great reconstruction of monuments after 1990

1. Reunified Germany and its material heritage

On 4 October 1990, the day after the official reunification of Germany, Chancellor Helmut Kohl delivered a speech at the first historic sitting of the Bundestag. At the very outset, he referred to Germany's historical heritage located in the territory of the former East Germany, stating:

16 G.D. Rosenfeld, *Munich and Memory: Architecture, Monuments, and the Legacy of the Third Reich*, Berkeley-Los Angeles 2000, pp. 15, 27–32.

17 R. Leick, M. Schreiber, H.-U. Stoldt, 'A New Look at Germany's Postwar Reconstruction', *op. cit.*

18 T. Markiewicz, 'Burzyć czy rekonstruować', *op. cit.*, p. 105.

The castles in Schwerin and Potsdam, the magnificent sculptures in Naumburg Cathedral, the Semper Opera in Dresden – all these places are symbols of one, shared Germany. It was at Wartburg Castle that Martin Luther translated the Bible for all Germans, and Weimar became synonymous throughout the world with German classicism. We rejoice that these places of our shared history and culture are once again accessible to all.

As the meticulous transcript records, these words were interrupted by sustained applause from all parts of the plenary chamber. Kohl continued:

This heritage, which is at the same time European heritage, imposes a shared obligation upon us all. Above all, we must ensure that cultural sites of European rank located in the territory of the former GDR retain their significance for both Germany and Europe. I am aware of the responsibility that rests with the federal government – irrespective of the fundamental competences of the Länder – for the continued existence of these sites. We shall have to act in accordance with this responsibility.¹⁹

Kohl, contributed greatly to the restoration of German unity and called for the swiftest possible integration of the country's western and eastern parts in social and economic terms. At the same time, he maintained that the cultural unity of the German nation had never disappeared. As his later actions demonstrated, however, Kohl regarded the reconstruction of a shared symbolic memory and its material expression as at least equally important. In what can be seen as a programmatic address, he announced that the reunified German state, meaning the federal authorities, would assume responsibility for the restoration and preservation of sites connected with history and, in many cases, though he did not state this explicitly, also for their reconstruction.

Several months earlier, on 19 December 1989, Helmut Kohl visited East Germany, which was then experiencing a democratic revolution that would lead to its first free elections in March 1990. He deliberately chose to deliver his key speech before the ruins of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, the baroque church destroyed during the war and left unrestored, a work of major importance for German cultural history. Addressing around 100,000 East Germans who had gathered and welcomed him enthusiastically, the West German Chancellor emphasised the significance of the church's ruins, describing them as "a place of great tradition" and underscoring the "memory of the suffering and the victims of this beautiful, old German city". Weighing his words and remaining aware that the immediate future remained uncertain, he declared that his goal "remains, if history permits, the unity of our nation" and that "this hour

19 Deutscher Bundestag. Plenarprotokoll 11/228, 4 October 1990, pp. 18020–18021.

will come if we work together towards it". He concluded with references to "one German family" and the words "May God bless our German fatherland".²⁰

This speech – one of Kohl's most famous – was intended to highlight, on the one hand, the still palpable social and political consequences of the war for the German nation and its suffering and, on the other, the prospect of a new beginning and renewal. After reunification, Kohl personally became involved in efforts to rebuild the Frauenkirche in Dresden, supporting public fundraising and encouraging companies to co-finance this technically and financially complex undertaking. This issue is discussed in more detail below.

The reconstruction of this symbolic church was accompanied by large-scale conservation and the rebuilding not only of individual monuments in the former East Germany but also of entire historic urban spaces. Kohl was fully aware of the importance of these efforts, as reflected in his remarks in Quedlinburg on 6 January 1990 during a spontaneous visit to the East German town. He pledged, among other things, to secure funding to save its exceptionally valuable but severely dilapidated old town.

The eastern part of the reunified Germany required vast investment in infrastructure, economic development, social policy and the renewal of cities whose urban order had been disrupted. Nearly half a century after the end of the Second World War, many cities still bore architectural voids. In place of unreconstructed historic centres there were empty squares or the ruins of buildings. As noted, in communist East Germany, unlike in West Germany, even public buildings of historical significance were often not rebuilt.

In the programmes adopted after 1990 by the Bonn government for the modernisation and reconstruction of the eastern regions, federal funds played a central role under the *Aufbau Ost* initiative. These included resources for the restoration of cultural heritage, including historic churches, palaces and public buildings. The Urban Development Support programme (*Städtebauförderung*) also proved crucial, providing co-financing for projects to preserve and conserve historic city centres. In 1998, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder decided to create the office of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media which would be at the ministerial level. The new office was tasked with coordinating Germany's cultural policy at the federal level, an unprecedented development considering the fact that culture had previously been the exclusive competence of the *Länder*.

20 Rede des Bundeskanzlers auf der Kundgebung vor der Frauenkirche in Dresden, *Die Bundesregierung*, 22 December 1989, bundesregierung.de. See H. Kohl, *Pragnąłem jedności Niemiec*. Kai Diekmann, Ralf Georg Reuth relacjonują rozmowy z kanclerzem, Warszawa 1999, p. 129.

German reunification was extremely expensive. According to estimates, around €2 trillion had been spent on it by 2014.²¹ The proportion of these funds which was allocated to conservation and monument reconstruction projects is unknown, though. Between 1991 and 2016, the federal government spent €2.4 billion under the Städtebauförderung programme alone to co-finance monument-related projects in 238 East German cities. Since 2017, annual expenditure under this programme for these purposes has amounted to €110 million. In addition to federal funds, resources for the conservation and reconstruction of monuments were provided by the eastern and western Länder, as well as by municipalities, private donors, businesses and public fundraising campaigns. While the total cannot be precisely calculated, it may be assumed that, since 1990, spending on the preservation, restoration and reconstruction of material cultural heritage in eastern Germany has reached into the tens of billions of euros.²²

The reunified state decisively challenged the post-1945 paradigm that it was neither possible nor necessary to recreate historic urban layouts destroyed during the war. After 1990, a fundamentally different conviction prevailed, similar to that seen in Poland after 1945: namely that Germany could not come to terms with the annihilation of a significant part of its material cultural heritage and that this had proved to be an essential component of national identity. Newly constructed buildings, shaped by the spirit and assumptions of modernism, were therefore regarded as insufficient. Over time, the trend initiated by Kohl ceased to generate controversy. Reconstruction projects were usually preceded by debates and disputes over specific designs and financing, but the decision was almost invariably to implement them. This also applied to the reconstruction of public buildings with problematic historical associations. Dissenting voices did of course emerge, most often from the defenders of modernist architecture who opposed demolishing post-war structures to make way for their historical predecessors. Arguments were also raised about the ‘falsehood of reconstruction’ and ‘inauthentic replicas’. Reconstruction was furthermore linked to an important debate about German guilt and responsibility and thus carried a moral dimension.²³

21 ‘Deutsche Einheit hat fast zwei Billionen Euro gekostet’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 May 2014, faz.net.

22 It is worth noting in this context that Germany allocated only symbolic funds for the preservation of German cultural heritage in the countries of Central Europe. For further details, see W. Konończuk, ‘ANEKS: Polityka RFN wobec dziedzictwa niemieckiego w Polsce po 1989 roku’ [in:] *idem*, P. Kosiewski, *Endangered heritage: Polish cultural goods in Ukraine and Belarus*, OSW, Warszawa 2020, osw.waw.pl, pp. 165–173.

23 E. von Engelberg-Dočkal, H.-R. Meier, ‘Traditional rebuilding in Germany after the Second World War’ [in:] J. Bold, P. Larkham, R. Pickard, *Authentic Reconstruction. Authenticity, Architecture and the Built Heritage*, Bloomsbury 2018, pp. 29–31.

Overall, though, a consensus emerged in Germany that material heritage plays an important role in contemporary national identity. Even Jürgen Habermas, one of Germany's most influential intellectuals and a well-known critic of the traditional forms of national identity, wrote in 1989 that "the bonds of constitutional patriotism with these democratic principles must be nurtured by the heritage of cultural traditions that are compatible with them".²⁴ In doing so, he developed his earlier argument in the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* from 1981 that the material remnants of history are not merely 'dead objects', but key participants in any social dialogue about values, the past and identity. It is therefore unsurprising that the left wing of German politics, which often called Kohl's and the CDU/CSU's talk of the 'German nation' 'reactionary nationalism', nevertheless proved more open to discussions on German tradition and culture.²⁵

2. Dresden – from an 'unattainable dream' to a reclaimed identity

"There were sounds like giant footsteps above. Those were sticks of high-explosive bombs. The giants walked and walked (...) There was a firestorm out there. Dresden was one big flame. The one flame ate everything organic, everything that would burn".²⁶ The 20-year-old American soldier Kurt Vonnegut, who years later immortalised this moment in one of the most important anti-war books in literary history, had been in German captivity for two months. Together with a group of other prisoners of war, he was working in a slaughterhouse near the centre of Dresden, which had a population of 600,000.

A few pages earlier he had written: "Every other big city in Germany had been bombed and burned ferociously. Dresden had not suffered so much as a cracked windowpane. Sirens went off every day, screamed like hell, and people went down into cellars and listened to radios there. The planes were always bound for someplace else – Leipzig, Chemnitz, Plauen, places like that. So it goes".²⁷ Yet on 13–15 February 1945, Dresden, regarded as one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, the 'Florence on the Elbe', with its rich artistic and cultural traditions, was 85% destroyed in Allied bombing raids. Vonnegut survived the air raids in a natural shelter beneath the slaughterhouse to write: "When the Americans and their guards did come out, the sky was black with smoke. The sun was an angry little pinhead. Dresden was like the moon now, nothing but minerals. The stones were hot. Everybody else in the neighbourhood was dead. So it goes". Around 25,000 residents were killed. Magnificent

²⁴ J. Habermas, *The new conservatism: cultural criticism and the historian's debate*, Cambridge 1989, p. 262.

²⁵ J. James, 'Undoing Trauma: Reconstructing the Church of Our Lady in Dresden', *Ethos* 2006, vol. 34, no. 2, p. 251.

²⁶ K. Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, New York, Dell Publishing 1991, p. 177.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

monuments lay in ruins, including the Protestant Frauenkirche, one of the most splendid and tallest works of German Baroque architecture at 91 metres. Dresden occupies a special place in the history of German wartime destruction and of post-1990 reconstruction.

The East German authorities showed no interest in Dresden's reconstruction and sought to build a model socialist metropolis on the ruins of the 'bourgeois' city. In 1946, its communist mayor Walter Weidauer outlined a post-war vision intended to guide the city for decades. In a speech that year, he declared that rebuilding Dresden was an "unattainable dream" and that the city "will not be reconstructed as a showcase for art historians to study the architecture and styles of past eras. Nor is it to become a great museum, but a city for progressive people, with all that this entails".²⁸

Many partially damaged buildings that could have been saved were 'cleared away' in the first post-war years, a process sometimes described as Dresden's 'second destruction'. In 1953, a vast empty central square was created on the site of the former old town's heart. The destruction of the surviving historic urban fabric continued into the late 1960s, when numerous buildings which had been burned out in 1945, including townhouses, public buildings and churches, were demolished.²⁹

The few monuments that were rebuilt included the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, completed in 1965, and the Zwinger Palace, one of the key works of European Baroque architecture. The decision to reconstruct the latter was taken as early as September 1945, an unprecedented step, and the project was fully completed in 1963, with the famous Dresden Gallery reopening seven years earlier. Despite initial plans and repeated appeals from residents, however, the East German authorities in 1966 decided to leave the Frauenkirche as a permanent ruin serving as an anti-Western war memorial. An inscription at the site referred to 'Anglo-American terror', incorporating the church's ruins into the Cold War narrative.

Dresden played a pioneering role in the debates that emerged in East Germany during the 1980s regarding the need to reconstruct destroyed monuments. Increasingly strong voices called for the **rebuilding of the Frauenkirche**, and were formalised in autumn 1989 in the civic initiative Society for the Promotion of the Reconstruction of the Frauenkirche in Dresden (*Gesellschaft zur Förderung des Wiederaufbaus der Frauenkirche Dresden*). A section of East German public and some intellectuals continued to argue that the church

28 Source: K. Marek, *Rekonstruktion und Kulturgesellschaft. Stadtbildreparatur in Dresden, Frankfurt am Main und Berlin als Ausdruck der zeitgenössischen Suche nach Identität*, 11 February 2009, a doctoral thesis defended at the University of Kassel, p. 31.

29 J. Paul, 'Reconstruction of the City Centre of Dresden: Planning and Building during the 1950s' [in:] J.M. Diefendorf (ed.), *Rebuilding Europe's bombed cities*, op. cit., p. 173.

should remain a ruin as a symbol of collective German guilt (*kollektive Schuld*). On 12 February 1990, a civic 'Appeal from Dresden' was published, calling for German and international efforts to rebuild what had once been the city's most important church, leading to the establishment of the Society for the Promotion of the Reconstruction of the Frauenkirche.³⁰

At the time of German reunification, Dresden remained a city with a partially unrestored centre marked by empty squares. Only fragments of surviving buildings in peripheral districts testified to its former splendour. The urban landscape, scarred by unhealed wartime wounds, the memory of mass casualties and Kohl's widely noted speech before the ruins of the Frauenkirche at the end of 1989 all reinforced a conviction which had been already present in both West and East Germany, namely that Dresden was one of the principal symbols of the *Bombenkrieg*, the area bombings of German cities. This perception had a significant influence on Berlin's memory policy regarding this aspect of the Second World War. For more information on this topic, see the chapter by Wojciech Pięciak.

The focus of the reunified Germany on the Frauenkirche, the active public debate in which a large majority of residents supported reconstruction, as well as the intense discussions among experts (whose views were divided) led to a decision on 18 March 1991 by the synod of the Protestant Church of Saxony, which owned the site, to rebuild the church, with 43 votes in favour and 26 against.³¹ In February 1992, Dresden's city council adopted a similar resolution, recommending that the rebuilt church should retain its message as a site of remembrance of the tragedy of war.

Between 1992 and 1994, the ruins of the Frauenkirche were dismantled. During this process, 8,390 original stone fragments were selected and examined in order to identify those suitable for reuse. The actual reconstruction began in 1994 and proved to be an exceptionally complex engineering and conservation undertaking. The work relied in part on paintings by the 18th-century Italian artist Bernardo Bellotto, known as Canaletto, a master of architectural detail who depicted numerous views of Dresden, including the Frauenkirche shortly after it was built.³² Approximately one third of the building material used consisted of original elements, which are visible in the reconstructed structure due to their darker colour.

30 'The »Appeal from Dresden« and how he was echoed', Frauenkirche Dresden, frauenkirche-dresden.de.

31 K. Marek, *Rekonstruktion und Kulturgesellschaft. Stadtbildreparatur in Dresden, Frankfurt am Main und Berlin als Ausdruck der zeitgenössischen Suche nach Identität*, op. cit., p. 36.

32 Canaletto's paintings depicting views of Warsaw also proved useful in the reconstruction of that city's monuments after 1945.

Securing funding presented another major challenge. In 1994, the Free State of Saxony, the City of Dresden and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony each contributed three million Deutsche Marks to establish the Frauenkirche Foundation (*Stiftung Frauenkirche e.V.*), which became the owner of the site and subsequently of the rebuilt church. The total cost of the project exceeded €197 million, of which the government of Saxony provided €26.5 million, the federal government €23 million and the City of Dresden €11.8 million. The remaining funds were raised through private donations, including a contribution from the German biologist and Nobel laureate Günter Blobel, who donated the entirety of his 1999 award, as well as from businesses, notably Dresdner Bank, and from the governments of the United States and the United Kingdom.³³ The model of financial cooperation developed during the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche, involving federal and Land authorities, the city and private and corporate donors, was subsequently replicated in the rebuilding of other symbolic monuments in Germany.

Initially, the residents of Dresden and Saxony were somewhat sceptical about the idea of rebuilding the Frauenkirche, but support for the project grew as work progressed.³⁴ In surveys conducted by the Dresden University of Technology at the turn of 2003 and 2004, as many as 80% of respondents in Saxony stated that reconstruction was the right decision, 12% were undecided and only 8% thought it was wrong.³⁵ The evolution of public opinion in Dresden towards this ambitious undertaking can be seen as typical of many subsequent monument reconstruction projects in Germany.

On 30 October 2005, a three-day ceremony began to consecrate the rebuilt church. Its construction had been completed a year ahead of schedule, which was unusual for a project of this scale. During the ceremony, President Horst Köhler said:

Anyone who has lost faith in themselves will regain it at the sight of the rebuilt Frauenkirche. (...) The reconstruction has changed Dresden, changed Saxony, changed Germany and shown us that our country needs more than just industrial plants, roads and research institutes. (...) What has been achieved in Dresden should serve as encouragement for the whole of Germany. The reconstruction of the Frauenkirche is an achievement of all Germany.³⁶

³³ Wiederaufbau, Frauenkirche Dresden, frauenkirche.de.

³⁴ K. Marek, 'Rekonstruktion! Warum?', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, no. 17, 26 April 2010, bpb.de, p. 25.

³⁵ 'Ausgewählte Ergebnisse der Umfrage zum Wiederaufbau der Dresdner Frauenkirche', tu-dresden.de, source: web.archive.org.

³⁶ Ansprache von Bundespräsident Horst Köhler zur Eröffnung der Dresdner Frauenkirche, Bundespräsidialamt, 30 October 2005, bundespraesident.de.

The event was conducted in the manner of a state ceremony. It was attended by the outgoing Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and his successor Angela Merkel, who would take office three weeks later. There were also representatives of all the political parties, churches, the armed forces and numerous international delegations. Around 60,000 people gathered around the rebuilt church, and millions of Germans watched the ceremony on television.

Given how deeply the Frauenkirche was embedded in the country's history, raising it from the ruins carried a meaning in the German collective memory that extended far beyond a physical reconstruction. It became a powerful symbol of reversing Germany's cultural loss through the recovery of its historical heritage, as well as a symbol of internal reconciliation and the reunification of the nation's two parts. For many Germans, it also marked a new beginning for a new Germany. As the American scholar Jason James has written, the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche "participates in a broader effort to fashion a redemptive form of Germanness defined in terms of cultural heritage. This effort [replaces] a stigmatised past with an ahistorical and apolitical one..."³⁷ Heidrun Kubiessa, in turn, argued that "the media spectacle surrounding the reconstruction of the church demonstrated how each stage of the process was used as a symbol within Germany's programme of national identity politics".³⁸

There is little doubt that the reconstruction of the Frauenkirche helped to overcome Germany's post-war trauma and became an important 'signpost' guiding subsequent approaches to many other monuments of varying symbolic weight that would be rebuilt, and not only in eastern Germany.

Another building reconstructed in Dresden in the 1990s was the baroque **Taschenberg Palace**, located next to the Zwinger and originally built by King Augustus II the Strong for his favourite, Anna Constantia von Brockdorff, known as Countess Cosel. Józef Ignacy Kraszewski, a nineteenth-century Polish writer, who spent many years in Dresden, described the monument as follows: "This building was a masterpiece of art. It was called the Palace of the Four Seasons, for there were different apartments for the different seasons; cool rooms for summer, and bright, warm, and sunny ones for winter. The former were adorned with marble, the latter with tapestry. The most costly and valuable articles that Europe could supply in the way of furniture, trinkets, carpets, dresses, &c., were to be found there".³⁹ What once was a sumptuous building

³⁷ J. James, *Undoing Trauma: Reconstructing the Church of Our Lady in Dresden*, op. cit., p. 253.

³⁸ H. Kubiessa, "Das Haus Deutschland unter einem Europäischen Dach". Helmut Kohl's Political Implementation of the Symbolic Value of Dresden's Frauenkirche' [in:] B. Busse, I.H. Warnke, J. Smith, *Place-Making in the Declarative City*, De Gruyter, 2020, p. 87.

³⁹ J.I. Kraszewski, *Memoirs of the Countess Cosel*, New York: Brentano's, London: Downey & Co, 1902, translated by Guy Jean Raoul Eugène Charles Emmanuel de Savoie-Carignan, comte de Soissons, pp. 122–123.



The Frauenkirche in Dresden, rebuilt after lengthy debates between 1994 and 2005 at a cost of nearly €200 million.

remained in ruins until the early 1990s. It was reconstructed between 1992 and 1995 for €128 million and opened as a luxury hotel.

The progress of work on the Frauenkirche influenced subsequent actions by the city authorities regarding other destroyed monuments. It emboldened politicians and intensified public debate on the need to reconstruct the church's immediate surroundings, once a baroque ensemble centred on the **Neumarkt** (New Market). After 1945, the ruins there were cleared away and plans were made to build socialist housing, but for various reasons this never materialised and the area remained empty.

After 1990, lengthy public and expert consultations focused primarily on the scale and character of the planned reconstruction of this part of the historic city centre. The majority of Dresden's residents responded enthusiastically to the plans, a sentiment characteristic of most reconstruction projects in Germany. In 1998, they established the Dresden Historical Neumarkt Society (*Gesellschaft Historischer Neumarkt Dresden*) to press for the reconstruction of as many buildings as possible. Surveys indicated that 80–90% of residents supported its activities.⁴⁰

Supporters of rebuilding the Neumarkt included Kurt Biedenkopf, former Secretary General and Deputy Chairman of the CDU in West Germany, who after reunification became politically active in Saxony and served as Minister-President of this federal state from 1990 to 2002. He believed that reconstruction would enhance the city's appeal and draw new residents.⁴¹ Between 1990 and 1999 alone, Saxony's government invested more than one billion Deutsche Marks in the conservation and reconstruction of Dresden's monuments, including surviving townhouses and the large building of the Saxon State Chancellery (*Sächsische Staatskanzlei*). Yet, as the newspaper *Die Welt* wrote at the time, "the wounded soul of this city cannot find peace".⁴² The reconstruction of the Neumarkt, an entire baroque quarter, more than half a century after its destruction, proved a far more complex undertaking, unprecedented in Germany.

Initially, the conservation authorities considered restoring only a few 'flagship buildings' within the Neumarkt area. After prolonged debate and hesitation, in 2002, the city council approved a plan for the reconstruction of

⁴⁰ D. Guratzsch, 'Eine Bühne für die Frauenkirche', *Die Welt*, 13 February 2001, welt.de.

⁴¹ K. Kozlova, 'Reconstruction of Dresden is Fake': An Architectural Historian on How Not to Rebuild the Historic City Centres', *Bird in Flight*, 14 December 2022, birdinflight.com.

⁴² 'Dresden oder Der Mythos der geraubten Identität', *Die Welt*, 12 February 1998, welt.de.



■ View of the reconstructed Neumarkt in Dresden. In the foreground, part of the Residenzschloss, under reconstruction since 1985, and in the background the Frauenkirche.

■ View of the Dresden Gallery, rebuilt by 1956, the Semperoper, reopened in 1985, and part of the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, restored by 1965.

the properties surrounding the Frauenkirche.⁴³ Work began two years later. The approximately 10-hectare old town area was divided into eight quarters, within which 60 baroque townhouses were rebuilt. Although the historic façades were faithfully reconstructed, the interiors were made deliberately contemporary in character. A further 45 buildings were designed in a modernist style, with proportions adjusted to fit the historic layout.⁴⁴

By the end of 2021, the entire Neumarkt had been rebuilt, with the exception of the Hotel Stadt Rom on its southern edge, the reconstruction of which has been postponed until 2027. The costs incurred to date amount to around €650 million and have been covered by commercial entities in exchange for ownership or co-ownership of the newly constructed buildings. The unprecedented scale and ambition of the Neumarkt reconstruction, unmatched elsewhere in Germany, have led to comparisons with the Polish school of monument reconstruction, including the historic centres of Warsaw, Gdańsk and Wrocław.⁴⁵

The culmination of Dresden's historical reconstruction project was the **rebuilding of the Saxon rulers' palace**, the Residenzschloss, located near the Neumarkt. This Renaissance-Baroque residence, whose architectural form stemmed from its early 18th-century remodelling by Augustus II the Strong, burned down in February 1945 and remained in ruins for decades. 40 years would pass before the East German authorities decided to reconstruct it. The decision was announced by Erich Honecker on 13 February 1985 during the reopening of the Semperoper, another iconic Dresden monument, which was rebuilt over eight years and cost 225 million East German marks, equivalent to around €95 million – an astronomical expense for the GDR.⁴⁶ On that occasion, the General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party declared – to the surprise of the guests gathered there, who included former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt – that the Saxon rulers' palace would be rebuilt by 1990.

In reality, the reconstruction took far more time and was completed only in 2024. The cost of this exceptionally meticulous project reached €380 million, twice that of the Frauenkirche. Despite the vast sums involved, it encountered

⁴³ This outcome was also shaped by the resolute stance taken by local residents. When an architectural competition was organised in 2000 for the development of the Neumarkt quarters, the responses were largely negative: "Architects can build modern structures wherever they like, but not around the Frauenkirche. In this small part of the city, we insist on restoring the historic architecture. Besides, most of these modern architects are from West Germany and we will not tolerate West Germans dictating what our city should look like". Source: J. Paul, "The rebirth of historic Dresden" [in:] A. Fuchs, K. James-Chakraborty, L. Shortt, *Debating German Cultural Identity since 1989*, Rochester-New York 2011, p. 122.

⁴⁴ „Das Ergebnis ist beeindruckend": Dresdner Neumarkt erstrahlt in neu-altem Glanz', *Dresden Magazin*, 10 February 2023, dresden-magazin.com.

⁴⁵ E. von Engelberg-Dočkal, H.-R. Meier, 'Traditional rebuilding...', *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴⁶ G. Bleier, 'Auferstanden aus Ruinen: Die Semperoper eröffnete vor 40 Jahren', *Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten*, 11 February 2025, dnn.de.

Photograph by Wojciech Konończuk, 2025



Photograph by the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Dresden



■ Contemporary view of Dresden's old town from the Elbe. Due to reconstruction, the cityscape is similar to what it was nearly three centuries ago. In the foreground are the Augustus Bridge, reconstructed in 1948–1949, the Frauenkirche, rebuilt by 2005, the Sächsches Ständehaus, reconstructed by 1955, and the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, restored by 1965.

■ Bernardo Bellotto 1748 painting Dresden from the Right Bank of the Elbe below the Augustus Bridge.

no public opposition and the first interiors were opened to visitors in 2004.⁴⁷ The exterior of the residence was faithfully reconstructed and the small courtyard was roofed over, but most of the interior spaces were designed in a contemporary style to serve as exhibition halls. Only the Green Vault, the Gothic-Renaissance palace chapel and the state rooms of Augustus II the Strong, completed in 2024, were authentically restored. Work on recreating the sgraffito in the inner courtyard is still underway.

Since 2010, the *Gesellschaft Historischer Neumarkt Dresden* has also been campaigning for the **reconstruction of buildings on the Neustädter Markt**, located on the opposite side of the Augustus Bridge, which links the Old and New Towns. The square is currently largely empty, with the Golden Rider, the equestrian statue of Augustus II the Strong, standing at its centre.

The city has already approved, within its urban development plan, the reconstruction of four buildings adjacent to the Neustädter Wache, known as the Blockhaus, which was rebuilt at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s and which until 1989 housed the House of German-Soviet Friendship. On the other side of the bridge, the 18th-century *Narrenhäusel*, a well-known pre-war riverside restaurant destroyed in the bombardment and demolished in 1959, will be rebuilt by around 2027.⁴⁸ Efforts to reconstruct the Neustädter Markt are likely to continue for many years, but given the experience of the past three decades, it may be assumed that these will ultimately prove successful.

* * *

Over the 35 years which have passed since German reunification, remarkable changes have taken place in Dresden's historic centre, with its pre-war architectural landscape restored on an impressive scale. The great wartime wounds have been healed to such an extent that observers once again speak of the revived 'myth of Dresden' and the reclaimed identity of the 'innocently destroyed city'.

This success would not have been possible without the determination of residents, the city and Land authorities, and the supportive stance of the federal government. The German press even wrote of the "almost religious zeal with which the people of Dresden are pursuing the reconstruction project". Scholars have noted that the city seeks above all to be associated with its historic

⁴⁷ D. Guratzsch, 'Das Schloss glänzt mit neuer Fassade', *Die Welt*, 13 January 2007, welt.de.

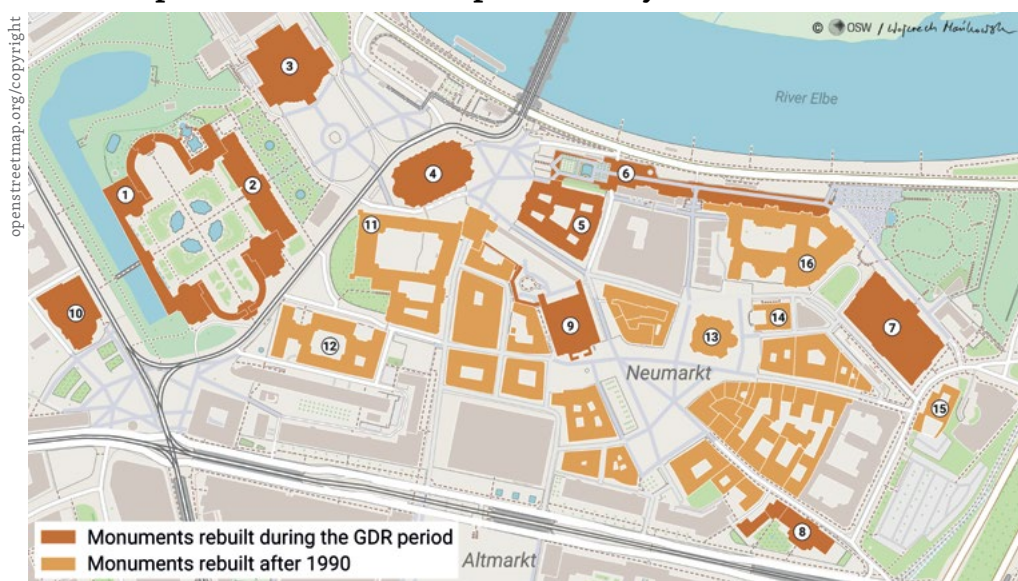
⁴⁸ 'Königsufer - Neustädter Markt', *Landeshauptstadt Dresden*, dresden.de; L. Zielke, 'Dresden: Das sind die neuen Pläne für Königsufer und Neustädter Markt', *TAG24*, 15 March 2024, tag24.de.

architecture, even if reconstructed, rather than with the new contemporary buildings erected in many parts of Germany after 1990.⁴⁹

The transformation has boosted Dresden's appeal not only among tourists but also for investors, turning the city into one of Germany's principal centres of high-technology development. Against the backdrop of the significant depopulation of the former East Germany, it is also notable that Dresden's population has grown by around 70,000 since 1990 and is now over 560,000 residents.⁵⁰

Finally, the successful reconstruction of Dresden's material heritage, including many buildings of major significance for German history and culture, had a substantial impact on the nationwide debate on reconstruction. The phenomenon that came to be described as the 'Dresden effect' became an important reference point for discussions and disputes in many other cities, in both eastern and western Germany, concerning the need for historical reconstruction, the recovery of urban identity and the overcoming of trauma. Dresden, in many respects the first 'testing ground' for these social, political, conservation and financial processes, set a course that Germany would subsequently follow.

Dresden - plan of the reconstructed part of the city



- 1) Zwinger 2) Dresden Gallery 3) Semperoper 4) Cathedral of the Holy Trinity 5) Saxon House of Estates
 6) Brühl's Terrace 7) Albertinum 8) Landhaus 9) Johanneum 10) Staatsschauspiel Theatre
 11) Royal Palace (Residenzschloß) 12) Taschenberg Palace 13) Frauenkirche 14) Cosel Palace 15) Kurland Palace
 16) Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau

⁴⁹ D. Guratzsch, 'Eine Bühne für die Frauenkirche', *op. cit.*; J. Paul, 'The rebirth of historic Dresden', *op. cit.*, p. 126.

⁵⁰ K. Frymark, *The Free State of Saxony. The state of permanent transformation*, OSW, Warsaw 2024, osw.waw.pl, p. 7.

Berlin – the critical reconstruction

In the opening shots of the film *Germany, Year Zero*, a sea of ruins stretches across Berlin. Its destroyed, burned-out streets and entire boroughs recur until the final scenes. Roberto Rossellini shot the film in this devastated city in 1947, which makes it a valuable documentary record. The neorealist work depicts not only the destruction of buildings but also the moral and existential crisis of Berliners and their deeply pessimistic view of the future. There is one memorable scene, when a secondary character defends her ailing flatmate, saying: “Do not forget that he is a sick man”. She hears in reply: “Sick! We are all sick. No one is in a better position”.

Yet post-war Berlin was not among the most heavily destroyed German cities. Around 40% of its buildings lay in ruins. The districts of Mitte, Kreuzberg, Friedrichshain and Prenzlauer Berg suffered particularly severe damage, not only from Allied bombing but also from the intense assault of the Red Army, which lasted several days. After 1948, when the city was divided into western and Soviet occupation zones, two centres emerged: East Berlin, which became part of East Germany, and West Berlin. Most of the historic centre, including the quarters around Unter den Linden, found itself within the communist state, along with the Brandenburg Gate, which was rebuilt between 1956 and 1957. In 1961, East Germany erected the Berlin Wall, a system of fortifications, barriers and a ‘death strip’ that separated the two parts of the city. This led to the further destruction of the urban fabric, including the demolition of around 300 historic buildings.

German reunification entailed both opportunities and challenges for Berlin. Over the course of half a century, the city had developed along two distinct paths, shaped by different approaches to architecture and urban planning. The ‘two Berlins’ shared only an initial questioning of the importance of material heritage – albeit for different reasons – followed by a cautious reconstruction of selected monuments on differing scales. After 1990, the overriding task was to ensure the harmonious ‘rejoining’ of the two halves of the city and to heal the divisions as effectively as possible. In this sense, the difficulties surrounding Berlin’s reconstruction were greater than anywhere else in Germany.

The Bundestag’s decision of 20 June 1991 to relocate the German capital to Berlin, known as the *Hauptstadtbeschluss*, significantly reinforced the need to treat the city as a special case. Although Chancellor Kohl strongly supported the move, it only passed by a narrow margin: 338 votes in favour and 320 against. The CSU, which formed part of the governing coalition, was almost unanimous in backing Bonn as the capital. Notably, two nationwide opinion

polls published on the day of the vote produced precisely opposite results. In the first, 52% of respondents supported Berlin as the capital, while in the second the same proportion preferred Bonn.⁵¹ During the debate, opponents of the relocation recalled the words of Konrad Adenauer, the Cologne-born first Chancellor of West Germany, who had stated decades earlier: “We in the west [of Germany] reject much of what is commonly called the Prussian spirit. (...) Whoever makes Berlin the new capital will, in spirit, create a new Prussia”.⁵²

Berlin’s recovery of its status as the capital of a reunified Germany required the adaptation of existing public buildings to the needs of the federal administration or the construction of new ones. The need to redevelop vast areas left by the Berlin Wall, as well as vacant squares that had remained undeveloped since the war and sites cleared after the demolition of selected GDR-era structures, meant that Berlin – particularly in the 1990s and at the turn of the twenty-first century – came to be regarded as ‘Europe’s largest construction site’ and a city ‘fascinated by architecture and urban planning’.⁵³ The changes that have taken place over the past 35 years, together with the significant social and political debates that accompanied them, have become one of the markers of Germany’s social, identity and architectural transformation, as well as of its approach to its own historical heritage.

1. Hans Stimmann and the restoration of Berlin’s European urban structure

“I had a drawer and when I opened it, I pulled out old city plans. (...) If this had worked for 250 years, why would we need new plans?”. These words were spoken by Hans Stimmann, one of the key figures shaping Berlin’s new architectural identity.

In 1991, the city senate appointed this urban planner and architect from Lübeck (who was then 50 years old) as Senate Building Director at the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing. Except for a pause to serve as State Secretary for Planning at the Berlin Senate Department for Urban Development, Environmental Protection and Technology between 1996 and 1999, he held this position until 2006. For 16 years, he oversaw the urban planning process, setting the rules and meticulously approving, supervising and controlling the proposed and subsequently implemented construction projects.⁵⁴

⁵¹ M. Fisher, ‘Berlin voted new seat of government’, *The Washington Post*, 20 June 1991, washingtonpost.com.

⁵² M. Colla, ‘Prussian Palimpsests: Historic Architecture and Urban Spaces in East Germany, 1945–1961’, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

⁵³ J. Stewart, ‘Das Kunsthaus Tacheles: The Berlin Architecture Debate of the 1990s in Micro-Historical Context’ [in:] S. Taberner, F. Finlay (eds.), *Recasting German Identity. Culture, Politics, and Literature in the Berlin Republic*, Rochester 2002, p. 51.

⁵⁴ M. Drozdowska, ‘Czarny Hans’, *Sztuka Architektury*, 1 January 2000, sztuka-architektury.pl; K.E. Till, *The New Berlin. Memory, politics, place*, Minneapolis, London 2005, p. 45.

To understand Stimmann's influence on Berlin's architecture, it is necessary to examine his urban planning concept, particularly as he succeeded in putting it into practice. In one interview, he stated: "Berlin has become a museum of failed urban planning concepts since 1945. I wanted to restore to the city the structure that I call the European city. I wanted Berlin to become a legible space once again". His aim was to shape a city that "does not deny its history, follows certain architectural traditions, yet is capable of distinguishing itself from other cities", while creating urban harmony through a coherent overall structure rather than through striking individual buildings.⁵⁵

Central to understanding Stimmann's approach is the concept of critical reconstruction, of which he was a leading proponent. Karen E. Till, a scholar of Berlin's contemporary architecture, explains that the aim of this method is "to bring back the historic texture of the city that was destroyed by poor postwar urban design". 'Critical reconstructionists' reject the postmodern approach to urban planning, arguing that "radically new designs have previously destroyed the urban fabric of Berlin and would only add to the "aesthetic noise and chaos" of the contemporary city".⁵⁶

After 1990, Berlin sought a new way to express its identity. This was not a simple return to the past, which was no longer possible, but an attempt to reconcile tradition with modernist innovation. Critical reconstruction therefore implied a dialogue between traditional form and modernity in its various dimensions, and an effort to find a place for the past within the new architecture.

The old plans of Berlin that Stimmann and his team recovered from their desk drawers served to reconstruct the street grid based on the historic urban layout and local building typologies. They also sought to limit the height of new buildings and the use of glass.⁵⁷ Before an investor could secure approval for a project, they had to guarantee that at least 20% of the planned office building's floor space would be allocated to residential use. Moreover, properties erected in the city centre could not exceed 22 metres in height, with Potsdamer Platz being the exception.⁵⁸ These restrictions aimed to protect the urban environment and prevent individual districts from being dominated by glass skyscrapers, which erode rather than create urban identity.

55 A. Tzortzis, 'Berlin's Post-Wall Master Builder Retires', *The New York Times*, 27 September 2006; 'Architekt Hans Stimmann. Heiler zwischen Ost und West', Deutschlandradio, 28 April 2022, deutschlandfunk.de.

56 K.E. Till, *The New Berlin. Memory, politics, place*, op. cit., pp. 37, 46.

57 R. Stern, 'Berlin's "Critical Reconstruction" and the Politics of Memory and Identity', *Oriental Occidental: Geography, Identity, Space* 2001, pp. 74–75, acaa-arch.org; K. James-Chakraborty, 'Beyond the wall: reunifying Berlin' [in:] A. Fuchs, K. James-Chakraborty, L. Shortt, *Debating German Cultural Identity since 1989*, op. cit., p. 103.

58 Since 1989, nine buildings higher than 100 metres have been constructed in Berlin, most of them located away from the city centre. By comparison, Warsaw saw the construction of 30 such buildings over the same period.

As a result of these measures, Pariser Platz by the Brandenburg Gate was redeveloped. Stimmann explained the rationale as follows: “Pariser Platz should look as it once did. The Brandenburg Gate ought to be the most important construction there. One might say it is our Bilbao-style gateway. I told Frank Gehry [the architect of the famous Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao] that we do not need a new Frank Gehry design on Pariser Platz. We already have a work on Gehry’s scale there – the Brandenburg Gate, the symbol of Berlin’s reunification”.⁵⁹

In addition to the comprehensive restoration of the eighteenth-century Brandenburg Gate, the Prussian eagle with an oak wreath and Iron Cross was returned to the quadriga crowning it. The East German authorities had not reinstated these elements, regarding them as symbols of Prussian militarism. Berlin’s local government sought to restore the historic character of Pariser Platz. This required numerous architectural restrictions for new buildings, including limitations on materials and window design, as well as the reconstruction of the famous Hotel Adlon. Despite its design, which can scarcely be regarded as an architectural success, it once again became one of the capital’s most elegant hotels.

Stimmann also restored Friedrichstrasse to its pre-war role as a major commercial thoroughfare. After reunification, it was one of the central areas marked by vast empty plots. The redevelopment and revitalisation of this long artery, which until reunification had lain in East Berlin, particularly the section between Checkpoint Charlie and Friedrichstrasse station, aimed to revive the city centre. The objective was to reintroduce harmonious buildings with façades drawing on Berlin’s neoclassical tradition. After more than a decade, the street regained its former commercial and cultural status. However, the outcome drew criticism. The new Friedrichstrasse was described as being marked by “monotony”, a “Prussian severity of form” and a “stony gloom, reminiscent of a high-security prison where almost windowless cells line both sides of a corridor”.⁶⁰

The Schützenstrasse quarter in Mitte was redeveloped between 1994 and 1997 on land along the former route of the Berlin Wall and designed by the renowned Italian architect Aldo Rossi; it met with a far more positive response. Rossi drew on pre-war development, retained the existing plot structure and incorporated the remains of two surviving townhouses. The project is regarded not only as highly successful but as one of the most important construction projects in the reunified Berlin.⁶¹

59 ‘Architekt Hans Stimmann. Heiler zwischen Ost und West’, *op. cit.*

60 U. Rada, ‘Die Friedrichstraße, ein Missverständnis’, *Die Tageszeitung*, 1 March 2006, *taz.de*.

61 M. Donath, ‘Denkmalpflege heißt Geschichte erlebbar machen’, *Kunsttexte* 2002, no. 1, *journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de*, p. 5.

Critical reconstruction, which Stimmann effectively promoted with the support of successive Berlin authorities and advocates of the ‘old European city’, attracted fierce criticism from representatives of postmodern architecture. Critics accused him of attempting to erase traces of Berlin’s difficult past and of favouring architecture that was “stone-built and rather straight than curved”. Daniel Libeskind, the architect of the Jewish Museum in Berlin, argued that the capital’s architecture sought to return to a time “that was nice and safe, as if history after 1934 wasn’t there. It was simply a rush to forgetting”. Frank Gehry, in turn, stated that “half the city wants to rebuild the 19th century (...) For me, even the work of [conventional] developers is more real and believable than [Berlin’s] historical pastiche”.⁶²

Since Stimmann’s death in 2025 away, more voices have emerged in his defence. One example is an article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, whose author argued that Stimmann was right to insist that “a city is more than a set of spectacular buildings”. The ultimate illustration of this approach is Pariser Platz. There Gehry designed what was described as the “strongest building”, which now houses the US embassy, while “submitting to Stimmann’s dictate. In doing so, he demonstrated that claims that good architecture was impossible under Stimmann were unfounded”.⁶³

2. Reviving Berlin’s historic heart: Unter den Linden and Museum Island

Since German reunification, the borough of Mitte has been regarded as Berlin’s historic centre, in particular the area around Unter den Linden. This stretches from the Brandenburg Gate by the Reichstag building to Museum Island, together with the neighbouring quarters of Alt-Kölln (Spreeinsel), Friedrichswerder, Dorotheenstadt and Friedrichstadt. As Mitte was among the most heavily destroyed parts of the city, few historic buildings survived there. The largest concentration of original development, mainly from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, remained in the once peripheral districts of Scheunenviertel and Spandauer Vorstadt, which underwent revitalisation after 1990.

One of the most pressing decisions facing the new Berlin concerned the reconstruction of the Reichstag. The building was erected in the neo-Renaissance style at the end of the nineteenth century on the site of the demolished palace of the Polish aristocrat and Prussian diplomat Atanazy Raczyński. During the war, this vast parliament building fell into ruin. It was subsequently rebuilt between 1961 and 1973. Until German reunification, the structure, located directly beside the Berlin Wall, served as a museum and as a venue

⁶² N. Ouroussoff, ‘Berlin’s Divided Identity’, *Los Angeles Times*, 31 October 1999, latimes.com.

⁶³ M. Alexander, ‘Baumeister für die Mitte’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 9 March 2021, faz.net.

for committee meetings held away from the Bundestag's main seat in Bonn. An international competition for its redesign was won by the British architect Norman Foster, who designed, among other elements, the glass dome above the plenary chamber, which is accessible to visitors. The Bundestag moved into the restored building in 1999.

Completing the reconstruction of the historic buildings in the eastern section of Unter den Linden, between Charlottenstrasse and Museum Island, and fully restoring the layout of what had once been the most prestigious boulevard in Berlin, remained a priority for both the federal authorities and the city government. In the late 1940s, the East German authorities embarked on the gradual reconstruction of the most important buildings located there. They started with the neo-baroque Prussian State Library (*Preussische Staatsbibliothek*), which became the German State Library (*Deutsche Staatsbibliothek*), the Arsenal (*Zeughaus*), which became home to the German Historical Museum, the *Neue Wache* and the complex of Humboldt University buildings. At the same time, the reconstruction of Museum Island began. By 1990, the Bode Museum, formerly the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, the *Alte Nationalgalerie* and the Pergamon Museum (*Pergamonmuseum*) had reopened to the public.

In the 1960s, all the buildings around the neoclassical Bebelplatz were rebuilt. This square had once been one of the most beautiful urban spaces in Berlin, bordered by St Hedwig's Cathedral and the State Opera, as well as three palaces and the Old Library. Finally, in the 1970s and 1980s, the historic buildings on Gendarmenmarkt were reconstructed, including the theatre, now the *Konzerthaus*, and the French Cathedral (*Französischer Dom*), while work began on rebuilding the German Cathedral. From the mid-1970s onwards, reconstruction also continued on the vast Berlin Cathedral on Museum Island.

After German reunification, work on public buildings in the eastern section of Unter den Linden proceeded along two tracks. The authorities completed the restoration projects which had begun in the East German era and embarked upon a comprehensive renovation and modernisation of buildings that had already been reconstructed.

The reopening of the restored Berlin Cathedral on 6 June 1993 was of particular significance. Chancellor Kohl, who attended the ceremony, described it as "a great and outstanding event for the Protestant Church, for our capital Berlin and for our country. Not only Berliners, but all Germans are regaining a part of their history". He added, however, that Germany was "facing up to its history", and that the rededication of the church "does not signify an uncritical drawing on the past".⁶⁴ Since then, discussions have continued about the

64 Ansprache anlässlich der Wiedereinweihung des Berliner Doms, 6 June 1993, bundeskanzler-helmut-kohl.de.

need to restore the cathedral to its original form and to rebuild the adjacent Denkmalskirche, once the burial chapel of the Hohenzollern dynasty.⁶⁵

The Berlin State Library (*Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin*) is the city's second largest historic building, measuring 170 by 107 metres and it occupies an entire block. Its comprehensive restoration and expansion were another major project. Between 2005 and 2021, at a cost of €470 million, the building was fully reconstructed in line with its pre-war design, with numerous architectural details reinstated.

The costliest conservation work proved to be on Museum Island, where the condition of several buildings reconstructed during the East German period was deemed critical and structurally flawed. As a result, it was decided that a comprehensive refurbishment of the Bode Museum, the *Alte Nationalgalerie* and the German Historical Museum (which was also extended) would be carried out. The New Museum (*Neues Museum*), left in ruins since the war, was rebuilt and reopened in 2009 in accordance with a design by the British architect David Chipperfield. By 2009 alone, the total budget allocated to works on Museum Island had reached €1 billion. The most expensive undertaking is the comprehensive renovation and restoration of the Pergamon Museum, under way since 2023 and not expected to be concluded until 2037 or 2043, at a projected cost of at least €1.5 billion.⁶⁶ Following extensive refurbishment funded primarily by the federal government, Museum Island has emerged as one of Berlin's principal attractions.

The refurbishment of buildings in the area surrounding Unter den Linden coincided with the debate over whether to reconstruct those structures that had not been rebuilt after the war. Following the demolition of the ten-storey East German Foreign Ministry office block on the banks of the Spree Canal in 1995–1996, it was decided that the *Kommandantenhaus* at 1 Unter den Linden would be rebuilt. Bertelsmann AG won the tender. The project required the faithful reconstruction of the neo-Renaissance façade, while granting flexibility in the design of the interior. By 2003, the monument had been meticulously restored. The investor approached the project with notable precision, commissioning bricks of the historic size and produced using original technologies. After analysing archaeological findings, 312 tonnes of sandstone were brought from Silesia for the reconstruction of the façade, as had been done 150 years earlier. The project cost €22 million.

65 Rüdiger Hoth, the architect responsible for the restored cathedral, remarked in one interview that “when it comes to the Hohenzollerns, everyone waves the issue away, whereas in Italy the legacy of the Medici is treated with far greater care”. K. Schnitzler, “Am liebsten hätten sie alle Kreuze verschwinden lassen”, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 6 June 2013, sueddeutsche.de.

66 ‘Museum Unveiled’, *Deutsche Welle*, 3 May 2009, dw.com; ‘The rebuilding of Berlin’s Pergamon Museum is 40 years behind schedule’, *The Economist*, 22 August 2024, economist.com.

Following the reconstruction of the *Kommandantenhaus*, debate intensified over the need to rebuild the Berlin Building Academy (*Berliner Bauakademie*), erected between 1832 and 1836 by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, one of Germany's most distinguished architects. The structure was an experimental project and is regarded as one of the earliest examples of modernism. It burned down during the war and, after its ruins were demolished in 1962, the East German Foreign Ministry headquarters was built on the site. In 2016, the Bundestag decided to reconstruct this iconic building. It allocated €62 million to this effect and subsequently established the Federal Building Academy Foundation. According to opinion polls, two thirds of respondents supported the decision.⁶⁷ Since then, debate has continued over the final design of the future building, with advocates of a faithful reconstruction confronting modernists who favour modifications. The dispute has unfolded both in the media and in parliament, where the AfD parliamentary group called for a full reconstruction, underscoring the social and political significance of heritage restoration.⁶⁸

An architectural competition for the reconstruction of the Berlin Building Academy is scheduled for 2025, yet the project's final form remains open. Regardless of the outcome, it is clear that over recent decades the historic appearance of the eastern section of Unter den Linden has been largely restored and the traces of wartime destruction, followed by East Germany's failed urban policies have been effectively erased. This reflects a consistently pursued policy of reconstruction in this part of the city, first by the East German authorities from the 1960s onwards and later by the government of the reunified Berlin with federal support.

Unter den Linden, together with the adjacent Museum Island, has once again become an elegant Berlin showcase. The rebuilding of the City Palace was a key complement to the large-scale reconstruction carried out there, intended to complete the restoration of this part of the city's pre-war urban layout.

3. The dispute over the Berlin Palace

The idea of reconstructing the Berlin Palace (*Berliner Schloss*) triggered one of the longest and most consequential disputes in Berlin, although it also took on a nationwide dimension. The debate concerned not only whether and how to rebuild historic monuments, but above all whether in certain cases this was permissible at all, or whether it amounted to a dangerous form of historical revisionism. The arguments over what was one of the largest cultural

⁶⁷ A. Kilb, 'Schinkel, oder was?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 October 2022, faz.net.

⁶⁸ See, for example, U. Hassler, Ch. Rauhut, 'Sie stand am Anfang, und sie muss am Ende stehen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 January 2023, faz.net; R. Haubrich, 'Ein Lob der exakten Replik', *Die Welt*, 2 December 2019, welt.de; 'AfD-Antrag zur Schinkelschen Bauakademie abgelehnt', *Deutscher Bundestag*, 3 July 2024, bundestag.de.

undertakings in the history of reunified Germany lasted more than two decades and require broader consideration.

The Berlin Palace, once one of the most important buildings in the German capital and a structure of considerable symbolic significance, was erected as the residence of the rulers of Brandenburg. Between 1701 and 1871, it served as the residence of the Kings of Prussia and, until 1918, of the German Emperors. During the interwar period, following the abolition of the monarchy, the building was used for museum purposes. In 1945, the palace was damaged, but its ruins were suitable for reconstruction. Shortly after the war, funds were allocated to secure the structure and restore the White Hall, which became a venue for exhibitions, including displays on the planned reconstruction of Berlin.

In June 1950, the General Secretary of the SED, Walter Ulbricht, announced that the ruins would be demolished, with the most valuable architectural elements preserved. It was argued that the building symbolised an era that had 'ceased to be acceptable'. The elements retained included the portal with the balcony from which Karl Liebknecht proclaimed the establishment of a 'Free Socialist Republic of Germany' on 9 November 1918. It was later incorporated into the new State Council building. In the following months, the ruined palace was blown up in stages, using 19 tonnes of dynamite. By the spring of 1951, only an empty square remained, which was subsequently used for parades and mass demonstrations, modelled on Moscow's Red Square. Between 1973 and 1976, the vast Palace of the Republic was constructed on the site, serving as the seat of the East German parliament until 1990.

After reunification, the building was closed and left vacant because 5,000 tonnes of toxic asbestos had been used in its construction. At the same time, German society entered the first phase of a long and contentious debate over the future of this site.

One side of the dispute, including the Greens, the Left Party, some art historians and the Association for the Preservation of the Palace of the Republic (*Verein zur Erhaltung des Palastes der Republik*), emphasised the architectural merits of the Palace of the Republic. They proposed carrying out the necessary modernisation or integrating it into a new building designed in a contemporary form. They regarded the reconstruction of the palace as 'ahistorical' and tantamount to restoring a symbol of Germany's imperial past.

On the other side stood proponents of rebuilding the palace, chiefly gathered in the Berlin Palace Friends' Association (*Förderverein Berliner Schloss*), founded in 1992 by the entrepreneur Wilhelm von Boddien. They believed the Palace of the Republic was an eyesore and called for as faithful a reconstruction as possible of the palace's structure and façades. In their view, this would restore the architectural coherence of this part of Berlin's historic

centre, encompassing Berlin Cathedral, the Lustgarten and Museum Island. They frequently invoked the successful reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw as an example.

Between 1993 and 1994, the Palace of the Republic was draped in a vast canvas depicting the historic façade of the Hohenzollern palace. Financed by supporters of reconstruction, the installation helped popularise the idea among residents of Berlin.

In 2000, the federal government and the Berlin Senate established an expert commission tasked with gathering proposals for the urban development of this part of the historic city centre and formulating recommendations regarding the design and financing of the future building to be erected at the site.

In July 2002, the Bundestag voted to demolish the Palace of the Republic and reconstruct its structure. The decision was passed by 384 votes to 133, with opposition coming mainly from The Left and the Greens. The plan envisaged restoring the historic baroque façades on three sides, while giving the fourth side and the interior a modern design. The vote followed a heated debate. Wolfgang Thierse, a former East German opposition activist and, in 2002, President of the Bundestag from the SPD, argued that reconstruction was necessary because Berlin had a great deal of modernist architecture but lacked a complete historic ensemble. In his view, the project would create “one of the largest museum complexes in the world”.

By contrast, his party colleague Eckhardt Barthel during the debate called for an architectural competition and for openness to new ideas in shaping *Schlossplatz*. Antje Vollmer of the Greens countered critics of the reconstruction, asserting that “it will not represent an endorsement of Prussian militarism, but rather testifies to our deep respect for the mastery of our forebears”.

The then Chancellor Gerhard Schröder also supported the reconstruction of the *Berliner Schloss*. As early as 1999, he had described the idea as an expression of a “longing for a historical point of identification” and the reconstruction idea as a “victory of beauty over dreariness”.⁶⁹

The decision, backed by two thirds of Bundestag members, reflected a compromise between supporters of full restoration and proponents of an entirely new building. The outcome of the vote also reflected broader public opinion, which was increasingly inclined towards the reconstruction of historic structures.

As it transpired, however, the parliamentary decision did not bring an end to the controversy.

69 B. Grunert, ‘Berlin: Hat sich Schröder auf den Wiederaufbau festgelegt? – Bund und Senat wollten bisher nur über den Platz beraten’, *Tagesspiegel*, 7 January 2000, tagesspiegel.de.

Five years later, in 2007, the Bundestag approved funding for the project, with construction scheduled to begin in 2010. Under the decision, the federal government would allocate up to €552 million, while the three baroque façades were to be financed through private donations, coordinated by the Berlin Palace Friends' Association.⁷⁰ The site was to shed its associations with the former imperial residence and was given a new name, the Humboldt Forum. Neil MacGregor, a British national and former Director of the British Museum, was appointed as its director. The new building was intended to house the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art. Opinion polls indicated steadily growing public support for reconstruction, rising from 58% in favour (and 34% opposed) in 2007, to 70% in favour in 2010. The highest level of support was recorded among 18 to 24 year olds.⁷¹

In 2008, the international competition to design the fourth, Spree-facing modern façade and the contemporary museum interiors was concluded. It was won by the Italian architect Franco Stella, whose proposal was described as a “coherent and balanced concept”, characterised by a “clever architectural fusion of old and new, combining modern use with the reconstruction of the former palace”.

In the same year, the demolition of the Palace of the Republic, which had begun in 2006, was completed. However, construction work did not begin until 2014 due to financial constraints. During coalition negotiations in 2009, it was decided that, in light of the global financial crisis, the project would be postponed for four years because, as one politician put it, “one does not build a palace at a moment like this”.⁷²

Eleven years after the Bundestag had decided to reconstruct the *Berliner Schloss*, President Joachim Gauck finally laid the foundation stone in June 2013. Construction continued for the next six years and on 16 December 2020 the palace was officially opened.

The building, measuring 180 by 120 metres with a floor area of over 40,000 square metres, has become one of the largest museum venues in Europe. The total cost of reconstruction significantly exceeded the original estimates, reaching €677 million. Of this sum, the federal state of Berlin contributed €32 million, with the remainder financed from the federal budget. An additional €105 million came from 45,000 private donations collected by the

70 F. Illies, ‘Rasen betreten verboten’, *Die Zeit*, 10 June 2010, zeit.de; ‘Bundestag bewilligt 552 Millionen Euro’, *Der Spiegel*, 8 November 2007, spiegel.de.

71 T. Fülling, ‘Berliner wollen Schloss-Wiederaufbau’, *Die Welt*, 4 May 2007, welt.de; ‘Meinungsumfragen zum Schloss’, berliner-schloss.de.

72 ‘Italiener sollen Wiederaufbau übernehmen’, *Der Spiegel*, 28 November 2008, spiegel.de; ‘Stoppt Schwarz-Gelb das Stadtschloss?’, *Der Spiegel*, 16 October 2009, spiegel.de.

Berlin Palace Friends' Association.⁷³ The scale of expenditure was regularly highlighted by the media and opponents of the project. Supporters, in turn, argued that the sums were negligible in the context of overall German public spending and noted that the new headquarters of the Federal Intelligence Service, built in Berlin between 2006 and 2017, had cost more than €1 billion.

The Berlin Palace continues to generate expenditure. In 2023, a replica of the great heraldic cartouche, weighing more than four tonnes, was installed above the main entrance. Beneath a gilded crown, flanked by eagles, appears the Prussian coat of arms with sceptre and orb, encircled by the chain of the Order of the Black Eagle. Work is also underway to reconstruct the passageways between the entrances and 26 sculptures on the external façade, with completion scheduled for summer 2025. The cost of €13 million will be covered by public donations raised by the *Förderverein Berliner Schloss*.⁷⁴

Throughout these years, supporters and opponents of the palace's reconstruction continued their debate over its final form and, ultimately, over how its interiors would be used. This long-running dispute became one of the most significant public debates in Germany after 1990. It featured a clash between critics of modernism on the one side and advocates of the primacy of contemporary architecture over whether to reconstruct monuments destroyed during the war on the other. However, the dispute was not limited to this and included the broader issue regarding the place of Prussian history in the modern German state. No other historic building in Germany has been the subject of such fierce controversy over the past three decades.

It is worth recalling selected arguments raised in this debate, which played out in the media, in parliament and through demonstrations and street campaigns.

Despite the Bundestag's 2002 decision, opponents initially hoped to preserve the Palace of the Republic, arguing that removing the legacy of East German modernism from the cityscape amounted to 'revanchism'. After its demolition, many residents of eastern Berlin regarded the move as an expression of 'Wessi imperialism'.⁷⁵ At the same time, some hoped that a modern building might be erected on the site, one that would not reference the historic Hohenzollern residence. When this also failed to materialise, critics

73 J. Fahrur, '33 Millionen mehr: Das Berliner Schloss wird immer teurer', *Berliner Morgenpost*, 23 October 2020, [morgenpost.de](https://www.morgenpost.de).

74 It is worth emphasising that the efforts of the *Förderverein Berliner Schloss*, resulted in constructing one of the palace wings, the *Lustgartenflügel*, in such a way as to allow for the future reconstruction of individual interiors, including the royal state apartments and the Great Staircase.

75 M. Sontheimer, 'Beton statt Barock', *Der Spiegel*, 19 May 2010, [spiegel.de](https://www.spiegel.de). According to a 2005 poll, over 60% of residents of eastern Germany opposed the demolition of the Palace of the Republic. Source: J. Walker, *Berlin Contemporary. Architecture and Politics After 1990*, New York 2022, p. 209.

objected to the reconstruction of the dome with its cross and to the inscription quoting King Frederick William IV, who had compiled verses from the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Philippians.⁷⁶ They accused the project's supporters of 'fundamentalism' and of "mocking the multicultural ethos of the Humboldt Forum".⁷⁷

When it became clear that the building would house ethnological and Asian art collections, critics began to stress that the "treasures assembled were often acquired for the German Reich from Africa and Asia by brutal means during the colonial era". The liberal-left weekly *Die Zeit* wrote: "In the heart of the city, a new piece of Prussia is emerging (...) instead of building something forward-looking, creating a new old centre of Berlin with contemporary architecture symbolising a city growing together and a self-confident democracy, nostalgia for history has prevailed, especially among politicians (...) The city's motto is no longer "be curious, be creative, be the future", but "be timid, be dull, be the past".⁷⁸

The *Der Spiegel* weekly likewise criticised the reconstruction, arguing that it "perfectly symbolises the spirit of the Merkel era: the country is living through a sleepy Biedermeier period". At the same time, the magazine observed that "the reconstruction of a representative building once inhabited by the electors and kings of Prussia constitutes a striking image of growing German hegemony. A backward-looking building in Berlin conveys a very different message: regained national self-confidence".⁷⁹

Supporters of reconstruction, who proved considerably more influential and who were backed by the majority of politicians, argued that restoring the *Berliner Schloss* would once again make central Berlin a coherent urban ensemble and, together with Museum Island, create a 'unique cultural quarter,' a kind of 'German Louvre'. They frequently invoked Dresden's Frauenkirche as an encouraging example, demonstrating that a visionary idea could be realised. The supporters also pointed to public opinion surveys indicating that residents "want buildings with soul in historic locations, not another glass shopping centre", and that "Berlin has had enough of modernity".⁸⁰

76 "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father".

77 A. Kilb, 'Unser Kolosseum', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 December 2020, faz.net.

78 N. Maak, 'Hurra, hurra, wir bauen uns ein Schloss', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 October 2020, faz.net; Ch. Seils, 'Stoppt das Stadtschloss!', *Die Zeit*, 29 November 2008, zeit.de.

79 S. Hammelehle, 'Unser Palast der Republik', *Der Spiegel*, 12 June 2013, spiegel.de.

80 G. Hasselfeldt, 'Das Berliner Stadtschloss, ein deutscher Louvre', *Die Welt*, 20 August 2010, welt.de; H.-J. Otto, 'Ein Schloss als Symbol bürgerschaftlichen Engagements', *Die Welt*, 16 August 2010, welt.de.

The decision to name the reconstructed palace the Humboldt Forum and to house a museum of non-European art within it, thereby seeking to legitimise a building associated with German imperialism was an important instrument employed by these circles. As Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, and Peter-Klaus Schuster, general director of the Berlin National Museums, wrote: “We found a narrative appropriate to the twenty-first century and were able to give it the hallmark of Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt”. They further argued that the former residence of the Hohenzollerns had become “a place of world cultures which, together with Museum Island opposite, encompasses the whole world in its gaze and does not assume the role of teacher or analytical observer, but itself enters into dialogue as a participant”.⁸¹

The reconstruction of the Berlin Palace did not, however, lead to a decision to rebuild another important, if differently weighted in identity terms, residential monument: the rococo Monbijou Palace. This notable building stood on the banks of the Spree opposite Museum Island and, until the war, housed the Hohenzollern Museum. Although calls for its reconstruction do occasionally resurface, no such plans are currently envisaged.

The Berlin Palace’s reconstruction marked a triumph of civic engagement. Determination, organisation and effective lobbying by its supporters proved decisive, alongside the backing of the majority of political actors. This occurred despite the general scepticism of many influential German media outlets, which continued to criticise the initiative even after the project’s form had been settled and, in some cases, even after its completion. One telling example was an opinion published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, which argued that the culmination of the reconstruction and the establishment of the Humboldt Forum within the palace “demonstrates the limits of German cultural policy. It remains far removed from the cosmopolitanism with which cultural projects are pursued in Paris or London”.⁸²

The lengthy debate over the future of *Schlossplatz* was, in essence, a domestic dispute over the identity of the new Germany, the place of Prussia and the *Kaiserreich* (with its legacy of militarism and authoritarianism) within German history, and the question of how national history may or may not be expressed, and what consequences this will have for Germany and Europe. The reconstruction of the *Berliner Schloss* has certainly not resolved these discussions.

⁸¹ M. Siemons, ‘Die Globalisierung verunsichert schon genug’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 December 2016, faz.net.

⁸² A. Klib, ‘Die Fassade steht, der Inhalt wackelt’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 12 December 2020, faz.net.

Photograph by Wojciech Konończuk, 2025



Photograph by Wojciech Konończuk, 2025



■ The Berlin Palace, rebuilt between 2013 and 2020 at a cost of nearly €700 million. Its reconstruction sparked one of the largest public debates in the reunified Germany.

■ A section of Unter den Linden with the Berlin Palace, rebuilt by 2020, the Commandant's House, reconstructed by 2003, and part of the Zeughaus, restored between 1948 and 1965 and now housing the German Historical Museum.

4. Debates over the reconstruction of Berlin's Old Town

While the reconstruction of the historic buildings surrounding Unter den Linden served as an important justification for rebuilding the Berlin Palace, the successful restoration of the former Hohenzollern residence in turn became an argument for reconstructing the oldest part of Berlin, whose origins date back to the Middle Ages.⁸³

Before the Second World War, this area lay on the right bank of the Spree, between St Nicholas's Church (*Nikolaikirche*) and St Mary's Church (*Marienkirche*), near Alexanderplatz. As a result of wartime destruction and subsequent demolitions during the East German period, only 85 of the 1,200 historic buildings in this part of the city survived. The East German authorities showed little interest in reconstruction, apart from the *Nikolaiviertel*, and to this day a vast undeveloped space remains on the site, covering an area equivalent to 20 football pitches. An eight-lane road was driven through the centre of the former Old Town, running past the two reconstructed Gothic churches. At the site of the oldest city square, Molkenmarkt, a major road junction was created. As one Berlin newspaper put it, "the heart of Berlin is now buried beneath asphalt and concrete".⁸⁴

Discussions about redeveloping this part of the German capital have continued since the 1990s, though they remained overshadowed by debates over the reconstruction of other buildings. The city senate presented a project to restore the historic *Klosterviertel* district, located next to Molkenmarkt in the 1990s, but no work was initiated.

The debate gained momentum after work began on the reconstruction of the former Hohenzollern residence, which was increasingly cited as an argument for further reshaping the city centre. In 2014, Hans Stimmann, no longer holding public office, entered the fray: "The reconstruction of the palace for the Humboldt Forum marks the first step in restoring the historic character of the surrounding squares and the city centre across the Spree, thereby re-establishing the building's proper scale and context".⁸⁵

In 2016, the Berlin Senate decided to reduce the arterial road cutting through the former Old Town to six lanes and to redevelop part of the Molkenmarkt area behind the Red Town Hall. The Great Jewish Courtyard is to be reconstructed, along with 450 flats and social and cultural infrastructure. Construction of new buildings, which 'should reference history', is scheduled

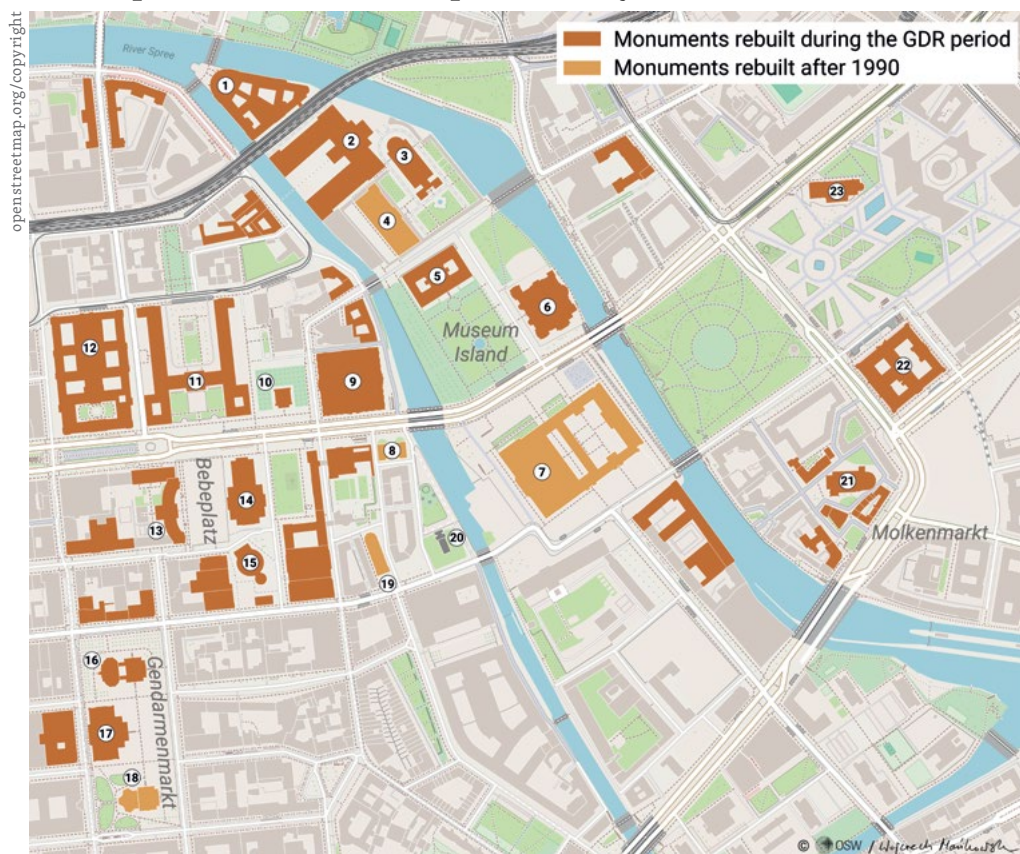
⁸³ M. Dellenbaugh-Losse, *Inventing Berlin. Architecture, Politics and Cultural Memory in the New/Old German Capital Post-1989*, Berlin 2020, p. 148.

⁸⁴ R. Haubrich, 'Die letzte Altstadt von Berlin', *Die Welt*, 13 December 2019, welt.de; I. Jürgens, 'Bürger wollen eine „historische Mitte“: Wie Vereine dafür werben', *Berliner Morgenpost*, 29 August 2024, morgenpost.de.

⁸⁵ Source: M. Dellenbaugh-Losse, *Inventing Berlin. Architecture...*, op. cit.

to begin in 2026, following extensive archaeological work.⁸⁶ The project is being overseen by Christoph Mäckler, an architect and co-author of the reconstruction of Frankfurt am Main's Old Town, widely regarded in Germany as highly successful. (See the subchapter 'The Frankfurt am Main model - reconstruction in West Germany').

Berlin – plan of the reconstructed part of the city



- 1) Bode Museum 2) Pergamon Museum 3) Old National Gallery 4) Neues Museum 5) Altes Museum
 6) Berlin Cathedral 7) Berlin Palace 8) Commandant's House 9) Zeughaus – German Historical Museum
 10) Neue Wache 11) Humboldt University 12) German State Library 13) Old Library 14) State Opera House
 15) St Hedwig's Cathedral 16) French Cathedral 17) Konzerthaus 18) German Cathedral 19) Friedrichswerder Church
 20) Berlin Building Academy [planned reconstruction] 21) St Nicholas's Church 22) Red Town Hall 23) St Mary's Church

The redevelopment of Molkenmarkt and the adjacent vacant Old Town areas, covering approximately 4.5 hectares and including the Gothic Franciscan

⁸⁶ R. Haubrich, 'Die letzte Altstadt von Berlin', *op. cit.*; J. Betschka, 'Berlins historische Mitte: So sieht der Plan des Senats für den Molkenmarkt aus', *Tagesspiegel*, 22 August 2023, [tagesspiegel.de](https://www.tagesspiegel.de).

church left in ruins since the war, is now viewed as the most important urban planning task in central Berlin. The debate continues in the media and involves civic activists advocating the restoration of the district's historic character. This reflects a belief that the form which a city centre has shapes urban identity and expresses the longing which Berlin's residents feel for the historic Old Town.

In 2024, Stimmann again joined the debate, arguing that the discussion proved that the capital was struggling with a "difficulty in searching for the lost part of Berlin", a problem stemming from a "loss of memory and historical identity". He also observed that "the traces of the Berlin Wall have become almost invisible, yet the impact of the divide on the identity of the entire city is a challenge the next generation will have to deal with".⁸⁷ Given that, in Germany, reaching decisions on reconstruction and other major projects usually takes an extremely long time, often preceded by extensive debate, it is reasonable to assume that the same will apply to restoring the buildings in the area of Berlin's oldest district.

Potsdam – erasing the traces of the GDR, restoring the baroque city

The night-time air raid of 14–15 April 1945 devastated the southern part of Potsdam's city centre, the most valuable area of the city in architectural terms. Around 1,400 people were killed, including many forced labourers, mainly from Poland and France. Approximately 45% of the historic centre was destroyed, including the buildings around the Old Market Square (*Alter Markt*). Shortly afterwards, from 17 July to 2 August 1945, Potsdam hosted the conference of the 'Big Three'. Despite the wartime damage, and unlike Berlin, the city retained numerous intact villas in which the delegations of the three victorious powers could be accommodated. Churchill, Truman and Stalin met in Cecilienhof Palace, which had been built a quarter of a century earlier for Wilhelm Hohenzollern, the German Crown Prince, who had left the residence only a few weeks before the famous conference.

After 1949, the East German authorities sought to transform the city – once a favoured abode of the Hohenzollern dynasty – into a model socialist centre. As a result, they decided not to reconstruct most of the destroyed monuments, with the exception of the Town Hall, rebuilt between 1961 and 1966, and St Nicholas's Church (*Nikolaikirche*, 1955–1981). As in many other parts of East Germany, buildings that could have been preserved were also demolished. In 1960, the ruins of the City Palace, the second official residence of the

⁸⁷ H. Stimmann, 'Das Zentrum Berlins bleibt eine Leerstelle', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 4 March 2024, faz.net.

Prussian monarchs after Berlin, located next to the former Old Market Square, were cleared away. The Sanssouci Palace complex and other palace and park ensembles, however, survived. During the East German period, much of the city's preserved bourgeois building stock remained neglected.

As early as October 1990, Potsdam's city council adopted a resolution calling for a "cautious restoration of the urban landscape in line with its historical layout". However, for years no concrete steps were taken to restore the former layout of the city centre. It was not until 1999 that the area designated for future revitalisation was defined, enabling planning work to begin. The area covered 30 hectares, extending from the Old Market Square and its surrounding streets, including the site of the former City Palace, to the New Market Square, as well as the route of the city canal.

Renovation work began around the *Nikolaikirche* (2002–2010) and the Town Hall (2008–2012). In 1999, reconstruction also started on the city canal, dating from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, which had once cut through the oldest part of the city centre but which was filled in during the 1960s. In 2002, the Belvedere on the Klausberg, a large garden building in Sanssouci Park and the only structure in the complex destroyed during the war, was meticulously rebuilt. The project was financed by the Munich-based Messerschmitt Foundation.

The first major reconstructed landmark was the **City Palace (Potsdamer Stadtschloss)**, erected in the mid-eighteenth century and demolished in 1960. In the final years of East Germany, a decision had been taken to build a theatre on the site. However, the political changes of 1989–1990 led to the demolition of the partially completed structure in autumn 1991. At the same time, hopes emerged for the reconstruction of the former Hohenzollern residence. In 1996, the Association for the City Palace (*Stadtschlossverein*) was established and began campaigning for the restoration of the monument. The first step was the reconstruction of the 27-metre-high ornamental entrance gate known as the Fortunaportal, between 2000 and 2002, made possible through private donations.

In 1999, the city council adopted a resolution to reconstruct the building "in a form approximating its historic volume and shape and to designate it for public use". In May 2005, the government of Brandenburg resolved to establish its new headquarters on the palace site, without seeking to restore the building's historical appearance. The Potsdam city government entered into negotiations with the Landtag regarding the design of the project and its financing. Brandenburg allocated €110 million for the development, but did not set aside funds for the reconstruction of the façades. Unexpectedly, €20 million for this purpose was donated by Hasso Plattner, founder of the software company SAP and one

Photograph by Wojciech Konończuk, 2025



Photograph by Wojciech Konończuk, 2025



■ The southern frontage of the Old Market Square in Potsdam, with the City Palace, rebuilt between 2010 and 2013 at a cost of over €130 million, and the Barberini Palace, reconstructed by 2017 at a cost of €70 million.

■ View of the section of Potsdam's old town rebuilt in the 21st century. We can see here St Nicholas's Church, reconstructed between 1945 and 1981, and to its right the City Palace.

of Germany's wealthiest individuals; reportedly, he had been impressed by the strength of public pressure in favour of reconstruction.⁸⁸

During the construction process between 2010 and 2013, around 600 surviving original façade elements, including several sculptures, were incorporated into the reconstructed exterior. The vast building, with its floor space of 19,000 square metres, was given a contemporary interior, with the exception of the reconstructed staircase in the southern wing. A further donation from Plattner in 2011 made it possible to clad the roof in copper in line with the historic model. The first parliamentary session was held there in January 2014. Unlike the reconstruction of the Berlin Palace, the rebuilding of the Potsdam Palace generated little controversy and was supported by a majority of residents. An inscription reading *Ceci n'est pas un château* (This is not a palace), designed by the Potsdam artist Annette Paul, was installed on its façade.

The reconstruction of the City Palace accelerated decisions to rebuild other Potsdam monuments destroyed during the war. This was driven both by pressure from active civic associations and by the success of reconstruction projects in other eastern German cities. The circumstances at the time were aptly captured by one Potsdam city councillor: "We have examined many models very critically. We have visited Dresden several times, closely studied the procedures and the results, and, drawing on the experience of other cities, we have developed our own concept. I believe we will succeed, perhaps even more effectively than others. Our particular ambition is to achieve results that surpass those of Dresden".⁸⁹

The reconstruction projects implemented over the past decade have led to a comprehensive transformation of Potsdam's city centre. The fastest progress was made between 2013 and 2017, when several eighteenth-century buildings in the southern part of the Old Market Square were reconstructed, combining residential and commercial functions. They regained their original Italianate façades, while their interiors were designed in a contemporary style. An exception was made for a number of buildings on Brauerstrasse which, while retaining their historic plot sizes and volumes, were given modern façades. The architect of one of them was Franco Stella, the designer of the Berlin Palace.

The most magnificent and important building was the **Barberini Palace**, constructed in the 1770s and modelled on Rome's Palazzo Barberini. After a lengthy debate over its future function, the proposal put forward by Hasso Plattner was accepted. He offered to convert the building into an art museum. By 2017, the palace had been reconstructed by a foundation which he established

88 G. Mallwitz, S. Rosig, 'Alter Markt in Potsdam wird zur Schaustelle', Berliner Morgenpost, 20 December 2009, morgenpost.de.

89 'Potsdam baut Altstadt wieder auf', Deutschlandradio, 27 October 2011, deutschlandfunk.de.

and finances at a cost of approximately €80 million. The façade was meticulously restored, while the interiors were newly designed. Since then, it has housed the Museum Barberini, displaying the founder's valuable collection of Impressionist paintings, including around 40 works by Claude Monet. The institution rapidly gained an international reputation, enabling it to organise major temporary exhibitions in cooperation with leading global museums.

The greatest challenge for the historic reconstruction project remains the **frontage and immediate surroundings of the Old Market Square (*Alter Markt*)**, once regarded as one of the most beautiful in Europe. Their redevelopment required the demolition of the former Teacher Training Institute, which defenders of East German architecture considered architecturally significant. The city council ultimately decided to reconstruct three blocks located to the north and west of St Nicholas's Church, designating them for residential and commercial use. In line with pre-war models, only the corner buildings will be faithfully reconstructed. The remaining structures will retain their historic volumes but will be given contemporary façades. Reconstruction of the first block was completed in 2024, with work on the next two scheduled to begin in 2025 and 2027 respectively.⁹⁰

Over the past three decades, numerous **historic palaces and villas** on the outskirts of Potsdam have been restored. One of them, Villa Schöningen, now houses a museum recounting the history of the 'Bridge of Spies', the Glienicke Bridge in Potsdam. Its owner, Mathias Döpfner, the CEO of the Axel Springer media group, invited Chancellor Angela Merkel, Henry Kissinger and Mikhail Gorbachev, among other guests, to the museum's opening in 2009. A significant section of the city canal is still awaiting reconstruction, despite Plattner providing financial support in 2020. Under a special programme financed by the federal government and the state of Brandenburg, a total of €400 million will be allocated to the city by 2030 for the renovation of Prussian palaces, primarily the Sanssouci Palace.⁹¹

The reconstruction of the **Garrison Church (*Garrisonkirche*)** has sparked the most intense debate in Potsdam. The church was built between 1730 and 1735 at the behest of King Frederick William I and was regarded as a major achievement of Prussian Baroque architecture. Its most distinctive feature was a tower rising more than 88 metres. The *Garrisonkirche*, the burial place of its founder and of Frederick II, was considered the most important military church in Prussia and became a symbolic pantheon of Prussian militarism. It became

90 K.D. Grote, 'Neue Blicke am Alten Markt', Tagesspiegel, 11 April 2023, tagesspiegel.de; 'Redevelopment Area Potsdam City Centre', Landeshauptstadt Potsdam, 18 February 2025, potsdam.de.

91 A. Kilb, 'Wird die Bildergalerie Friedrichs des Großen dauerhaft geschlossen?', Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 14 September 2023, faz.net.



The 58-metre tower of the Garrison Church in Potsdam, rebuilt between 2017 and 2024 at a cost of over €44 million. In the future it will be crowned with a 30-metre spire bearing the already restored symbols of the Hohenzollerns (visible in the photo): the black Prussian eagle and the crown. A dispute continues over the reconstruction of the nave, where a computer centre building from 1971 is situated.

associated with the history of Nazism on 21 March 1933, when, shortly after being appointed Chancellor, Adolf Hitler met President Paul von Hindenburg there. Their handshake symbolised the alliance between the Nazi movement and conservative elites. The building was damaged during Allied bombing on 15 April 1945 and, by decision of the East German authorities, its ruins were demolished in 1968.

In the mid-1980s, there were the first grassroots efforts calling for the reconstruction of the church. In 2004, more than 100 public figures signed a petition known as the ‘Potsdam Appeal’, deliberately modelled on the ‘Dresden Appeal’, calling for the building’s reconstruction. Among its initiators was the Minister-President of Brandenburg, Matthias Platzeck. In 2008, the civic Garrison Church Foundation (*Stiftung Garnisonkirche*) was established with the aim of rebuilding the church and ensuring its future use as an “open and symbolic city church and a school of conscience”.

In 2013, the authorities granted permission for the reconstruction of the church tower, and the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media recognised the church as a site of national significance. Construction work began in 2017 and cost €44 million, of which €24.75 million was provided from the federal budget. In 2022, Potsdam’s city councillors decided to retain the computing centre adjacent to the reconstructed tower – a decision which the Garrison Church Foundation and some opponents of reconstruction regarded as a reasonable compromise.

Throughout the preparation and reconstruction process, protests were staged across Germany by groups who considered the project unacceptable due to the church’s past, and viewed it as a ‘symbol of Potsdam’s anti-democratic spirit’. Opponents – organised in several civic initiatives – argued that the building was ‘historically tainted’ and would become a symbol for right-wing extremists. The historian Agnieszka Pufelska was among those who participated in the debate, arguing that “an examination of Polish–Prussian relations clearly demonstrates why the *Garnisonkirche* project urgently requires a Polish perspective”.⁹²

In a debate that unfolded across numerous German media outlets, supporters of reconstruction argued that the project had nothing to do with reviving the militarism of ‘new Prussianism’. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* mocked fears that “Prussian militarism would seize the people”, arguing that such concerns were “about as likely as the Kaiser once again strolling through the streets of Frankfurt”. Andreas Kitschke, one of the principal initiators of the reconstruction, contended: “Few places illustrate the course and the

92 A. Pufelska, ‘Vergesst die Teilung Polens nicht’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1 February 2021, faz.net.

errors of German history better than the Garrison Church. It reminds us of human susceptibility to temptation, while admonishing us to “guide our feet into the path of peace”, as the inscription in five languages on the base of the reconstructed tower states”.⁹³

On 23 August 2024, there was a ceremony to mark the opening of the reconstructed 58-metre tower, to which a further 30-metre spire will be added in 2026. The event was attended by President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who had supported the project for several years. In his address, he stated that “the path to reconstruction has been long and complex and remains controversial (...) this site challenges us and confronts us with our history”. At the same time, he called for the addition of “a new, brighter and modern layer to the many historical layers”.⁹⁴

A chapel is housed on the ground floor of the tower, and a historical exhibition is displayed on an upper floor. Opponents of reconstruction and sections of the media have criticised the display for failing to place the Hitler–Hindenburg handshake at the centre of the narrative and for “overlooking its significance”.⁹⁵ A viewing platform has been installed at the top. Disputes continue over the reconstruction of the nave, a prospect that has generated further tension, as it would require the demolition of the 1971 computing centre building, which is currently being used as a cultural venue and is defended by many supporters.

* * *

Almost all reconstruction projects in Potsdam have sparked heated debate between their supporters and opponents. The latter argue that rebuilding “erases from the urban landscape the historical layer of the years 1946–1989” and accuse “newcomers from West Germany” of “turning Potsdam into a city for the economic elite”.⁹⁶ The most radical defenders of East German architecture claim that reconstruction aims to create a city centre that “will in future look as if the Second World War and the GDR had never existed”.⁹⁷ This interpretation is contradicted by such examples as the retention of the hotel that dominates the historic centre, the prefabricated housing blocks located adjacent to the Old Market Square, and the restoration of the well-known and architecturally successful former Minsk restaurant. When Plattner bought the restaurant,

⁹³ C. Seidl, ‘Eine rechtsextreme Verschwörung?’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 March 2024, faz.net; A. Kitschke, ‘Sie erinnert an die Verführbarkeit der Deutschen’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1 November 2022, faz.net.

⁹⁴ F. Kappelsberger, ‘Wachturm der Demokratie oder Nazikirche?’, *Der Spiegel*, 22 August 2024, spiegel.de.

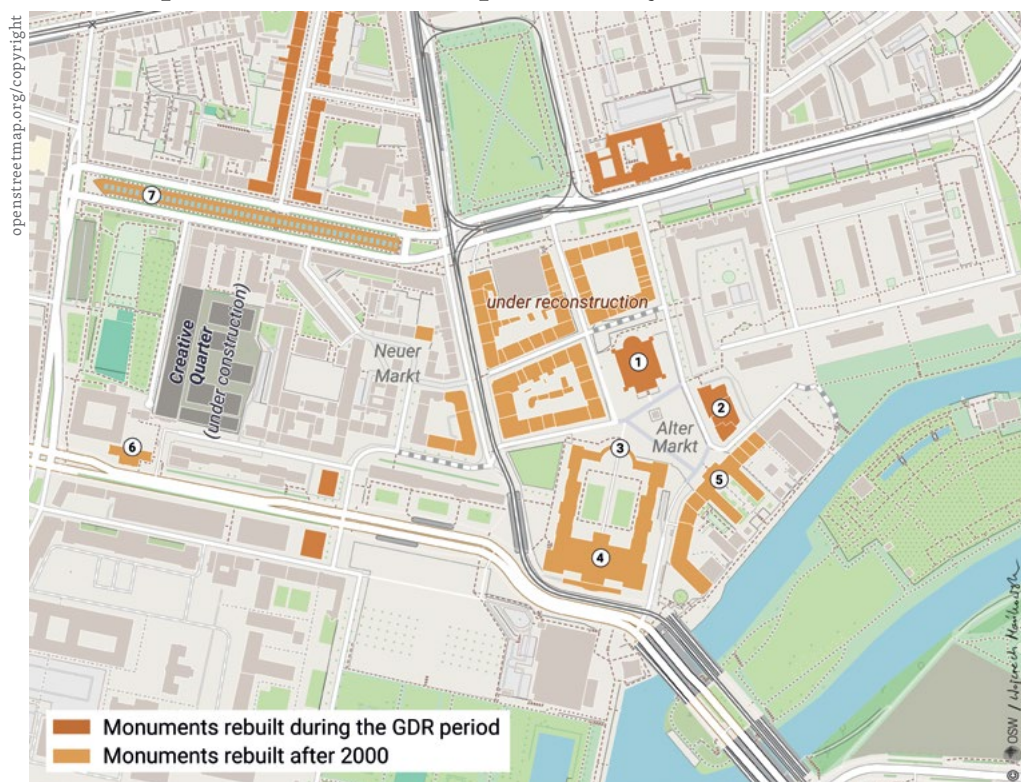
⁹⁵ A. Kilb, ‘Gott mit uns und Preußen gegen alle’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 22 August 2024, faz.net.

⁹⁶ C. Seidl, ‘Die heimliche Hauptstadt’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 June 2021, faz.net; J. Schneider, ‘Ringten um die neue Mitte’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 23 January 2017, sueddeutsche.de.

⁹⁷ M. Baumgärtner, A. Wassermann, ‘Rettet die Ostmoderne’, *Der Spiegel*, 28 June 2017, spiegel.de.

it reopened as Das Minsk, becoming another museum and exhibition space for his collection of East German-era art. Plattner himself – born in West Berlin and now a resident of Potsdam – remarked in an interview: “We treated people from the former GDR very harshly. When the West now says, ‘It’s over. We have given you everything. You have good roads, better than ours’, that is true. However, public sentiment does not necessarily align with material improvements in infrastructure”.⁹⁸

Potsdam – plan of the reconstructed part of the city



- 1) St Nicholas's Church 2) Town Hall 3) Fortuna Portal 4) City Palace 5) Barberini Palace 6) Garrison Church
- 7) Old Canal

For enthusiasts of reconstruction, Potsdam has become something of a ‘mecca’ and proof that sustained civic pressure, combined with political support and the fashion among Berlin elites for purchasing one of Potsdam’s many villas, can yield results, even if the process takes many years. In Potsdam’s case, the backing of figures such as Chancellor Olaf Scholz proved

⁹⁸ S. Schicketanz, ‘Das große Hasso-Plattner-Interview: „Wir sind sehr roh mit den Menschen umgegangen“’, Tagespiegel, 29 March 2019, tagesspiegel.de.

important. He described the city's monument reconstruction process as "recovering the centre", assessing it as "a project close to the hearts of many residents".⁹⁹ He was well-placed to make this judgement, having not only stood for election to the Bundestag in the Potsdam constituency but also, since 2021, having lived in one of the reconstructed townhouses near the Old Market Square.

Revitalisations: Leipzig, Chemnitz, Halle, Magdeburg, Halberstadt...

A black-and-white photograph shows an American soldier, 21-year-old Raymond J. Bowman, lying in a pool of blood. Moments earlier, he had been struck by a bullet fired by a German sniper. The incident took place on 18 April 1945 in Leipzig, and the moment was captured by Robert Capa, the Hungarian-American photographer and one of the most important figures in twentieth-century photography. A few weeks later, *Life* magazine published Capa's picture on its cover under the caption 'Portrait of the Last Man to Die', making it one of the iconic images of the Second World War.

Leipzig, the fifth-largest city in the Third Reich and a major industrial centre, was largely destroyed during Allied air raids. Post-war reconstruction focused on selected public buildings, including the valuable Renaissance Town Hall, the Old Stock Exchange (*Alte Handelsbörse*) and several townhouses around the Old Market Square. Leipzig's old town nonetheless largely retained its historic urban layout, which distinguished it favourably from many other East German cities. Cities such as Chemnitz, Magdeburg and Halle were less fortunate. There, apart from a few individual buildings, the communist authorities not only abandoned plans for reconstruction leaving vacant spaces in their historic centres for decades, but also altered the traditional street layout.

In Chemnitz, which was almost 50% destroyed and known as Karl-Marx-Stadt between 1953 and 1990, the entire city centre was redesigned. This involved the demolition of several blocks of pre-war architecture in the 1960s, including the ruins of the eighteenth-century St Paul's Church (*Paulikirche*). These were replaced by buildings in socialist and industrial styles to underscore the city's role as one of East Germany's most important economic centres.

In the case of Magdeburg, once a prosperous Hanseatic city and more than half-destroyed, the East German authorities resolved to reshape it as a model socialist city. For ideological reasons, they not only refrained from reconstructing historic buildings, including those that could have been restored, but even

⁹⁹ C. Seidl, 'Die heimliche Hauptstadt', *op. cit.*



■ Leipzig's Renaissance Town Hall, reconstructed between 1945 and 1950. Beside it stands the baroque Royal House, once owned by King Augustus II the Strong, partially destroyed during the Second World War and rebuilt by 1963. Its historic appearance was restored in the mid-1990s.

■ The New Town Hall in Leipzig, only slightly damaged during the war, with repairs completed by 1949.

demolished many that had survived. As a result, only isolated structures remained in the centre, among them the Gothic cathedral, the Romanesque Monastery of Our Lady and the Town Hall. Around them rose modern residential blocks, set within newly laid out spacious squares and broad avenues. The historic urban fabric was effectively erased.

Halle proved somewhat more fortunate, as the destruction there was less extensive and the historic layout was largely preserved, although a wide flyover cut through part of the city centre. In the 1960s, Halle-West, a new district for chemical industry workers, was constructed. From 1967 to 1990, it functioned as a separate city under the name Halle-Neustadt. In the 1980s, parts of Halle's historic building stock were demolished, and plain prefabricated housing blocks were built in the immediate vicinity of the Moritzburg, the Renaissance castle of the archbishops.

After reunification, eastern German cities faced structural problems stemming from deindustrialisation, unemployment and a rapid population decline, driven largely by migration to the West. Over the course of three decades, the populations of Chemnitz, Halle and Magdeburg, for example, fell by 20–25%. High vacancy rates became a major challenge. In Magdeburg, vacant flats accounted for around 20% of the housing stock, leading to large-scale demolitions.¹⁰⁰ Depopulation affected small towns in eastern Germany even more severely. Apart from Berlin, notable exceptions were Leipzig and Dresden, where the population increased by around 20% and 10% respectively over the same period. While East Germany had approximately 15 million residents in 1989, excluding East Berlin with its population of around 1.3 million, 35 years later the number of residents in that part of Germany fell below 12.6 million – a decline of 15%.

In May 1991, during his visit to Halle, Chancellor Kohl was pelted with eggs and tomatoes by a crowd shouting 'liar, liar', protesting against factory closures, bankruptcies, impoverishment and unemployment. Kohl lost his composure and moved towards the demonstrators. The incident is widely regarded as symbolic of the strained relationship between the authorities of the reunified Germany and a disillusioned eastern German public.

In an effort to stem outward migration and improve living standards, the federal authorities launched wide-ranging programmes to revitalise eastern German cities. Substantial funding from federal, regional and European Union sources was also directed towards the restoration of surviving material heritage, which after four decades of East German rule was in most cases in

100 K. Racoń-Leja, 'Impact of Wartime Destruction and Post-War Politics on the Social Reconstruction of a Modern City – on the Example of Magdeburg', IOP Conference Series: Materials Science and Engineering, vol. 471, 2019, pp. 5–6.



■ Moritzburg Castle in Halle. Between 2005 and 2008, its western and northern wings were given a futuristic roof designed by the Spanish architects Fuensanta Nieto and Enrique Sobejano. It now houses the Moritzburg Halle Art Museum.

■ A section of renovated old town buildings in Halle alongside residential blocks of flats erected during the East German period.

need of minor or, more often, major conservation work. Priority was given to the most valuable monuments, including churches, public buildings and former residences.

Funding was also directed towards the restoration of entire blocks of surviving pre-war buildings. The vast majority underwent comprehensive renovation after 1990, in some cases at the last possible moment. One example is the townhouse at Jahnallee 61 in Leipzig, where Robert Capa took his iconic photograph. Dating from the early 20th century, the building stood vacant for years and faced demolition. It was saved by local activists who had identified it as the site of the famous photo. Their efforts led to it being purchased by a private investor and to a thorough refurbishment. The building, now known as Capa House, also hosts a permanent exhibition on the photographer's work in Leipzig.¹⁰¹ Another example of a highly successful renovation, combined with reconstruction and the addition of contemporary elements, is the aforementioned Moritzburg Castle in Halle. It was raised from a state of partial ruin and, since 2008, has housed a museum hosting, among other things, a valuable collection of modernist paintings.

Within a relatively short period, the reunified Germany succeeded in restoring the historic fabric that had survived the war and East Germany's often hostile approach to the material traces of the past. At the same time, efforts were made to redevelop vacant spaces in historic city centres. Only in a limited number of cases did this involve the reconstruction of buildings that had existed before the war. Although such examples can be found in many East German cities, nowhere, apart from Dresden, Potsdam and Berlin (as discussed in previous chapters), was reconstruction systemic in character. More commonly, urban infill took the form of new buildings whose scale and outline drew on their pre-war predecessors. In many cases, the original street layout was preserved, helping to recreate the unique atmosphere of the old town. Perhaps the most successful example of this approach is Leipzig's old town, where historic architecture coexists with new buildings that have been skilfully integrated into the historic urban fabric.

It also became common to fill vacant plots with large buildings, for example, shopping centres that occupied several historic plots of land. Their generally dull forms bore no relation to the surrounding historic fabric. Similar, often uninspired architecture can be found in the old towns of Halle, Magdeburg and Rostock. The Old Market Square in Chemnitz provides a negative example

101 K. Connolly, 'Leipzig flat made famous in Capa war photo becomes poignant memorial', *The Guardian*, 1 September 2016, [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).

of this kind of development, with its new, oversized buildings which dominate and effectively overwhelm the city's surviving monuments.

On the other hand, some noteworthy projects by renowned architects have emerged in the cities of eastern Germany. One of the most prominent is the Paulinum, the new building of Leipzig University constructed between 2007 and 2017 on the site of the Gothic St Paul's Church, demolished in 1968. Its principal structural elements reference the historic church. The Museum of Fine Arts in Leipzig (MdbK) also stands out. Completed in 2004, the 36-metre-high glass cube has integrated surprisingly well into the historic centre.

Magdeburg, which was left with little historic urban fabric, offers an instructive case study. After 1990, the city searched for a viable revitalisation strategy. In the 1990s, a comprehensive renovation combined with partial reconstruction was carried out on a grand baroque building adjacent to the cathedral, which now houses the Landtag of Saxony-Anhalt. In 2005, the Green Citadel, a postmodern residential complex designed by the Austrian artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser, was erected in the historic centre. The building continues to generate controversy and can be seen as emblematic of the dilemmas surrounding the redevelopment of central Magdeburg. Finally, in 2021, after lengthy debate, it was decided that part of the old town along the Elbe would be reconstructed under the Am Prämonstratenserberg project. The aim is to revive the historic old-town development there and restore residential and commercial functions to this part of the city.¹⁰² Public consultations on the final design are underway and the ultimate form of the reconstruction remains open.

In both eastern and western Germany, the historic fabric of the vast majority of smaller towns survived the war. These towns, which typically had populations running into the tens of thousands, often lacked war-related industry, and were therefore spared Allied air raids. One exception was Halberstadt in Saxony-Anhalt, a town of around 50,000 residents, where a factory producing wings for Junkers bombers operated and which employed, among others, prisoners from a local subcamp of Buchenwald. In a bombing raid on 8 April 1945, approximately 80% of the town was destroyed, including 676 historic half-timbered houses, while the great Gothic cathedral suffered severe damage. During the East German period, the devastated area was built over with prefabricated housing blocks, while the former Old Market Square remained an undeveloped void. The destruction of the urban fabric was compounded in the 1980s by the demolition of around 400 historic timber-framed houses.

¹⁰² M. Pestalozzi, 'Historisierende Fassaden in Magdeburg?', 29 October 2021, german-architects.com.



The new Museum of Fine Arts in Leipzig, completed in 2004 in the form of a 36-metre-high glass cube, integrates effectively into the city's historic centre.

Other medium-sized East German towns, including Görlitz, Freiberg, Naumburg, Quedlinburg, Stralsund, Wismar and Weimar, emerged from the war largely unscathed or with only minor damage that could be repaired. The reunified Germany adopted several federal programmes aimed at restoring historic town centres and revitalising public spaces. It became clear that more than four decades of East German rule had created substantial backlogs in maintenance and conservation, threatening the very survival of this part of Germany's material heritage. The intention was to transform historic centres into vibrant and attractive places to live, work and relax – an objective made all the more pressing due to rapid depopulation. Attracting tourists was also seen as important, as this was expected to boost economic development. Between 1991 and 1995, the Federal Ministry for Housing, Urban Development and Building implemented the 'Model City for Urban Renewal' (*Modellstadt für Stadtsanierung*) programme. Under this initiative, several towns, including Quedlinburg, Meissen, Weimar, Stralsund, Naumburg and Halberstadt, were selected to serve as exemplary cases of historic centre restoration. More significant, however, was the 'Urban Heritage Conservation' federal-Länder programme (*Städtebaulicher Denkmalschutz*), launched in 1991, which aimed to support comprehensive measures to preserve, renew and develop historic centres and areas of architectural and cultural value. Its motto, 'Save the Old Towns', echoed one of the key demands of civic movements in East Germany in the late 1980s. Between 1991 and 2008, €4.6 billion was allocated under the programme to projects in 178 towns across the new federal states. By 2019, revitalisation and development schemes in historic areas had been implemented in a further 77 eastern German towns.

In some cases, monuments destroyed during the war were also reconstructed. These included the baroque Hundisburg Palace in Haldensleben near Magdeburg and the monumental fourteenth-century St George's Church (*Georgenkirche*) in Wismar, which had lain in ruins since 1945. The highly complex conservation works, one of the few examples of the large-scale reconstruction of a Gothic church in recent decades, were carried out between 1990 and 2017 at a cost of €43 million.

In addition to federal initiatives, individual state governments introduced their own programmes to restore historic town centres. One example was Saxony-Anhalt's Urban Reconstruction 2010 initiative (*IBA Stadtumbau 2010*), launched in 2002. Under the scheme, 19 towns with particularly valuable old-town ensembles were selected for a comprehensive renovation financed by local and EU funds. Part of the funding was also directed towards economic and social measures. The programme was especially significant in Saxony-Anhalt given the depopulation occurring there. Between 1989 and 2009, the population

of this federal state fell from 2.96 million to 2.36 million – a decline of 20%. By 2025, it had decreased to 1.94 million – a further 18% drop.¹⁰³

Quedlinburg and Halberstadt exemplify the effectiveness of these systemic urban renovation programmes. Located just 10 kilometres apart, both towns were renowned before the war for their unique ensembles of half-timbered architecture. In Quedlinburg, a town of 30,000 residents, 1,200 historic buildings were restored at a cost of €171 million, one third of which came from federal funds, with the remainder provided by regional and municipal sources.¹⁰⁴ As a result, the carefully revitalised town, with its unique old-town vibe, has become a popular tourist destination.

Halberstadt, with around 35,000 residents, faced a far greater challenge. Unlike Quedlinburg, it suffered not only wartime destruction but also large-scale demolitions during the East German period. Once considered an architectural jewel, the town was in a severe state of decline after 1990. Of the original 1,500 half-timbered houses, only 447 survived and they required urgent conservation. Federal programmes made it possible to restore the entire remaining historic fabric. Between 1995 and 1998, modern buildings were erected around the former market square, only referring to their predecessors in terms of their scale. A new town hall was constructed on the preserved cellar foundations, following the original layout and with a reconstructed façade, thus closing a large gap in the historic centre.¹⁰⁵ Today, Halberstadt's urban layout appears far more coherent than it did before 1990, although the new buildings, with their simple and rather unremarkable architecture, are not widely regarded as being successful. Over three decades, substantial progress has been made in partially healing the scars of war, but a complete restoration will never be possible.

Halberstadt has seen a further success in Halberstadt in the restoration of Cathedral Square, the historic buildings surrounding it, and the two churches that frame it at opposite ends: the four-towered Romanesque Basilica of Our Lady (*Liebfrauenkirche*) and the Gothic Cathedral of St Stephen and St Sixtus. The partial reconstruction of the cathedral took several decades and was not completed until 2010. It is one of the more successful post-war conservation projects involving a Gothic church. The significance of this sacred monument was underscored by the restored cathedral treasury reopening to visitors in 2008, an event which was attended by the President of Germany, Horst Köhler. It is worth quoting a longer excerpt from his address:

103 International Building Exhibition Urban Redevelopment Saxony-Anhalt 2010, iba-stadtumbau.de.

104 '50 Years of the Urban Development Support Programme in Germany', Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, Berlin 2020, staedtebauforderung.info, pp. 24–25.

105 M. Donath, 'Denkmalpflege heißt Geschichte erlebbar machen', *op. cit.*; 'Modellstadt Halberstadt', halberstadt.de.

We are reconnecting with long-standing traditions. We see ourselves as part of a history that extends far beyond the past century, with its destruction and devastation brought upon our country and this city by war and dictatorships. This day signifies that Halberstadt is looking to the future with confidence, civic solidarity and commitment, while affirming its deep historical roots (...) Today in particular we can sense this clearly: there is no future without a past. Identity requires an awareness of one's own history. The reopening of the cathedral treasury today makes an important line of tradition, the lineage of this city and this region visible once again.¹⁰⁶

After more than three decades, medium-sized and smaller eastern German towns have fundamentally changed in appearance. Years of investment from federal and Länder budgets, supplemented by European Union funding, have led to the comprehensive revitalisation of their historic centres, public spaces and infrastructure. In many cases, the material traces of war – vacant plots and ruins – have been removed, restoring a sense of urban coherence. Today, these towns are generally places that draw confidence from a renewed sense of identity and which boast impressively restored monuments and attract tourists. Depopulation, however, remains a persistent challenge in many of them. Both Länder and federal governments continue to allocate substantial resources to monument conservation, as illustrated by the joint restoration programme for palaces and castles in Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia adopted in 2021. Under this scheme, €400 million will be spent by 2027, half of which will be provided by the federal government.¹⁰⁷

As a result of the sustained, systemic investment in heritage preservation and restoration, further historic town centres and individual monuments in eastern Germany have been added to the prestigious UNESCO World Heritage List: Quedlinburg (1994), the Luther memorials in Eisleben and Wittenberg (1996), Weimar (1998), Wartburg Castle (1999), the Dessau-Wörlitz Garden Realm (2000), Stralsund and Wismar (2002), Naumburg Cathedral (2018), the Old Synagogue in Erfurt (2023) and Schwerin Castle (2024).

106 'Grußwort von Bundespräsident Horst Köhler anlässlich der Wiedereröffnung des Halberstädter Domschatzes', Bundespräsidialamt, 13 April 2008, [bundespraesident.de](https://www.bundespraesident.de).

107 C. Hickley, 'East German palaces and castles to get €400m for renovation', *The Art Newspaper*, 28 June 2021, theartnewspaper.com.

The Frankfurt am Main model – reconstruction in West Germany

As a result of wartime destruction and the subsequent reconstruction, most large cities in West Germany acquired a modernist image. As outlined in the subchapter ‘West Germany – reconstruction in a modernist form’, after 1945 the reconstruction of historic buildings was usually abandoned. Individual public buildings were restored, while the historic street layout was retained and new structures were erected along these streets in forms resembling the original. After 1990, the western Länder did not undertake a project of heritage reconstruction on the scale observed in the former East Germany. This was largely because, after almost half a century of democracy and a free market system, city centres were already densely built up. Spatial ‘voids’ in inner cities, such as those found in Berlin or Dresden, were rare.

Following reunification, however, intensive efforts were made in the western part of the country to renovate preserved monuments and architectural ensembles. In many places, authorities also reconstructed buildings that had not been rebuilt immediately after the end of the Second World War. Although on a different scale and with some delay compared to developments in the eastern part of the country, reconstruction and heritage protection in the western Länder became an important element of identity and cultural policy, and a subject of public debate.

Immediately after reunification, the greatest effort focused on renovating existing monuments, often including the completion of projects initiated after the end of the war. Comprehensive works were undertaken at Aachen and Cologne’s cathedrals, the Romanesque St Michael’s Church in Hildesheim and the old town of Bamberg. Each year, the western federal states allocated hundreds of millions of euros to the maintenance and preservation of architectural heritage. In 2009, the federal-Länder programme ‘Urban Heritage Protection’ (*Städtebaulicher Denkmalschutz*) was extended to the western Länder. By 2019, it had funded 343 projects in 322 cities. The non-governmental German Foundation for Monument Protection (*Deutsche Stiftung Denkmalschutz*) has also played a prominent role. Since 1985, it has supported around 600 renovation projects annually with approximately €20 million, made possible by private donations. To date, it has provided more than €750 million for the conservation or reconstruction of around 7,500 monuments across the country.

In western Germany, unlike in the new Länder, there was no need for the large-scale reconstruction of destroyed **residential buildings**, because the vast majority had been successfully rebuilt in the decades following 1945.

Examples include:

- the baroque Würzburg Residence (*Würzburger Residenz*), compared to Versailles and Schönbrunn, rebuilt between 1946 and 1987, which meant it could be placed on the UNESCO World Heritage List;
- the Mannheim Palace, one of the largest palace complexes in Europe, reconstructed between 1957 and 1964 to serve as a university;
- the Zweibrücken Palace in Rhineland-Palatinate, rebuilt by 1964 to house a court;
- the Bruchsal Palace in Baden-Württemberg, reconstructed between 1946 and 1977, with restoration of the frescoes not completed until 1996;
- the Rumpenheim Palace in Offenbach am Main, rebuilt in the 1980s and 1990s.

Although Nuremberg Castle (*Nürnberger Burg*) and the Munich Residence (*Die Münchner Residenz*) have long been open to visitors, work is still being finished off in some sections. This underlines how complex, time-consuming and costly the process is.

After 1990, work began on a small number of western German residential buildings that had not previously been reconstructed. Between 2004 and 2010, the late baroque Thurn und Taxis Palace in central Frankfurt am Main (*Das Palais Thurn und Taxis*) was rebuilt, although its volume was slightly reduced compared to the original. Although the building has a reinforced concrete structure and a modern interior, its façade was faithfully restored, with salvaged sandstone elements incorporated into it. The palace stands alongside two contemporary skyscrapers erected at the same time and is now used as a commercial space.

Between 2005 and 2007, the neoclassical Brunswick Palace (*Braunschweiger Schloss*) was reconstructed. Its ruins had been demolished in 1960. The project was unusual. Lacking sufficient funds, the city sold the plot for €35 million to a commercial company which then rebuilt the former residence of the House of Welf as a shopping centre. At the same time, space was set aside for a museum, archive and library. The city of Brunswick contributed €11 million towards the faithful reconstruction of the stone façade. Polish stonemasons, who had previously worked on Dresden's Frauenkirche, incorporated 650 original elements into it.¹⁰⁸ Brunswick Palace became the subject of extensive expert and media debate. Some argued that its "reconstruction closes a wound for many residents of Brunswick". At the same time, it provoked fierce protests, and the building was described as a "hybrid palace".¹⁰⁹ In 2008, a nine-metre-high, 25-tonne bronze quadriga was reinstated above the main entrance.

¹⁰⁸ Ch. Thomas, 'Discount statt Denkmalschutz', Deutschlandfunk, 27 March 2007, deutschlandfunk.de.

¹⁰⁹ A. Klingenberg, 'Das Hybrid-Schloss', Die Zeit, 19 June 2017, zeit.de.

It is the largest surviving quadriga in Germany and was cast at a foundry in Komorniki near Poznań.

Another example of reconstruction is the baroque Herrenhausen Palace near Hanover (*Schloss Herrenhausen*), the summer residence of the Hanoverian dynasty. The building was rebuilt between 2009 and 2013 at a cost of €25 million, much of which was provided by the Volkswagen Foundation, and now serves as a museum. Substantial sums were also spent on a comprehensive renovation of residential monuments which had already been reconstructed after the war. One example is Mannheim Palace (*Schloss Mannheim*), the largest baroque palace in Germany, whose conservation cost €54 million.

Regardless of where in the world decisions to reconstruct are taken, they stem from an obvious fact: a given palace or castle plays an important role in the identity of a town and its local community. It is also worth noting that, unlike in East Germany, landed estates in West Germany were not nationalised after 1945. In East Germany, nationalisation often led to the destruction of many rural palaces.

After 1990, numerous western German cities decided to rebuild monuments that had not existed since the war. In most cases, this process began only in the early twenty-first century and remains ongoing. The most prominent examples include the reconstruction of the timber-framed buildings at Andreasplatz in Hildesheim, around the Gothic Church of St Andrew, the restoration of the Flemish Gothic town hall façade in Wesel in North Rhine-Westphalia, the rebuilding of the sixteenth-century Old Weigh House in Brunswick, and the ongoing interior works at Augsburg Town Hall (one of the most important Renaissance secular buildings in northern Europe). These projects were often initiated by civic groups, and the successful reconstruction of one monument frequently prompted debate about restoring others.

Munich represents an exceptional case. Despite extensive wartime destruction, over several decades it regained its former status as one of the most attractive and harmonious cities, and traces of the war became barely visible. After German reunification, many monuments rebuilt during the difficult years of post-war poverty underwent a comprehensive renovation. One example is Munich's New Town Hall, which was meticulously conserved in the late 1990s.

One of the most high-profile architectural projects in Germany after 1990 was the **reconstruction of part of Frankfurt am Main's old town**. In 2004, the city authorities opened a debate on whether to renovate or demolish the vast modernist Technical Town Hall (*Technisches Rathaus*),¹¹⁰ which had been

110 A 'technical town hall' is a term used in Germany to denote municipal administrative buildings that house institutions such as building control offices and urban planning departments.

built some 30 years earlier and occupied a large section of the former old town. The historic centre had been heavily damaged in an air raid on 22 March 1944. After the war, only part of it was rebuilt, including the Römer, the medieval town hall building and, following reunification, several individual structures such as the neoclassical Old City Library (*Alte Stadtbibliothek*). Although the architectural competition resolved a year later selected a proposal for contemporary buildings on the site, it was annulled after effective civic mobilisation. A citizens' initiative, supported by a large share of residents, demanded that the municipality restore the historic layout of the district. The activists strengthened their position when some of them joined the electoral lists of the Civic Alliance for Frankfurt, which holds seats on the city council. As a result, the citizens' group succeeded in pushing through a plan to reconstruct part of the old town.

In 2007, the city council of Frankfurt am Main decided to reconstruct historic buildings on the site of the Technisches Rathaus. The structure, which had never enjoyed public support and was dubbed the 'Klotz' or 'block', was demolished between 2010 and 2012.¹¹¹ The reconstruction project, branded Dom-Römer, was carried out between 2012 and 2018. The city adopted a model under which the project was implemented by its own development company. At a cost of €210 million, it rebuilt 35 buildings. 15 were faithful reconstructions based on historical plans and executed using traditional craftsmanship, including the iconic townhouses *Goldenes Lämmchen* and *Haus zur Goldenen Waage*. A further 20 were given forms modified from their originals. Frankfurt am Main was able to undertake the project without federal funding, as its status as a key banking centre makes it one of the wealthiest cities in Germany. In line with established German practice, part of the area was designated for residential use.¹¹²

German researchers note that Frankfurt am Main's decision to reconstruct its old town district was influenced by the reopening of the Frauenkirche in Dresden and the subsequent rebuilding of the Neumarkt. As Katja Marek wrote, "In Frankfurt, it can be demonstrated that the Dresden effect is one of the reasons, or one of the driving forces, behind the reconstruction of the historic centre".¹¹³ The affluent western German city even sought to surpass the Dresden model, where only façades were reconstructed but with modern interiors. In Frankfurt am Main's old town, by contrast, some buildings were comprehensively and meticulously rebuilt.

Frankfurt am Main came to be regarded, alongside Dresden, as the most important example of the successful reconstruction of part of a historic urban

111 Frankfurts neue Altstadt, Ein Web-Dossier der Frankfurter Rundschau, 2019, frstory.de.

112 'Lebendiges Wohn- und Einkaufsviertel im Herzen Frankfurts', DomRömer, domroemer.de.

113 K. Marek, 'Rekonstruktion! Warum?', *op. cit.*, p. 22, bpb.de; E. von Engelberg-Dočkal, H.-R. Meier, 'Traditional rebuilding...', *op. cit.*, p. 42.

fabric and as a reference point for other German cities. A few years after the completion of the Dom-Römer project, both residents and many experts who had previously been sceptical were able to agree that an initiative which was not purely architectural in nature had produced highly positive results. It created an attractive public space that draws tourists, serves as an important testament to the city's history and, as its mayor – who had been an opponent of the reconstruction – stated, “it restored to the residents a part of their soul”.¹¹⁴ The success of Dom-Römer also prompted efforts to develop the remaining post-war ‘void’ in the neighbouring Paulsplatz district.

The Frankfurt am Main example encouraged other cities in western Germany. The largest undertaking is the **redevelopment of Lübeck's city centre**, launched in 2017. In the Gründungsviertel district, located in the western part of the old town, two large post-war buildings were demolished and work began to restore the historic plot structure. The façades of the new townhouses, 38 of which are due to be completed by 2026, do not replicate their pre-war predecessors. Instead, they offer a contemporary interpretation, drawing in shape and form on the traditional Hanseatic architecture characteristic of this part of Germany. This represents a compromise between advocates of reconstruction and those who favour modern architecture.

The process of monument reconstruction in western Germany remains unfinished, and there are strong indications that the coming years will bring further positive decisions. In Stuttgart, discussions are underway on the need to rebuild the town hall and the market square townhouses. Similar debates are taking place in Bremen and Dortmund, where 84% of respondents have expressed support for reconstructing the town hall. Residents are most often the driving force behind reconstruction, while city authorities are typically persuaded by the prospect of increased tourist appeal and by the process's impact on strengthening the local identification with the place of residence.

As a result, over the past three decades the face of some western German cities has changed, with the past coexisting harmoniously alongside the present.

Conclusions: the future needs to be rooted in the past

On 7 May 1995, the 50th anniversary of the capitulation of Nazi Germany, Jürgen Habermas delivered a lecture in the former St Paul's Church (*Paulskirche*) in Frankfurt am Main, a site of symbolic importance for Germans. In 1848–1849, this neoclassical building housed the Frankfurt National Assembly, the first

¹¹⁴ G. Murr, 'Die Lehren aus dem Wiederaufbau', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 October 2023, faz.net.

democratically elected German parliament. The church was destroyed during the war, but as early as 1948 it reopened after reconstruction as a deconsecrated national memorial and venue for public events.

Habermas entitled his address: *1989 in the shadow of 1945: on the normality of a future Berlin Republic*. This prominent philosopher argued, among other points, that the years 1989–1990 marked a transition from one historical epoch to another. As a result, Germans regained a continuity interrupted in 1945 and could again function normally at the heart of Europe ‘without fear of power’. At the same time, he identified coming to terms with a criminal past and the preservation of its memory as an integral part of the identity of a united Germany. He went on to state:

The epochal threshold, which simultaneously paves the way for a return to a happier status quo ante bellum awakens a dialectical expectation: on the one hand, entirely new problems demand entirely new answers; on the other, those answers are to be mined from the sealed treasure trove of a tradition with which we made, in 1945, an ‘infamous’ break.¹¹⁵

This intellectual, who exerted considerable influence on Germany’s public debate, not only encouraged the broadly understood ‘treasure trove of tradition’ to be drawn on, he also criticised the post-war rupture with it. He argued that Germans should seek within it some of the answers to the questions and problems they faced.

An important element of Habermas’s appeal was his reference to Germany’s material heritage, which had been severely diminished by wartime destruction. In the mid-1990s, a movement for the renovation and conservation of architectural monuments was only just beginning to take shape in Germany, followed by efforts to reconstruct some of those considered irretrievably lost. The ongoing reconstruction of the Frauenkirche in Dresden, which was supported by the federal authorities (in particular Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who repeatedly stressed the importance of heritage for German identity), was powerful stimulus for this development. This accelerated a shift already underway in the mindset of the intellectual and political elites.

Changing this mindset required the dismantling of a view that had been dominant in the post-war half-century and which had been endorsed by experts. This view discredited the reconstruction of monuments, describing it as ‘deception’, a ‘falsification of history’ or even the ‘erasure of guilt’.¹¹⁶ The German

115 J. Habermas, ‘1989 in the Shadow of 1945: On the Normality of a Future Berlin Republic’ [in:] *A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany*, University of Nebraska 1997, p. 167.

116 W. Nerdinger (ed.), *Geschichte der Rekonstruktion. Konstruktion der Geschichte*, München 2010, p. 14, arthistoricum.net; M. Donath, ‘Denkmalpflege heißt Geschichte erlebbar machen’, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

public responded quickly and enthusiastically to proposals for rebuilding. A clear majority regarded them as justified and beneficial for their communities and for the country. This proved to be a crucial factor, often leading civic initiatives to exert grassroots pressure on authorities to reconstruct specific buildings.

Let us return to Jan Zachwatowicz, who in his address of 1946, cited here on several occasions, argued that without public support nothing would succeed:

It must be recognised that we will not be able to carry out a great heritage programme on the basis of legislation alone (...) Only awareness-raising efforts and the cooperation of society that these achieve will make it possible to attain the principal objective: restoring monuments to their proper form and role.¹¹⁷

Decisions to rebuild many important German monuments after 1990, followed by frequent disputes over their final form, were usually preceded by heated debates between the (plentiful) supporters and the (less plentiful) opponents. Germany's culture of compromise often proved helpful and, once reconstruction was completed, criticism would usually halt. The Berlin Palace and the Garrison Church in Potsdam were, and are likely to remain, exceptions. For some participants in the debate, they carry the legacy of Prussian militarism and Hitlerism. In their view, "uncritical reconstruction" creates a new national narrative that removes the wartime defeat and the subsequent division of Germany from memory, and "elides the issue of the guilt of the Nazi regime".¹¹⁸

Over time, the arguments of the critics of historical reconstruction have stilled, not least because of successive successful projects which have demonstrated tangible benefits for local communities as well as for the business and tourist appeal of a given city. Potsdam offers a clear example. In 2013, at least one million tourists spent a night there, while ten years later the figure had risen to 1.36 million.¹¹⁹ The increase was even more pronounced in Dresden, where 2.7 million tourists stayed overnight in 2005, compared with 4.4 million in 2023. Notably, in both these cities Polish visitors top the list of foreign tourists.¹²⁰ Research indicates that local budgets benefit significantly from the renovation or reconstruction of monuments. Each euro invested in these projects can generate up to €1.80 in tax revenue.¹²¹

117 J. Zachwatowicz, 'Program i zasady konserwacji zabytków', *op. cit.*, p. 50.

118 S. Kott, T. Wieder, 'The (Re-)construction of Monuments in Germany: New Historical Narratives in a Time of Nation-building', *Contemporary European History* 2023, no. 32, p. 7.

119 'Tourismus im Blick Angebot und Nachfrage', Landeshauptstadt Potsdam, *Statistik im Blick* 02/2023, p. 4, potsdam.de; 'Neuer Übernachtungsrekord für Potsdams Tourismusbranche', *Pressemitteilung* No. 83, 4 March 2024, potsdam.de.

120 Tourismus, *dresden.de*.

121 S. Mitchell, 'Renovation and Restoration Opportunities in Germany's Historic Buildings', *HouseNix*, 31 March 2025, housenix.com.

The emergence of the younger generations to the forefront has also played an important role. They do not feel responsible for German crimes during the Second World War, see no controversy in the reconstruction process, and the debate linking it to 'historical guilt' makes little sense to them. As a result, the scale of subsequent reconstruction projects grew larger and more ambitious, and questions about their ethical dimension, or about whether "we are permitted to do this at all", subsided. This illustrates a gradual process by which Germany has sought to free itself from the burden of history. It seems likely that current disputes over the legitimacy of particular reconstructions will, in time, cease to be seen as significant and will fade from memory.

The arguments advanced by advocates of the preservation of the East German architectural legacy are a separate issue. Their opposition has at times delayed or temporarily blocked the demolition of post-war buildings to make way for the reconstruction of earlier structures. This reflects a broader problem, concerning both the place the East German communist state and its memory occupy within German history, and also contemporary historical policy. The dominant narrative tends to reduce East Germany solely to a dictatorship imposed by the Soviet Union – an account that remains incomplete.

Debates accompanying the reconstruction of monuments, the widespread nature of this practice and the 'historicisation' of urban public space directly affect German identity and contemporary understandings of the country's dark past. In Germany, as in Poland after 1945,¹²² reconstruction has been treated as a form of social response to trauma and an attempt to overcome it. The restoration of historic buildings has coincided with an intensified discussion of German suffering and the mass casualties caused by Allied air raids, as well as with a growing conviction among Germans that they, too, were victims of the Second World War.

On the one hand, the link between reconstruction and guilt has been severed. The post-war conviction that destroyed monuments should not be reconstructed on a large scale due to historical responsibility has gradually faded. On the other hand, the reconstruction process has strengthened the identification with the 'old Germany' and increased pride in at least partially recovered and attractive expressions of the past, embodied in historic buildings. The continued rebuilding of monuments also reflects a belief within German society that the nation has become reconciled with itself. From this perspective, the 'normalisation' of Germany – after accepting its Nazi history, building democratic institutions and achieving reunification – led to the

122 P. Majewski, 'Odbudowa zabytków – nadal aktualna?', *Teologia Polityczna*, 4 March 2025, teologiapolityczna.pl.

gradual recovery of memory and of the right to take pride in Germanness.¹²³ In this sense, historical reconstructions have become a form of therapy, all the more so as the restoration of certain monuments is seen as an element of ‘international reconciliation’. The Frauenkirche in Dresden provides a clear example. The foundation that rebuilt it adopted as its motto: ‘Building bridges, living reconciliation, strengthening faith’.¹²⁴

The reconstruction of monuments, along with the discussions and at times heated disputes accompanying it, has helped to restore memory at both the local and national levels. For what are monuments if not material manifestations of a community’s historical memory? Historic architecture is one of the key carriers of memory and is thus also an important foundation and source of identity and, as Zachwatowicz put it, an “anchor of national identification”. Hasso Plattner, the philanthropist mentioned in the previous chapter, expressed a similar view when he stated that the rebuilding of Dresden and Potsdam “restored their souls”.¹²⁵

For this reason, placing the issue of monument reconstruction at the centre of many German debates has contributed to a redefinition of contemporary German historical identity by adding back recovered elements from earlier periods. This has fuelled concern among opponents of reconstruction, who argue that rebuilding historic structures strengthens a right-wing identity. In support of their claim, they point to the fact that reconstruction is particularly strongly endorsed by the radical AfD.¹²⁶ By contrast, the counterarguments are well captured in the words of the German urban planner Harald Bodenschatz, who wrote:

Some reconstructions are welcomed by the new political right. So what? Does that mean that everything the new political right likes is therefore right-wing and that we should leave it to them? The Berlin Palace, the Garrison Church in Potsdam, the new old town in Frankfurt am Main? Or perhaps we should also turn our backs on Goethe and Schinkel, who were fervently venerated by former Nazis? That is absurd and, above all, politically misguided, even capitulatory. We must fight for every element of cultural heritage, for every building – not

¹²³ See M.G. Ash, ‘Becoming Normal, Modern, and German (Again!)’ [in:] M. Geyer (ed.), *The Power of Intellectuals in Contemporary Germany*, Chicago 2001, p. 295.

¹²⁴ A. Saupe, “‘Deep Historicisation’ and Political and Spatio-Temporal “Centrism”: Layers of Time and Belonging in the Reconstructed City Centres of Berlin and Potsdam’ [in:] S. Eckersley, C. Vos (eds.), *Diversity of Belonging in Europe. Public Spaces, Contested Places, Cultural Encounters*, London 2023, p. 67.

¹²⁵ S. Schicketanz, ‘Interview mit Hasso Plattner: „Potsdam wird ein bedeutender Ort auf der Kunst-Weltkarte“’, *Tagespiegel*, 20 February 2020, [tagesspiegel.de](https://www.tagesspiegel.de).

¹²⁶ U. Rada, ‘„Rechte stoßen in die Mitte vor“’, *Die Tageszeitung*, 28 January 2024, [taz.de](https://www.taz.de).

against heritage, not against the monument. Above all, this means fighting for the right memory, for its interpretation and its use.¹²⁷

It is difficult to disagree that it is not the reconstructions of monuments themselves that could awaken Germany's 'demons' of the past.

* * *

It is impossible to fully restore the pre-war architectural order of German cities, nor has anyone set themselves this objective. Yet over the 80 years since the war, Germany has rebuilt and restored a substantial part of its architectural heritage. This process accelerated after reunification, particularly in the eastern Länder and in Berlin. During this period, the German capital and many other cities underwent a profound transformation, shaping a new image with extensive reference to tradition. By reconstructing entire areas within historic city centres, Germany has to a large extent filled the post-war architectural void and at least partially restored urban order and harmony. Despite major reconstruction successes, which have significantly influenced the formation of a new German social identity, the process remains incomplete. State policy continues to favour its continuation.¹²⁸

In conclusion, one may ask about the long-term effects of Germany's still unfinished 'reconstruction boom' and the issue of authenticity. The occasional 'conservation falsehood', meaning reconstruction in a modified or modernised form, is of limited significance once a monument has been recovered, restored to life and given new functions, thereby enriching the architectural landscape and the local community.

Václav Havel provided a reasonable response to the question about authenticity. After visiting Gdańsk in 2005 and praising the old town rebuilt after 1945, he wrote: "In a hundred years it won't matter a bit whether a particular house in Gdansk was built 200 years earlier or later. After all, even Czechs can no longer distinguish between Gothic and pseudo-Gothic".¹²⁹

¹²⁷ H. Bodenschatz, 'Neurechte Bildpolitik?', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 8 April 2024, faz.net.

¹²⁸ Owners of listed buildings in Germany are offered public funding and tax exemptions. According to estimates, by 2040 the restoration and reconstruction sector will be worth €312 billion. S. Mitchell, 'Renovation and Restoration Opportunities in Germany's Historic Buildings', *op. cit.*

¹²⁹ V. Havel, *To the castle and back*, London 2008, p. 261.

History museums in Germany's memory policy

Robert Kostro

MAIN POINTS

- History museums are among the key institutions in Germany's memory policy. Their origins in the 1980s were linked to the debates surrounding the experience of National Socialism, the Holocaust, and the possibility of reconstructing positive elements of German history as components of national identity. Some institutions, such as the German Historical Museum and the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany, both established through top-down initiatives, reflected the consciously pursued policy of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's government. Others, such as the Topography of Terror and the Jewish Museum Berlin, emerged in response to initiatives originating from various social and cultural groups.
- German memory policy places particular emphasis on commemoration and educational activities relating to two areas of Germany's dramatic historical experience in the 20th century: the crimes of National Socialism and the communist dictatorship in the GDR. Activity in these spheres is largely institutionalised through memorial sites – museums established at the original sites of crimes and repression: concentration camps, prisons, and former headquarters of the Nazi or communist security services, among other sites. These memorial sites preserve the original historical fabric, organise permanent and temporary exhibitions, and conduct research as well as educational and outreach activities.
- Over the past 30 years, there has been a tendency to shift competences in the field of memory policy towards the Federal Chancellery (specifically, the Minister of State for Culture and the Media), which oversees the most important museums (the German Historical Museum and the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany) and co-finances some institutions whose founding bodies are the federal states (the memorial sites). The museums (the most significant institutions) are managed by foundations established by acts of the Bundestag or by legislation adopted by the federal states. This ensures the independence of these institutions from current political agendas. Supervision is exercised through collegial bodies – boards of trustees and academic councils.
- Germany has developed complex procedures for dialogue and achieving consensus in the field of historical memory. This process involves multi-stage consultations and debates involving parliament, experts, and the media. The outcome is the development of relatively robust solutions – even to difficult and controversial issues.

- Attempts to address Polish-related themes – particularly the need, from the Polish perspective, to reach the wider public with greater awareness of German crimes (the *Polen-Denkmal* initiative) – have encountered resistance. This resistance stems – or at least is publicly presented as stemming – from a general reluctance to discuss the victims of the Second World War in national terms, as well as from fears that doing so might confront Germany with the need to respond to further demands or claims from other countries. Undoubtedly, another factor is the uncertainty among politicians about the reactions of their electorate, as many of them believe that Germany has already done enough in terms of both symbolic and financial compensation.

The Prussian exhibition and the beginnings of historical museums in Germany

The Federal Republic of Germany was born as a state without a past. The term *Stunde null* – ‘zero hour’ – is one of the most common expressions used to describe 1945, signifying that Germany began to measure its history anew. Yet even events as dramatic as Nazism, the Second World War, and the defeat of Nazi Germany could not sever all the threads connecting the present with the past. One manifestation of this continuity was the surge of interest in Prussian history during the 1970s – the so-called *Preußenwelle* (‘Prussian wave’). This process culminated in the major Berlin exhibition ‘Prussia – An Attempt at Assessment’ (*Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz*), held in 1981.

The very idea of opening a ‘Prussian exhibition’ sparked lively debate. Jürgen Kunze, an FDP deputy in the West Berlin Parliament, criticised the way the exhibition was being prepared, stating: “The Prussian exhibition, if it is to make sense, must not conceal the controversies surrounding the history of Prussia; it should consciously present them – and even seek them out”. By contrast, Horst Kollat, a representative of the ruling SPD in the German capital at the time, defended the exhibition’s concept, pointing out that Prussian history contained inherent contradictions. The state, he argued, was “a peculiar mixture of *raison d’état* enforced through coercion and social principles that can be regarded as highly progressive”. The Berlin Social Democrat also stated: “We must put an end to that nonsensical parallel imposed on Germans after 1945 – the straight line drawn from Frederick the Great through Bismarck to Hitler. That is a historical falsification we do not wish to perpetuate”. Similar debates regarding how German history should be presented in museums continued in the years that followed. Ultimately, the exhibition was held in the Martin-Gropius-Bau, which had been restored only a few months earlier. It attracted hundreds of thousands of visitors and was well received by both the public and critics. The undertaking proved to be a unique test for the new German memory policy, and the initiative had a significant impact on the launch of subsequent museum projects.¹

The emergence of the ‘Prussian exhibition’ and other museum initiatives in the 1980s in the Federal Republic of Germany should be viewed in connection with what is commonly referred to as the ‘memory boom’. This term refers to the awakening of public interest in the past, a process observed in the West since the 1970s. Exhibitions, films, and popular books increasingly

1 Y. Müller, ‘Bilanz eines Versuchs. Die Preußen-Ausstellung von 1981, das nationalsozialistische Erbe und die „Topographie des Terrors“’, 24 September 2021, zeitgeschichte-online.de.

explored historical themes, particularly those relating to contemporary history. Among the key factors shaping this phenomenon, the US historian Jay Winter identified the rise of affluent societies, in which a well-educated middle class developed expanding cultural needs. Debates surrounding the Holocaust also played a crucial role, especially following the trial of Adolf Eichmann and the Auschwitz trials. Moreover, history became an increasingly important theme within emerging identity politics.²

The establishment of modern German historical museums took place within a distinct context, alongside circumstances typical of other Western countries. Above all, it required addressing the question of whether, after the experiences of the Second World War and the crimes of Nazism, Germany had any right to construct a traditionally conceived national historical narrative at all. What place should themes of continuity occupy within it, and to what extent should tradition be rejected, reinterpreted, or refocused on the issue of collective guilt? The history of German museology over the past four and a half decades represents both an instrument of historical policy and a response to the need to define collective identity. Within it, one can discern an ongoing search for balance – between remembrance and the creation of positive historical narratives, and, at the same time, the struggle with guilt and responsibility. Debates concerning German museums also reflect broader universal questions about the relationship between the state's historical policy and political disputes over the past, as well as the roles of museology and historiography.

In this study, I examine the most important historical museums developed following the reunification of Germany. I focus primarily on those financed or co-financed by the federal authorities, particularly on institutions located in Berlin, where the majority of museums of nationwide significance have been established. A worthwhile subject for further analytical work would be an examination of museums that existed before 1990 but were subsequently transformed or modernised after reunification, such as the Bundeswehr Military History Museum in Dresden or the 'memorial sites' situated in former Nazi concentration camps. An important group of institutions not discussed in this text consists of those with a regional character. In recent decades, several significant museums of this kind have been opened, inspired – as their names suggest – by the success of the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn, including the House of Bavarian History (*Haus der Bayerischen Geschichte*) and the House of the History of North Rhine-Westphalia (*Haus der Geschichte Nordrhein-Westfalen*). Some important institutions also have

2 J. Winter, 'The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the 'Memory Boom' in Contemporary Historical Studies', *GHI Bulletin*, vol. 21, autumn 2000, pp. 69–72.

a municipal or regional ownership structure, even though their significance extends well beyond the regional level – for instance, the Documentation Center Nazi Party Rallying Grounds (*Dokumentationszentrum Reichsparteitagsgelände*) in Nuremberg and the German Emigration Center (*Deutsches Auswandererhaus*), established by the city of Bremerhaven and the state of Bremen. Finally, an analysis of temporary exhibitions in German museums could provide particularly valuable insights – a topic I have only touched upon incidentally here.

It is worth noting the distinction that exists in Germany between museums and *Gedenkstätten* (memorial sites). The latter are closest to what, in Poland, are referred to as martyrological museums, although there is a certain semantic difference between the two categories. German memorial sites are usually established at their original locations – concentration camps, prisons, the headquarters of political police forces such as the Gestapo or the Stasi, or preserved fragments of the Berlin Wall within the urban landscape. By contrast, martyrological museums – according to Polish terminology – can exist without a direct spatial connection to the sites of the crimes themselves, as is the case, for example, with Holocaust museums.

Historical policy in the Kohl era

The 1980s and the early 1990s constituted the formative period of German historical museology – both because of the political processes shaping the Federal Republic of Germany and due to developments affecting museum culture across the wider Western world. It was a time of important debates about contemporary history in the Federal Republic. Particularly significant, both within Germany and internationally, was the *Historikerstreit* – a historians’ debate on how Nazi Germany and Nazi crimes should be perceived within the broader context of German and European history.³ The article ‘History in a Country without History’ (*Geschichte in einem land ohne Geschichte*) by Michael Stürmer, published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1986, was one of the most influential contributions to this debate. At that time, Stürmer, a lecturer at the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, was working closely with Chancellor Helmut Kohl as his adviser and speechwriter.⁴ The conservative historian wrote: “Roughly throughout the country, one observes a renaissance of interest in history, and this is regarded as a most commendable development. Museums are springing up one after another, flea markets thrive on nostalgia

³ M. Łukasiewicz (ed.), *Historikerstreit. Spór o miejsce III Rzeszy w historii Niemiec*, Aneks, London 1990.

⁴ M. Stürmer, ‘Historia w kraju bez historii’ [in:] *Historikerstreit...*, op. cit., pp. 7–9. The text was first published as ‘Geschichte in geschichtslosem Land’ in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 15 April 1986.

for the good old days, historical exhibitions attract no shortage of visitors, and historical literature – which, twenty years ago, existed on the fringes of public interest – has once again begun to flourish among both writers and readers”. In the conclusion of his article, Stürmer formulated a thesis that may be regarded as key to understanding the historical policy pursued by Kohl’s CDU: “(...) The technocratic contempt for history on the part of the right, and its gradual suffocation by the left, have caused great damage to the country’s political culture. The search for lost history is not a quest for an abstract culture: it is morally justified and politically necessary. It concerns the internal continuity of the German Republic and the confidence that its foreign policy should inspire. In a country without memory, anything is possible”.⁵

Accordingly, for the ruling CDU in the Federal Republic of Germany, restoring history to a central place in public life was intended both to strengthen national identity and to anchor democratic Germany more firmly within the international community. The ability to narrate one’s own past was seen as essential to building the state’s credibility. It is in this context that two key museum initiatives launched by Chancellor Kohl’s government in the 1980s – though completed only after German reunification – should be understood: the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany (*Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) in Bonn and the German Historical Museum (*Deutsches Historisches Museum*) in Berlin. In his inaugural address as Chancellor in October 1982, Kohl emphasised the need for reflection on German history (*Besinnung auf die deutsche Geschichte*) in the context of overcoming the division of the nation. He also announced the creation, in Bonn, of “a collection devoted to the history of Germany since 1945, dedicated to the history of our state and our divided nation”.⁶

In addition to political factors, the opening of a new chapter in Germany’s historical policy was profoundly influenced by the modern theory and practice of museology known as ‘new museology’. This approach called for museums to focus more on their audiences and educational activities, rather than primarily on the formation and preservation of collections.⁷ This development was linked, among other things, to the growing use of modern technology in exhibition design – including multimedia and interactive installations. Such tools freed curators from the limitations of displaying only original artefacts and paved the way for narrative museums, which constructed historical narratives by supplementing gaps in their collections through the use of photographs as

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ H. Kohl, Regierungserklärung vom 13. Oktober 1982, ‘Stenografischer Bericht des Deutschen Bundestages von der 121. Sitzung’, Plenarprotokoll 9/121, S. 7227 (C).

⁷ R. Starn, ‘A Historian’s Brief Guide to New Museum Studies’, *The American Historical Review* 2005, 110(1), pp. 68–98.

well as scenographic and audiovisual installations. The opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993 was a landmark moment in this evolution. Its exhibition serves as a distinctive display designed to evoke the visitors' emotions. Beyond the visual and spatial effects, the museum employed a number of techniques to foster identification with the victims of terror – for example, distributing biographical cards of specific individuals together with entry tickets. Visitors are guided through the successive stages of the Holocaust, while also encountering depictions of Jewish life before the genocide and learning about the many individual fates of those who were murdered or survived.⁸

1. House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany

The idea, first outlined in Kohl's inaugural address, of creating a collection devoted to the history of the Federal Republic of Germany was developed further through the establishment of the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany. An initial concept for the institution was prepared in 1983 by a group of experts appointed by the Minister of the Interior. The resulting document was then circulated to more than one hundred institutions and individuals, inviting them to submit comments and opinions.⁹ This did not prevent the SPD politician Freimut Duve from criticising the government during a Bundestag debate in 1984 for the way the museum concept was being developed without parliamentary involvement and without a broader public debate. Duve also accused Kohl of wanting to build a monument to himself.¹⁰ The report adopted by the federal government in 1985 stated that the central theme of the future exhibition would be the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, including its political, economic, social, and cultural achievements. The exhibition's content was also intended to outline the constitutional challenge of German reunification, as well as the country's ties with other Western states. The document further indicated that the museum's presentation could address themes related to the development of German democracy by drawing on earlier periods. The exhibition should address the era of the National Socialist dictatorship.¹¹

The museum was formally established in 1986 on the basis of an ordinance issued by the Minister of the Interior, and it subsequently took the form of a foundation created by an act of the Bundestag in 1988. The building, designed by Ingeborg and Hartmut Rüdiger, was constructed in Bonn between

⁸ B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Inscenizowanie historii. Muzeum Historii Żydów Polskich Polin' [in:] P. Kowal, K. Wolska-Pabian (eds.), 'Muzeum i zmiana. Losy muzeów narracyjnych', Warszawa-Kraków 2019, pp. 101–102.

⁹ H. Schäfer, 'Das Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland Strukturgeschichtliche Darstellung im Museum', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 1988, no 2.

¹⁰ BT-Plenarprotokoll 10/99, S. 7174A–7216C.

¹¹ H. Schäfer, 'Das Haus der Geschichte...', *op. cit.*

1989 and 1994. Initially, the exhibition was intended to focus on the achievements of the Federal Republic of Germany. However, the country's reunification changed the context in which the project was implemented. Above all, it required the exhibition's creators to incorporate themes relating to the history of the GDR. In the end, around 40% of the exhibition was devoted either to all-German themes or specifically to the history of the GDR.¹² The exhibition at the House of the History of the FRG displayed nearly 7,000 original artefacts, while also employing multimedia materials, interactive installations, and scenographic elements. Officially opened by Kohl in 1994, the institution achieved considerable success – with more than 650,000 visitors annually, it became one of Germany's most popular museums.¹³

The House of the History was intended to showcase the achievements of West Germany and to reinforce democratic identity. Yet when Kohl opened the building in 1994, *Der Spiegel* described it as the *Schlussstein der Bonner Republik*. In German, *Schlussstein* means a keystone – the final stone completing a Gothic arch – but it also sounds like the opposite of *Grundstein*, the cornerstone. Three years earlier, the Bundestag had decided to move the capital back to Berlin, so by 1994 the Federal President was already based there. Reviewing the exhibition, the weekly magazine – aligned with the liberal left – acknowledged that fears of the display being politicised by conservatives had not materialised and that “German post-war history has been presented in a neutral and accurate manner”.¹⁴

2. German Historical Museum

Kohl officially announced the construction of the German Historical Museum in 1987 during the celebrations of Berlin's 750th anniversary. The idea of creating such an institution, however, had emerged earlier. It was publicly presented in 1981 by Richard von Weizsäcker, who at that time had taken office as Mayor of Berlin on behalf of the CDU.¹⁵ From the outset, the idea met with criticism from liberal and left-wing circles. Günter Grass and Jürgen Habermas spoke unfavourably about the plan to establish the museum. Hans Mommsen feared that the intention was to create a “binding national vision of history”. The Green Party politician Hans-Christian Ströbele maintained that it would become a propaganda institution used by the federal government to instrumentalise the past and to promote a form of identity that no longer

12 *Ibid.*, ‘Begegnungen mit unserer eigenen Geschichte Zur Eröffnung des Hauses der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn am 14. Juni 1994’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 1994, no. 23.

13 S. Töniges, J. Hitz, ‘25 Jahre Haus der Geschichte’, *Deutsche Welle*, 14 June 2019, dw.com.

14 ‘Geschichte auf Samtpfoten’, *Der Spiegel*, 5 June 1994, spiegel.de.

15 A. Scriba, ‘Die Gründung des Deutschen Historischen Museums 1987’, *Deutsches Historisches Museum*, October 2012, dhm.de.

existed within a divided nation. Among many left-leaning commentators, the involvement of the 'neoconservative' Michael Stürmer in the group developing the concept also provoked concern.¹⁶

During the ceremonial laying of the foundation plaque in 1987, Chancellor Kohl stated that "this museum will attempt to present German history in all its multidimensionality, with its brighter and darker chapters. For the many visitors to the city from Germany and abroad, and above all for young people, it will be a place of remembrance and self-reflection on the past and future of our nation". Kohl also emphasised that the exhibition was to show that the history of Germans in the East and the West is a shared history. He underlined that constructing such an institution in Berlin would highlight the city's significance as the former capital of the state. The head of government added that the project was extremely important for Germany as a whole and was being closely observed by neighbouring countries, which was why it required expert discussion as well as a broad – and critical – public debate.¹⁷

The manner in which the exhibition was developed largely dispelled the concerns of its critics. The museum concept was drawn up by a commission of experts whose composition was agreed in 1985 by the Bundestag and the Berlin Senate. The proposal was sent to 3,000 representatives of major social and political groups, as well as to history departments at German-speaking universities. Hearings and seminars were also organised.¹⁸ The final easing of the concerns held by liberal and left-wing circles was greatly aided by the open approach of the museum's first director – Christoph Stölzl, formerly head of the Munich City Museum and associated with the Christian Democrats – who did not shy away from addressing controversial subjects in the temporary exhibitions organised prior to the opening of the main display.¹⁹ The museum was established in 1987 as a limited liability company overseen by the Berlin authorities. It was only in 2008 that the Bundestag created a foundation – the German Historical Museum Foundation (*Stiftung Deutsches Historisches Museum*) – subordinate to the federal minister responsible for culture and the media.²⁰

Initially, the plan was to house the institution in the Martin-Gropius-Bau, with the 'Prussian exhibition' intended as the first step towards implementing this idea. However, the concept was abandoned, and a decision was made

16 *Ibid.*; J. Rydel, *Polityka historyczna w Republice Federalnej Niemiec. Zaszczości. Idee. Praktyka*, Kraków 2011, after: rep.up.krakow.pl, pp. 185–187.

17 H. Kohl, 'Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin – Jubiläumsgeschenk der Bundesrepublik Deutschland an das Land Berlin', speech delivered in Berlin on 28 October 1987, bundesregierung.de (English translation of fragments of this speech is available at germanhistorydocs.org/en).

18 B. Asmuss, 'Die Dauerausstellung des Deutschen Historischen Museums: Vorgeschichte, Kritik und Gegenkritik', *Zeitgeschichte*, 1 July 2007, zeitgeschichte-online.de, pp. 1–6.

19 N. Bernau, 'Das Haus für ein europäisches Deutschland', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 17 January 2019, fr.de.

20 Die Stiftung, Deutsches Historisches Museum, dhm.de.

to construct a new building on a site adjacent to the – at that time yet to be reconstructed – Reichstag. An architectural competition was held, but before the project could be realised, events overtook the plans. The fall of the Berlin Wall took place, and the team working on the creation of the museum received the premises and collections of the East Berlin German Historical Museum. The historic Arsenal (*Zeughaus*) on the prestigious Unter den Linden avenue, near Museum Island, was therefore designated as the museum's permanent home.²¹

Even before the permanent exhibition was established, a temporary display entitled 'Images and Testimonies of German History' (*Bilder und Zeugnisse der deutschen Geschichte*) was opened in 1994. Covering 2,500 m², it presented a wide selection of objects intended for inclusion in the future permanent exhibition. Ultimately, the renovated building housed a permanent display of 8,000 m² featuring around 8,000 original artefacts. The permanent exhibition, prepared under the direction of the new president of the foundation, Professor Hans Ottomeyer, was officially opened by Angela Merkel in 2006.²² In parallel with the renovation works, construction was under way on a modern building for temporary exhibitions, connected to the historic Arsenal. It was designed by the American architect of Chinese origin I.M. Pei – known, among other projects, for the glass pyramid in front of the Louvre. The personal involvement of Chancellor Kohl was necessary to persuade this renowned architect to accept the commission.²³

Among the temporary exhibitions organised by the museum that attracted particular media attention, one especially noteworthy example is the 2010 exhibition 'Hitler and the Germans: Nation and Crime' (*Hitler und die Deutschen. Volksgemeinschaft und Verbrechen*). It drew a very large audience as the first exhibition to make the figure of the Third Reich's leader its central theme. Contrary to the fears of some and the hopes of others, the project did not prove to be a provocation, nor did it break any taboos. The curators presented the Nazi Führer as an object of cult-like veneration. The exhibition aligned with a line of historical discourse that emphasises that Nazism was not merely an imposed dictatorship; rather, ordinary Germans became enthralled by the leader of the Nazi Party and were thus complicit in the crimes perpetrated by Nazi Germany. The immense public interest stemmed largely from the fact that Hitler – or, more precisely, the cult surrounding him – was made the exhibition's main theme. Another attraction was the inclusion of many previously unknown or little-known artefacts. This exhibition reflects the museum's broader strategy:

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²³ F. Mausbach, *Bauten, die Staat machen. Erinnerungen und Geschichten von den Baustellen der Berliner Republik*, Berlin 2022, pp. 90–96.

to carry out numerous exhibition projects that are academically robust and socially resonant, while avoiding deliberately provocative interpretations.²⁴

After the museum opened, personal and museological disputes concerning the institution's management proved far more heated than the historical debates about its exhibitions. As a result of internal conflicts, in 2016 the president of the German Historical Museum Foundation, Professor Alexander Koch, was forced to resign. One of the causes of the dispute was his intention to reduce the number of objects on display and to open the institution more fully to modern museum practices. Koch believed that, despite the museum's considerable potential, it had become a second-tier institution. Meanwhile, the team built by Christoph Stölzl and Professor Hans Ottomeyer defended a traditional concept of the museum, one that relies almost exclusively on original artefacts.²⁵

3. The Jewish Museum in Berlin

The process of creating the Jewish Museum Berlin began independently of the political debates and museological transformations of the 1980s, yet it was ultimately shaped by them. In 1971, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the Jewish community, the idea emerged of establishing a permanent exhibition on the history of Jews within the framework of the Berlin Museum. The decision to construct a new building was taken at the end of the 1980s. The city authorities then resolved to add a new wing to the Baroque *Kollegienhaus*, the former courthouse. The architectural competition announced at that time was won by Daniel Libeskind – an American architect of Polish-Jewish origin. The building was designed in the form of a deconstructed, fractured Star of David symbolising the tragic fate of the Jewish people. Conceived as a monumental sculpture, the structure is characterised by sharp angles and voids, evoking the absence of the Jewish community today and the loss suffered by Germany. A further element of the design was the 'Holocaust Tower' – an empty, concrete, open-topped space intended to encourage silence and reflection.²⁶

Construction of the museum began in 1992, and the building – still without a permanent exhibition – opened in 1999. Its mission and role were only defined in 1997, when Michael Blumenthal was invited to take charge of the institution. The new director had been born in Germany, was a survivor of the Holocaust, and had pursued a career in the United States as a businessman and politician,

24 K. Pieper, *Ausstellungsrezension after: 'Hitler und die Deutschen. Volksgemeinschaft und Verbrechen'*, 15 October 2010 – 27 February 2011, H-Soz-Kult, 22 January 2011, hsozkult.de.

25 S.-F. Kellerhoff, 'Hässlicher Abgang am Deutschen Historischen Museum', *Die Welt*, 12 May 2016, welt.de.

26 J. Frank, W.H. Weitzer, 'Das Jüdische Museum Berlin', *The Federal Agency for Civic Education*, 5 November 2021, bpb.de; S. Erlanger, 'A Memory-Strewn Celebration of Germany's Jews', *The New York Times*, 10 September 2001, nytimes.com.

rising to the position of Secretary of the Treasury in the administration of Jimmy Carter. Blumenthal had a clear vision for the institution: he wanted it to showcase the achievements of German Jews. He also sought to persuade leading West German politicians to make the museum a nationwide, rather than purely municipal, project. He succeeded, and in 2001 the Bundestag established the federal Jewish Museum Berlin Foundation (*Stiftung Jüdisches Museum Berlin*). The curatorial team prepared a narrative permanent exhibition covering 3,500 m², designed to present 2,000 years of German-Jewish history as an integral part of Germany's past. The museum team used not only original artefacts but also multimedia, replicas, and reproductions.²⁷

The building was opened to the public in 2001 in the presence of the Federal President, Johannes Rau, and the Federal Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder. At the ceremonial opening, Blumenthal stated: "I want Germans, when they think of the word 'Jew', to think of something other than Auschwitz and guilt. I want them to think of the Jews as people – and here are their faces – who were loyal citizens and helped build the country. A sense of national responsibility is different from a sense of guilt". In his speech, Rau stated that the history of German-Jewish relations could not be reduced to the Holocaust. He also highlighted the contribution of Jews to German and European culture. "The roots of Europe do not lie solely in Christendom". Historian and writer Fritz Stern, also present at the ceremony, observed that Germany is perhaps the only country that builds monuments on its own soil to those who were killed by its own government and its own people.²⁸

The reservoir of trust the museum had built up during Blumenthal's tenure eroded significantly in the years that followed. This was largely due to his successor – Professor Peter Schäfer, previously a lecturer in the history of Judaism at Princeton University – whose actions on several occasions provoked criticism of the institution from the Israeli government and from the German Jewish community. In the spring of 2017, the museum opened the exhibition 'Welcome to Jerusalem', which presented Jerusalem as a place claimed by the followers of three religions – Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The exhibition and its accompanying educational programme were poorly received by the Jewish community and by the authorities of the State of Israel, who judged that it reflected a Palestinian and Muslim perspective. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called on the German government to halt funding for the museum and for several other projects. According to the Israeli authorities, these had become platforms for presentations by members of the BDS movement (Boycott,

27 A. Posener, M. Blumenthal, 'Das Jüdische Museum in Berlin wird jüdischer', *Die Welt*, 19 June 2014, welt.de.

28 S. Erlanger, 'A Memory-Strewn Celebration of Germany's Jews', *op. cit.*

Divestment, and Sanctions),²⁹ which advocates a boycott of Israeli-made goods.³⁰ The author of the Jewish online weekly *Jüdische Allgemeine* pointed out that the exhibition included Palestinian propaganda images presented without commentary – for example, the Muslim holy site, the Dome of the Rock, wrapped in an Arab *keffiyeh* (scarf or head covering) bearing the image of a Kalashnikov rifle, or shown gripped by black pincers on which a Star of David had been drawn. The exhibition also displayed the wall dividing Jerusalem but made no mention of the reasons for its construction – namely, Palestinian terrorism. Nor was there any reference to the pro-Nazi stance of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem during the Second World War.³¹

Peter Schäfer again provoked criticism by receiving the cultural attaché of Iran at the museum, and the final nail in the coffin for the director was a tweet posted on the institution's account linking to an article from the left-wing newspaper *Die Tageszeitung*. The article challenged a Bundestag resolution describing the BDS movement as antisemitic. The director of the Jewish Museum was publicly criticised by the President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Josef Schuster, who wrote on Twitter: "Enough is enough. It seems the Jewish Museum has completely spun out of control. Under these circumstances, one has to ask whether the term 'Jewish' is still appropriate...". Following these scandals, Schäfer resigned.³²

Meanwhile, from 2017 onwards, work was under way to modernise the Jewish Museum's permanent exhibition. The new display was opened during the pandemic in 2020 by the institution's new director, the Dutch museum specialist Hetty Berg. The renewed presentation of the history of German Jews did not provoke any major controversy. The exhibition is better adapted to the challenging architecture of Libeskind's building, which avoids right angles – it no longer 'fights against' the structure, as the previous display had done, but instead seeks to make use of its qualities. The designers avoided scenographic literalness, drawing instead on works of art, and in the section devoted to the Holocaust the exhibition itself – as Zofia Wóycicka writes – becomes an artistic installation. In its new form, the museum's narrative is broadly chronological but includes thematic 'islands' explaining aspects of religion and culture and exploring Jewish identity in greater depth.

In response to comments from visitors to the earlier version of the exhibition, the display was expanded to include a section devoted to the period

29 S.J. Hofmann, 'Was steckt hinter der Bewegung BDS?', Deutsche Welle, 2 December 2017, dw.com.

30 M. Eddy, I. Kershner, 'Jerusalem Criticizes Berlin's Jewish Museum for 'Anti-Israel Activity'', The New York Times, 23 December 2018, nytimes.com.

31 J. Bernstein, '»Einseitig und relativierend«, Jüdische Allgemeine, 28 March 2019, juedische-allgemeine.de.

32 T. Landsberg, 'Direktor des Jüdischen Museums zurückgetreten', Deutsche Welle, 14 June 2019, dw.com.

of National Socialism and the Holocaust, as well as to the post-war history of German Jews. This period is presented through their eyes – showing a range of personal attitudes and choices in the face of increasing terror. The exhibition does not seek to shock visitors with photographs of victims or images of concentration camps; nor does it feature perpetrators, their profiles, or their uniforms. Instead, it presents the facts and provides essential information. A map of the extermination camps is shown, along with key details about the sites of the crimes. According to the curators, this narrative approach is intended to highlight the responsibility of German society as a whole, rather than solely that of the Nazi regime. The installation devoted to post-war reckoning with Nazism focuses exclusively on the issue of compensation. It does not include information on denazification, the Auschwitz trials, or the Eichmann trial.³³

There is no reason to doubt the curators' explanation that avoiding a more extensive presentation of mass murder and of the profiles of Nazi security officials was intended to prevent the exhibition from focusing solely on the guilt of the direct perpetrators. From a Polish perspective, however, such decisions are difficult to endorse. Today, we are becoming increasingly distant from the Second World War, and historical knowledge is becoming more indistinct, which strongly influences – and will continue to influence – how visitors perceive past events. The absence of a clear identification of the perpetrators, combined with the widely known fact that the 'factories of death' were located on the territory of occupied Poland, may subconsciously lead to the conclusion that Poles were the authors of, or at least complicit in, the Nazi killing machine.

The shadow of National Socialism and the Holocaust

An important role among German museums is played by institutions dedicated to commemorating the victims of National Socialist crimes and the history of the Holocaust. On the one hand, their establishment is motivated by a sense of responsibility; on the other, it reflects an awareness that a memory policy focused on these crimes enabled Germany to regain an equal place among the nations of the West. It may also be argued that funding such exhibitions and memorial sites serves as a form of political counterbalance to initiatives aimed at restoring the value of national history. It is a way of declaring that maintaining tradition does not extend to themes associated with nationalism and antisemitism. Behind the memory policy that highlights German crimes

³³ G. Seibt, 'Neuanfang im Jüdischen Museum Berlin: Schönheit, Sprache, Täuschung, Mord', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 August 2020, sueddeutsche.de; Z. Wóycicka, 'W poszukiwaniu trzeciej drogi. Nowa wystawa stała w Muzeum Żydowskim w Berlinie (część „Katastrofa”)', *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, no. 19 (2023), pp. 673–684, zagladazydow.pl.

lies another insight: that acknowledging guilt creates a form of moral capital, which is at times deployed in German politics.³⁴

1. Topography of Terror

The creation of the 'Prussian exhibition' stimulated interest in the area opposite the Martin-Gropius-Bau – the site of the former palace of Prince Albrecht, where the Gestapo headquarters had been located during the war. Even before the exhibition opened, proposals emerged to establish on the *Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände* either a complex documenting Nazi crimes or a Holocaust memorial. In connection with the 50th anniversary, in 1983, of the Nazi Party's ascent to power in Germany, the idea of creating an exhibition in Berlin devoted to the crimes of the Third Reich was discussed. This initiative was first proposed by the Berlin left-wing group Alternative List (*Alternative Liste*). Finally, the SPD in the Senate of West Berlin submitted a formal motion for the "construction of a memorial to the victims of the National Socialist regime" (*Errichtung eines Mahnmals für die Opfer der nationalsozialistischen Gewaltherrschaft*), which led to the announcement of the first competition to design the redevelopment of the former Gestapo headquarters site.³⁵

The exhibition on Nazi crimes was eventually created in 1987 and was entitled 'Topography of Terror: The Gestapo, the SS, and the Reich Security Main Office on the Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände' (*Topographie des Terrors. Gestapo, SS und Reichssicherheitshauptamt auf dem Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände*). It was opened in a temporary pavilion as part of the 'Berlin, Berlin' exhibition marking the city's 750th anniversary. Historian Reinhard Rürup played a particularly important role in the project. He was also the originator of the name 'Topography of Terror' (*Topographie des Terrors*), which was adopted by the emerging institution. The team working on the development of the project was separated out in 1992 as the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre Foundation, subordinate to Berliner Festspiele, the organisation responsible for coordinating major cultural and anniversary projects in the city. Three years later, in 1995, the Topography of Terror Foundation (*Die Stiftung Topographie des Terrors*) obtained full legal independence.³⁶

The road to creating the permanent exhibition, however, was still a long one. The competition for the building's design was won in 1993 by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor, but construction, which began in 1997, was halted two years later due to technical problems and a major escalation of costs. The failure of

³⁴ M. Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne w późnej nowoczesności*, Kraków 2017.

³⁵ Y. Müller, 'Bilanz eines Versuchs. Die Preußen-Ausstellung von 1981...', *op. cit.*; *Verdrängte Geschichte*, Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, topographie.de.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

the project forced Rürup to resign, after which historian and rabbi Andreas Nachama assumed leadership of the institution. A new architectural competition was eventually announced, and the building – together with the surrounding grounds – was completed according to a concept by Ursula Wilms and Heinz W. Hallmann. The pavilion was opened to the public in 2010. One of the challenges faced by the designers involved preserving the surviving underground parts of the complex, which had endured despite wartime destruction. In the end, these were secured, and part of the exhibition was installed in the exposed original cellars of Prince Albrecht's palace.³⁷

The Topography of Terror Documentation Centre is arranged in a deliberately simple manner. Inside the modernist pavilion are panels featuring photographs, maps, and charts that present, step by step, the creation of the Nazi apparatus of terror, its expansion, and the crimes committed both in Germany and in the occupied countries of Europe. The exhibition also covers the collapse of the Third Reich and the post-war reckoning with Nazism and its perpetrators. In addition to the main exhibition, the Centre includes a display illustrating Nazi rule and the atmosphere of terror that prevailed in Berlin at the time. The institution also conducts extensive educational activities and maintains a specialist library. The impact of the exhibition lies in its central urban location and the authenticity of the site itself – it attracts more than a million visitors each year.³⁸

2. The Holocaust Memorial

The educational exhibition forming part of the Holocaust Memorial (*Holocaust-Mahnmal*) – officially named the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (*Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*) – addresses the challenges of presenting the Holocaust more directly than the Jewish Museum does. The origins of the project are linked to an initiative launched by television and radio journalist Lea Rosh and the association Perspektive Berlin. Initially, the proponents sought a location on the *Prinz-Albrecht-Gelände*, competing with the founders of the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre. Ultimately, however, after German reunification, a two-hectare site near the Brandenburg Gate was designated for the construction of the memorial.³⁹

The first controversy surrounding the Holocaust Memorial concerned, above all, whether such a site should be created at all. This question was largely settled by the position taken by German Jewish organisations. In 1993, the chairman of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Ignatz Bubis, made

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Topographie des Terrors, topographie.de.

³⁹ J. Rydel, *op. cit.*, pp. 213–215.

his consent to the establishment of a German memorial to the victims of war and tyranny (*Neue Wache*) conditional on Chancellor Kohl's support for the construction of the memorial. Subsequently, a fierce debate accompanied the selection of its artistic concept. Following an unsuccessful first competition, in which the design by German architect Christine Jacobs-Marks was chosen, a new procedure was launched, and the project by US architect Peter Eisenman was selected. In 1999, after the SPD came to power, the Bundestag approved the construction of the memorial in this form. Ultimately, 2,711 concrete slabs resembling stelae were installed on the site in central Berlin.⁴⁰ The memorial site also includes underground spaces for exhibitions, conferences, and educational activities. These made it possible to create a permanent exhibition based on multimedia and artistic installations.

Memory of the communist dictatorship and Germany's division

The themes that have perhaps received the most extensive representation in the historical museology of contemporary Germany are the communist dictatorship, the division of the country, the dramatic experiences of escapees from the GDR, and the fates of families torn apart. To a large extent, this is the domain of memorial sites (*Gedenkstätten*), often created spontaneously in the first months and years after the fall of communism and German reunification, in original locations associated with repression, the operations of the Stasi political police, and the Berlin Wall. The work of institutions dedicated to the memory of the communist dictatorship was the subject of an analysis conducted by the Commission of Experts for the Establishment of the Historical Association 'Coming to Terms with the SED Dictatorship' (*Expertenkommission zur Schaffung eines Geschichtsverbundes „Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur“*) – the so-called Sabrow Commission, appointed by the government of Gerhard Schröder. Its task was to coordinate and rationalise the state's activities in the field of addressing the legacy of the communist dictatorship and to define the necessary measures to be taken at the federal level.⁴¹

In its report published in 2006, the Sabrow Commission formulated the principle that memory policy concerning communism should rest on three pillars: 'Power – Society – Resistance' (*Herrschaft – Gesellschaft – Widerstand*), 'Control and Persecution' (*Überwachung und Verfolgung*), and 'Division and

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 201–222; 'Holocaust-Denkmal: Chronik eines langen Streites', Deutsche Welle, 10 May 2005, dw.com.

⁴¹ S. Jones, 2015, '(Extra)ordinary Life: The Rhetoric of Representing the Socialist Everyday After Unification', *German Politics and Society*, Vol. 33 (2015), Issue 1, berghahnjournals.com, pp. 119–134; 'Empfehlungen der Expertenkommission zur Schaffung eines Geschichtsverbundes „Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur“', 15 May 2006, zeitgeschichte-online.de.

the Border' (*Teilung und Grenze*). Individual institutions, including museums, were expected to develop their work within these three areas. What provoked controversy, however, was not this tripartite structure – which to a large extent simply described the existing situation – but rather the criticism that memory policy was excessively focused on the theme of repression. The Commission recommended greater attention be paid to everyday life. The report stated, among other things, that institutions dealing with the history of the GDR had so far focused mainly on presenting the repressive apparatus and its victims, while insufficiently addressing aspects of daily life. The report was criticised by memorial institutions, whose representatives argued that it sought to dilute the subject of communist terror. Hubertus Knabe, director of the Hohenschönhausen Memorial, described it as an attempt to “decree *Ostalgie* from above”. The Commission’s proposals were also described as “the GDR in a light version”. Rainer Eckert, head of the Forum of Contemporary History in Leipzig and a member of the Sabrow Commission, defended the publication, arguing that the report was not calling for a nostalgic portrayal of history but for an end to the rigid opposition between the remembrance of everyday life and that of dictatorship and repression. It sought, he said, to highlight the responsibility of ordinary people for their participation in the system, which – according to him – is an aspect that becomes blurred if one focuses exclusively on the security apparatus and its victims.⁴²

The findings of the Sabrow Commission and the debate surrounding them influenced the activities of the German state. The creation of later exhibitions, such as the one at the Museum in the Kulturbrauerei in Berlin, can be seen as an example of the German state engaging with the theme of everyday life in the GDR. The idea of establishing ‘pillars’ of memory policy also shaped the state’s involvement in creating foundations that organise the work of memorial sites and museums. One example of such an organisation is the Stiftung Berliner Mauer, established by the Berlin Senate with support from the federal authorities, which brings together memorial sites devoted to the division of Germany and the Berlin Wall.⁴³

A new set of recommendations for action in the field of memory policy was prepared following the election under the direction of Bernd Neumann (CDU), the federal minister responsible for culture and the media in the cabinet of Angela Merkel. The document ‘Updating the Concept for Federal Memorial Sites: Assuming Responsibility, Strengthening Efforts at Coming to Terms with the Past, Deepening Remembrance’ (*Fortschreibung der Gedenkstättenkonzeption*

⁴² *Ibid.*; C. Dippel, ‘Debatte um Erinnerung an SED-Diktatur Publikation zur Sabrow-Kommission’, *Tagesspiegel*, 11 April 2007, tagesspiegel.de.

⁴³ *Entwicklung*, Stiftung Berliner Mauer, stiftung-berliner-mauer.de.

des Bundes. Verantwortung wahrnehmen, Aufarbeitung verstärken, Gedenken vertiefen) became the subject of debate in the Bundestag. The report stated, among other things, that maintaining memorial sites dedicated to Nazi crimes and communist repression falls within the responsibilities of the federal states. Federal support was to be granted only in special cases: when an institution had national or international significance; when the authenticity of the site warranted it; when the manner of commemoration exemplified the remembrance of particular aspects of Nazi terror (*NS-Terrorherrschaft*) or the communist dictatorship (*SED-Diktatur*); when the project was of high quality; or when the institution's work contributed to strengthening cooperation between memorial sites.⁴⁴

1. The Stasi Museum

The first exhibition devoted to the system of repression in the GDR was opened at the Centre for the Memory and Study of GDR Stalinism (*Gedenk- und Forschungsstelle zum DDR-Stalinismus*), located in the former headquarters of the Ministry for State Security (Stasi), which today operates as the Stasi Museum (*Stasimuseum*). It was established in the summer of 1990, prior to German reunification. The initial decision to create it was taken by the last – and only democratically elected – government of the GDR, led by Lothar de Maizière. However, rapid political developments meant that the institution was not established as a public body. Instead, responsibility for preserving the former Stasi headquarters was assumed by the Anti-Stalinist Action Berlin-Normannenstrasse (*Antistalinistische Aktion Berlin-Normannenstraße*; ASTAK), a citizens' initiative. The Museum continues to operate under this legal form to this day.⁴⁵

The Stasi Museum is the oldest and also the simplest exhibition in Berlin focusing on the activities of the communist regime. In the original rooms of the former office building, objects and memorabilia connected with the communist security services have been assembled – for example, listening devices and authentic office furnishings. The artefacts are accompanied by panels with photographs and infographics presenting the history of the repressive apparatus, its officials, and its victims.

2. Marienfelde

In 1993, the association Memorial Site Marienfelde Refugee Camp (*Erinnerungsstätte Notaufnahmelager Marienfelde*) was established to assume responsibility for the Marienfelde transit camp for refugees and resettlers from the

⁴⁴ Fortschreibung der Gedenkstättenkonzeption des Bundes – Verantwortung wahrnehmen, Aufarbeitung verstärken, Gedenken vertiefen, Drucksache 16/9875, Deutscher Bundestag, 19 June 2008, dip.bundestag.de.

⁴⁵ Stasimuseum, stasimuseum.de.

GDR, which had operated in West Berlin during the Cold War. The museum established on this site became the central place of remembrance for escapes and resettlements from the GDR. It also set standards for museum practice, for example through the use of audio and video materials containing witness testimonies, which later became a characteristic and enduring feature of German exhibitions devoted to contemporary history.⁴⁶

Since 2008, Marienfelde has been part of the Berlin Wall Foundation. A programme for preserving memorial sites connected with the division of Berlin was developed in 2005 for the city's Senate, in cooperation with the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. On the basis of the document *Comprehensive Concept for Commemorating the Berlin Wall (Gesamtkonzept zur Erinnerung an die Berliner Mauer)*, the Berlin Senate established the Berlin Wall Foundation (*Stiftung Berliner Mauer*) in September 2008, with the support of the Federal Chancellery. Within it, alongside Marienfelde, there is also the Berlin Wall Memorial (*Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer*) and several other sites.⁴⁷

A separate institution is the Hohenschönhausen Memorial (*Gedenkstätte Hohenschönhausen*), which has existed since 1994 and operates in the buildings of the former remand prison for political detainees. It was first established by the NKVD and later operated by the GDR's Stasi security police. Today the museum functions as the Hohenschönhausen Memorial Foundation, founded in 2000 by the Berlin state authorities with support from the federal budget. In addition to the original cells and the interrogation and administrative rooms, the site includes a permanent exhibition entitled 'Prisoners in Hohenschönhausen. Testimonies of Political Persecution 1945–1989' (*Gefangene in Hohenschönhausen. Zeugnisse politischer Verfolgung 1945–1989*), covering around 700 square metres. The display presents personal effects, photographs, and infographics, and features several dozen multimedia stations that convey, in a modern manner, the history of the prison, the GDR's repressive apparatus, and the experiences of those held there.⁴⁸

Among the permanent exhibitions installed in historic locations in the capital and relating to the Berlin Wall and the communist dictatorship, particular mention should be made of the exhibition 'Border Experience. Everyday Life in Divided Germany' (*GrenzErfahrungen. Alltag der deutschen Teilung*). It was opened in 2011 in the pavilion of the former border crossing at Friedrichstrasse underground station – the so-called Palace of Tears (*Tränenpalast*).

46 Die Erinnerungsstätte, Stiftung Berliner Mauer, stiftung-berliner-mauer.de; S. Handro, 'Musealisierte Zeitzeugen. Ein Dilemma', *Public History Weekly*, 17 April 2014, public-history-weekly.org.

47 Die Erinnerungsstätte, *op. cit.*

48 Organisation, *Gedenkstätte Berlin-Hohenschönhausen*, stiftung-hsh.de.

The exhibition operates as a branch of the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn, which is funded by the federal government.⁴⁹

To complete the picture of museum representations devoted to the communist dictatorship and the division of Berlin, it is worth mentioning the widely-visited and privately run Wall Museum – Checkpoint Charlie (*Mauermuseum – Haus am Checkpoint Charlie*). It has operated since 1963 at the former Checkpoint Charlie border crossing. Chronologically, its establishment falls outside the timeframe of this text – the institution was created during the Cold War, has a strongly anti-communist message, and is housed in adapted rooms of a historic tenement building. The exhibition focuses on the history of the Berlin Wall and on escapes across the border. It is engaging, but it has a distinctly commercial character.⁵⁰

3. Everyday life and the activity of the opposition in the GDR

Exhibitions devoted to the GDR – its politics and everyday life – are a separate category. As with the history of repression, this field includes both grassroots initiatives that later received state support (as in Eisenhüttenstadt) and institutions created from the top down, implementing policies developed in the Federal Chancellery or at the federal state level and entrusted to professional museum specialists.

The Documentation Centre for the Culture of Everyday Life in the GDR (*Eisenhüttenstädter Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR*), established as early as 1993, was the first centre to begin systematically collecting objects connected with everyday life in the GDR. It was established in the workers' town of Eisenhüttenstadt in Brandenburg, built during the GDR period alongside the steelworks on the River Oder. Since 2016, this museum has received support from the federal state, and in 2021 it was merged with the Kunstarchiv Beeskow art collection from the communist era. It has since operated under the name Museum Utopie und Alltag.⁵¹ The theme of everyday life in the GDR is also addressed by the exhibition at the Museum in the Kulturbrauerei in Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg district. The permanent exhibition, opened in 2013, is entitled 'Everyday Life in the GDR' and serves as a response to various commercial initiatives portraying daily life under communism. The museum operates as a branch of the Bonn-based House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany Foundation.⁵²

49 S. Handro, 'Musealisierte Zeitzeugen. Ein Dilemma', *op. cit.*; Organisation, *op. cit.*

50 Mauermuseum, mauermuseum.de.

51 A. Ludwig, 'Musealisierung der Zeitgeschichte. Die DDR im Kontext', Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 5 October 2011, bpb.de; Dokumentationszentrum Alltagskultur der DDR, Museum Utopie und Alltag, utopieundalltag.de.

52 Organisation, Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, hdg.de.

In 1999, on the 10th anniversary of the Leipzig demonstrations that played a major role in bringing down the communist regime in the GDR, the Forum of Contemporary History (*Zeitgeschichtliches Forum*) was established in Leipzig. On the basis of a Bundestag decision, the museum operates as a branch of the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn, and its main mission is to present the activities of the opposition in the GDR. The Forum of Contemporary History is housed in a converted former trade fair building in the city centre. The exhibition includes more than 2,000 objects, photographs, and films illustrating the political history and everyday life of the GDR.⁵³

Alongside professionally run museums and memorial institutions – usually funded from federal and state budgets – numerous commercial exhibitions have emerged in Germany, aimed at attracting tourists and often drawing on elements of ‘Ostalgie’. In 2015, there were 30 such venues. The best known is the privately run GDR Museum (*DDR Museum*) in Berlin, opened in 2006 on the banks of the Spree, near Unter den Linden. It uses the slogan ‘history you can touch’. The interactive exhibition not only allows visitors to view displays but also to handle most of the exhibits: visitors can open the drawers of furniture containing various everyday objects and documents, sit in a Trabant, or try on clothes made in the GDR. Multimedia materials and interactive educational games further engage visitors. The museum holds a collection of more than 360,000 objects.⁵⁴

New wave of museum initiatives

At the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of initiatives were launched which, in various ways, responded to the success of the earlier historical museums. They often develop themes that were only marginally represented in existing institutions and typically address the expectations of political circles and pressure groups. Their creation is frequently associated with the emergence of new fields of memory-related dispute – both internationally and within Germany itself.

1. The Centre against Expulsions / Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation

The idea of creating an exhibition on the forced expulsion of Germans after the Second World War emerged before the year 2000. For many years it was associated with the work of the CDU parliamentarian Erika Steinbach, who

53 A. Ludwig, ‘Musealisierung der Zeitgeschichte. Die DDR im Kontext’, *op. cit.*

54 N. Lindner, ‘Mit der Wende schlagartig historisch’, Deutschlandfunk-Programme, 1 October 2015, deutschlandfunk.de; DDR Museum, Museumsportal Berlin, museumsportal-berlin.de.

became head of the Federation of Expellees in 1998. The initial success of the initiative stemmed from modernising the way the subject was presented. Steinbach decided to move away from portraying the expulsions solely in terms of the injustices suffered by Germans at the hands of their eastern neighbours, and from linking the topic with demands for border revision. The centre was intended primarily as a place for addressing collective trauma. Steinbach also sought to universalise the issue by presenting it as a human rights issue. She argued that the German expulsions should be presented in the context of other forced resettlements and expulsions of the twentieth century. The exhibition concept also envisaged acknowledging the crimes committed by Nazi Germany, especially the Holocaust. A key factor in the project's success was the involvement of politicians and intellectuals from outside the conservative milieu. Alongside Steinbach, one of the leading advocates of the initiative was the Social Democrat Peter Glotz. Others also became strongly engaged in the project, among them Helga Hirsch – a journalist formerly associated with the 1968 student protest movement, who for a time had even been a member of the communist (Maoist) organisation KPD-Aufbauorganisation and who, in the 1980s, as a correspondent for the West German press, supported the Polish anti-communist opposition.⁵⁵

The exhibition concept met with strong criticism both in Poland, including in mainstream media such as *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Polityka*, and in Germany itself, where the chairman of the German-Polish parliamentary group, SPD deputy Markus Meckel, opposed the idea. A German-Polish proposal also emerged in the public sphere to organise an exhibition on forced expulsions in Wrocław and to establish an international network of memory institutions. This latter initiative later took shape as the European Network Remembrance and Solidarity, although today it deals with a broad range of themes related to the difficult history of the twentieth century.⁵⁶ A further response to the Centre Against Expulsions was the idea of constructing the Museum of the Second World War, proposed in the autumn of 2007 by Professor Paweł Machcewicz and subsequently carried out between 2008 and 2017 by a team of historians and museum specialists under his direction.⁵⁷

Ultimately, in 2002 the Bundestag adopted a decision supporting Steinbach's project, but made it conditional, among other things, on extensive consultations with academic circles in Germany and abroad. Consequently, the implementation of the initiative was postponed. It was only in 2008 that the government of Angela Merkel decided to establish the Foundation Flight,

⁵⁵ J. Rydel, *op. cit.*, pp. 253–266.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 268–279.

⁵⁷ P. Machcewicz, *Spory o historię 2000–2011*, Kraków 2012, pp. 249–253.

Expulsion, Reconciliation (*Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung*) as an institution subordinate to the German Historical Museum Foundation. Under Polish pressure, and owing in part to the involvement of Władysław Bartoszewski, who at the time was the plenipotentiary of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk for international dialogue, Erika Steinbach did not enter the Foundation's governing bodies. Yet the disputes surrounding the project did not subside. The conflict was reignited by provocative articles written by Professor Manfred Kittel, appointed director of the organisation in 2009. In an article for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, he claimed, for example, that the Slavs had succumbed to a 'highly contagious expulsions virus'. In this climate, several people resigned, among them the Polish member of the Foundation's academic council, Professor Tomasz Szarota, and Helga Hirsch.⁵⁸

Another crisis occurred in 2014, when the Foundation presented the exhibition 'Twice a Stranger' in the building of the German Historical Museum. It expanded on a Greek project of the same name and showed the fate of people who had been forcibly displaced in the twentieth century. The starting point was the resettlement of Greeks and Turks after the First World War. Manfred Kittel was forced to remove the section devoted to the expulsion of Germans from Poland, as it did not meet the Foundation's standards. He was accused of organising the exhibition without consulting the academic council. He resigned after the council met with the federal minister responsible for culture and the media, Monika Grütters (CDU).⁵⁹

The work on the permanent exhibition was finally completed under the new director, Dr Gundula Bavendamm. The Foundation's headquarters was constructed in central Berlin, near Anhalter station. The exhibition was officially opened by Angela Merkel on 21 June 2021. Its main permanent section concerns the forced displacement of Germans during the Second World War and includes personal effects, photographs, and multimedia materials. Importantly, the exhibition begins by outlining the causes of the war and the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany. It then presents the terror of the occupation and the forced displacements carried out by the Third Reich. Only against this background are the experiences of Germans shown – those fleeing the Red Army, often forcibly removed from their homes even under official decisions made by German authorities. The exhibition then addresses the decisions agreed by the three powers at the Potsdam Conference and the forced expulsions from the territories of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the USSR. It presents the dramatic fates of individuals and families, as well as the difficult process

⁵⁸ J. Rydel, *op. cit.*, pp. 279–284.

⁵⁹ S.-F. Kellerhoff, 'Streit in Vertriebenen-Stiftung endet mit Rauswurf', *Die Welt*, 16 December 2014, welt.de.

of integration in the FRG and the GDR. A key element of the exhibition's final part concerns the political circumstances leading to Germany's recognition of its eastern borders and to reconciliation with the USSR, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. In addition to the section devoted to the fate of Germans, visitors can also explore a multimedia exhibition focusing on forced displacement in different parts of the world, violence, and the challenges associated with integration into new homelands.⁶⁰

The exhibition of the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation in its present form does not give rise to objections. It presents the experiences of Germans honestly, set within the context of the criminal policies pursued by Nazi Germany in the occupied countries of Europe. One can only hope that the transfer of responsibility for the Foundation, envisaged in the CDU-SPD coalition agreement of March 2025, from the Federal Chancellery to the Ministry of the Interior – which traditionally maintains ties with the expellees' organisations – will not lead to changes in the way history is presented or result in the introduction of controversial content into the exhibition.⁶¹

2. Ort des Erinnerns und der Begegnung mit Polen

In the autumn of 2017, inspired by earlier statements made by Władysław Bartoszewski, Florian Mausbach, the former president of the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, put forward a proposal to build a memorial dedicated to the victims of the German occupation of Poland. It was intended to serve as an important symbol of reconciliation and as a response to the problem of Germans' limited knowledge of Nazi crimes in occupied Poland. Mausbach's appeal was supported by many figures who had contributed to fostering good German-Polish relations. Among the initiators were Dieter Bingen, former director of the Polish Institute in Germany, and respected CDU and SPD politicians, including former presidents of the Bundestag Rita Süssmuth and Wolfgang Thierse.⁶²

The German political class reacted with reluctance to Mausbach's proposal. Several arguments against the commemoration were put forward by the Holocaust scholar Stephan Lehnstaedt. He argued that most Polish victims had already been honoured through the construction of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (the Holocaust Memorial). Moreover, constructing a monument for 'real' Poles would diminish the significance of Jewish victims and would amount to a return to the division of victims according

⁶⁰ V. Witting, 'Flucht und Vertreibung – Ort des Erinnerns', Deutsche Welle, 21 June 2021, dw.com.

⁶¹ Verantwortung für Deutschland. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD, koalitionsvertrag2025.de.

⁶² F. Mausbach, *Bauten, die Staat machen. Erinnerungen und Geschichten von den Baustellen der Berliner Republik*, op. cit., pp. 235–244.

to the racial categories imposed by the Nazis. The historian's reasoning also contained the accusation that such a form of commemoration would serve as a 'sign of nationalism'. Other opponents of the memorial pointed to the practical consequences of such a move. Building a monument for Polish victims could lead to similar claims from other nations that had suffered – Russians, Greeks, or Czechs.⁶³ In addition to the concerns expressed publicly, there were also political manoeuvres directed at voters who – regardless of the actual facts – believe that Germany has already done enough in terms of symbolic and material atonement. The mainstream parties do not wish to risk losing votes to the AfD, a party without scruples and deliberately 'unconventional' in matters of historical memory.

The idea of commemorating Polish victims was gradually transformed into the concept of creating a Place of Remembrance and Encounter – an exhibition and educational institution devoted to Polish–German relations. The Bundestag resolution of 20 October 2020, supported by all parties except the AfD, states that the decision concerns 'a place of remembrance and encounters in order to do justice to the nature of German–Polish history and to help deepen the special bilateral relations'.⁶⁴ The initiative was placed under the responsibility of the German Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt), headed at the time by the SPD politician Heiko Maas, and the task of preparing the concept for the memorial was entrusted to a group of experts reporting to the German ambassador to Poland, Rolf Nikel. In 2022, the matter was transferred to the Federal Chancellery, and subsequent work – under the auspices of the Minister of State for Culture and the Media, Claudia Roth – was entrusted to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe Foundation and the German Institute of Polish Affairs in Darmstadt.⁶⁵

Before the Bundestag took an official decision on the implementation of the 'Polish memorial', on 9 October 2020 it adopted a resolution on the establishment of the 'German Occupation of Europe in the Second World War' Documentation Centre (*Dokumentationszentrum „Zweiter Weltkrieg und deutsche Besatzung in Europa“*).⁶⁶ It is intended to operate in a broader format, responding to the potential expectations of other nations that fell victim to Nazi crimes. The project is currently being developed within the structure of the German

63 J. Lubecka, 'Wokół Polen-Denkmal. Rozbieżności w polskiej i niemieckiej pamięci o ofiarach II wojny światowej', *Rocznik Polsko-Niemiecki* 2023, no 31, after: czasopisma.isppan.waw.pl, pp. 81–105.

64 K. Frymark, A. Kwiatkowska, 'A German house. Controversy over commemoration of the Polish victims of the Second World War', *OSW Commentary*, no. 581, 14 March 2024, osw.waw.pl.

65 J. Lubecka, 'Wokół Polen-Denkmal. Rozbieżności w polskiej i niemieckiej pamięci o ofiarach II wojny światowej', *op. cit.*; 'Ort des Erinnerns und der Begegnung mit Polen. Konzept', *Auswärtiges Amt*, auswaertiges-amt.de.

66 Dokumentationszentrum „Zweiter Weltkrieg und deutsche Besatzung in Europa (ZWBE), Deutsches Historisches Museum, dhm.de.

Historical Museum Foundation. It remains unclear whether the development of two different concepts for commemorating the victims of German occupation in Europe will lead to the establishment of two independent museum institutions, or whether they will prove to be competing frameworks. In 2025, the 'German Occupation of Europe in the Second World War' Documentation Centre initiated its public activities by presenting a temporary exhibition in the building of the German Historical Museum.

New themes in memory policy

In recent years, new themes have emerged in German debates on memory, distinct from the experience of twentieth-century totalitarianisms that shaped the museum landscape of the Berlin Republic during its first three decades. An indication of possible future directions in German memory policy was the controversy triggered at the beginning of 2024 by Claudia Roth, Minister of State for Culture in Olaf Scholz's Chancellery. A document entitled Framework Concept for Remembrance (*Rahmenkonzept Erinnerung*) was published on the ministry's website. In this document, Roth proposed broadening the range of themes to be addressed by the federal authorities. Alongside the long-established focus on confronting the terror of National Socialism and the communist SED dictatorship, new themes appeared: the issue of colonialism, the history of German democracy, and the problem of immigration. The document also called for greater attention to the activities of the racist NSU (National Socialist Underground), which committed several murders of immigrants in the early 2000s. Roth's concept met with widespread criticism from memorial institutions, which stressed that the crimes of National Socialism and communism were mass atrocities committed by the state and therefore occupy a central place in federal policy. By contrast, the new themes – with the exception of colonialism – do not possess such a dimension and cannot be placed on the same level. Roth's proposal was described as 'naive', 'counter-productive', and 'chaotic'. The minister withdrew the document, and the accession to power of the CDU/CSU is likely to render parts of its content obsolete.⁶⁷ It nevertheless illustrates the ideas for historical policy emerging within SPD and Green Party circles. Without doubt, certain elements of this kind will be implemented. The issue of coming to terms with the history of colonialism – alongside the work of confronting National Socialist terror and

⁶⁷ T. Handel, 'Streit um die Zukunft des Erinnerns', 10 August 2024, tagesschau.de.

the communist dictatorship – appeared in the coalition agreement prepared for Friedrich Merz’s CDU/CSU–SPD government.⁶⁸

1. The Humboldt Forum

Among the most high-profile museum projects of recent years, which indicate new trends, the construction of the Humboldt Forum is worth mentioning. Although no historical museum was established there, the debate surrounding its development and the building’s final form reveals much about discussions on memory policy and their possible influence on historical museology. The Forum represents the implementation – after many years of dispute – of the idea of rebuilding the royal palace in Berlin. Because of controversies surrounding the symbolism of the building, associated with German and Prussian militaristic and nationalist traditions, left-wing circles had opposed the project for decades.

The Bundestag resolution outlining the general concept of the project was adopted on 4 July 2002. The building was intended to serve as a cultural institution and to house, among other institutions, the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art. However, several years passed before decisions were taken regarding the architectural form of the structure and the specific purposes it was to serve. Ultimately, a decision was made to reconstruct faithfully only parts of the original building – above all the northern, western, and southern façades. In June 2013, President Joachim Gauck laid the foundation stone for the construction of the Forum.⁶⁹

The architectural form of the building was the result of a compromise devised by the Italian architect Franco Stella: it involved a partial reconstruction of the representative façades combined with modern interiors. Further controversy arose over the decision to place a cross on the dome crowning the building. There were also disputes concerning the function of the structure. A key issue was Germany’s colonial past, as well as the allegedly ‘colonial’ perspective reflected in the decision to present non-European ethnographic collections separately from European and ancient art collections.⁷⁰

An element intended to dispel the ‘evil spirits’ of the former palace was the large exhibition ‘Berlin Global’, created by the Berlin Museum and installed within the Forum. Covering an area of 4,000 square metres, it presents a wide range of themes relating to both the history and the present-day life of the German capital. The exhibition is based on multimedia and scenographic

68 *Verantwortung für Deutschland. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD, op. cit.*

69 ‘4. Juli 2002: Bundestag beschließt Wiederaufbau des Berliner Stadtschlosses’, *Deutscher Bundestag*, bundestag.de.

70 L.H. Wurth, ‘Dreams and ideology clash at Humboldt Forum in Berlin’, *The RIBA Journal*, 30 March 2021, ribaj.com; ‘The Humboldt Forum: A Controversial New Museum Project Opens in Berlin, Pablo Larios interviews the director, Hartmut Dorgerloh’, *FRIEZE*, 20 July 2021, frieze.com.

elements and contains only a small number of original objects. It is, in effect, the opposite of a traditionally conceived, identity-focused historical display. With the exception of the revolutionary moments (1848, 1918–1919, 1989), the history of Germany and its capital is presented primarily as a negative point of reference – colonialism, racism, homelessness (with women prominently featured), and the Nazi past. Alongside this, numerous installations depict Berlin in a positive light – as a city of alternative movements, open to immigrants, religiously diverse, a centre of activism for equal rights (for women and sexual minorities), and a city of vibrant culture and leisure. The exhibition largely consists of interactive installations and resting areas designed to enhance the visitor experience. It seems, however, that what in traditional museums serves as a welcome complement to a visit is here used to mask the absence of a clear concept for filling the vast, empty rooms – empty in two senses: sparsely furnished with content and largely devoid of an audience. The exhibition lacks a clear chronological or thematic structure; rather, it amounts to a collection of impressions. ‘Everything is connected with everything else’ (*‘Alles ist miteinander vernetzt’*), the curators explain. Unfortunately, this comes across as a cliché that conceals an unsuccessful attempt to create an alternative to traditionally conceived historical exhibitions.⁷¹

2. The Exile Museum

Among the museum projects still awaiting realisation, the Exile Museum (*Exil-museum*) in Berlin is worth mentioning. This private initiative was launched in 2011 by the Nobel Prize-winning writer Herta Müller. It is intended to present the fate of German political émigrés between 1933 and 1945. Among those involved in the project were former president Joachim Gauck and the late founder of the German Historical Museum, Christoph Stölzl. According to current plans, the museum’s building is to be constructed near Anhalter station, opposite the building of the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation. For now, its activities are funded from private sources.⁷²

Dynamics of the development of German historical museums

An examination of historical museums in the Federal Republic of Germany opened during the 30 years of the Bonn Republic reveals three phases in the development of German museology. The first phase was linked to the

⁷¹ Berlin Exhibition at the Humboldt Forum, Humboldt Forum, humboldtforum.org.

⁷² Werkstatt Exilmuseum, Stiftung Exilmuseum Berlin, stiftung-exilmuseum.berlin.

formulation of a new narrative of German history. The creation of positive narratives – which dominate the exhibitions of the German Historical Museum and the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany, although these museums also include elements addressing the negative legacy of the past – was accompanied by the establishment of institutions presenting the darker chapters of German history. The Topography of Terror is one such example. In this phase, the federal authorities played a key role in creating new institutions. This was the deliberate policy of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and the moderately conservative circles cooperating with him, implemented at times in the face of criticism from influential media and left-liberal intellectuals. The House of the History of the FRG and the German Historical Museum were top-down initiatives. In other cases, such as the Topography of Terror, the federal state authorities (in this case, the city of Berlin), supported by the Federal Chancellery, gave a public and national character to what had originally been a citizens' initiative. Similarly, the federal response to Blumenthal's idea was to give the Jewish Museum – which had emerged from a municipal institution – a national mission.

In the 1990s, following Germany's reunification, several dozen exhibitions were created addressing the communist dictatorship, the division of the country, and everyday life in the GDR. This was connected with the need to confront the past and, at the same time, with the necessity of safeguarding historic sites of memory linked to communist terror and the division of Germany. The creation of these exhibitions largely represented the materialisation of grassroots civic initiatives and, in some cases, commercial ones. Their sheer number is also related to the relatively broad consensus surrounding this subject matter. It was also partly the result of the deliberate policy of the government of Helmut Kohl, which sought to carry out the political re-education of former GDR citizens and to define the ideological shape of the Berlin Republic by rejecting both Nazism and communism. Politicians also recognised the identity-building potential of these initiatives: the narrative of terror, the division of Germany and escapes from the GDR has strong dramatic potential and conveys a democratic message. It is also a narrative in which Germans can, to a large extent, safely identify themselves not as perpetrators – as in the case of Nazi Germany memorials – but rather as victims or participants in various forms of resistance. These exhibitions also have considerable tourist appeal, as they attract visitors interested both in the dramatic aspects of these stories and in the more 'exotic' features of everyday life under communism.

The current phase includes initiatives typically undertaken in response to the expectations of various politically oriented lobby groups. These are attempts either to entrench certain themes in collective memory or to introduce

new ones. This applies, on the one hand, to the narrative of expulsions, and, on the other, to the commemoration of Polish victims of the occupation and the political history of émigrés during the Third Reich. There are also efforts to incorporate new themes into the range of topics addressed by memory policy, such as colonialism or the history of migration.

To date, German initiatives in the field of historical museology have generally been balanced and centrist in character, and have been thoroughly discussed by historians and other relevant actors. The most daring projects – such as the mobile exhibition on the crimes of the Wehrmacht, organised in 1995 by the private Institute for Social Research – were often created outside the framework of the state's official memory policy. Controversial undertakings, if they receive state support, are usually subjected to lengthy and often multi-stage processes of discussion and consultation, which in the end tend to lead to balanced solutions. Attempts to construct more extreme narratives or to infringe upon the interests of the state – such as those undertaken by Manfred Kittel (at the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation) or Peter Schäfer (at the Jewish Museum) – ended with the resignation of the heads of these institutions. These, however, were exceptional cases, as politicians generally avoid direct interference in the work of museums, and most museum directors serve for many years, often until reaching retirement age. The stability of these institutions is also strengthened by the foundation model developed in the 1990s. Depending on their importance and scope, foundations are established by acts of the Bundestag or by the relevant federal state authorities. They have collegial bodies that ensure both the scholarly quality of exhibitions and ongoing contact with political circles and various stakeholder groups.

It is a cause for concern that responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich is handled either by institutions devoted to the Holocaust and to Jewish history, or by general exhibitions in which Polish themes stand little chance of distinguishing themselves among numerous other subjects. The prolonged process of creating the 'Polish memorial' is a manifestation of this approach. The impact of political polarisation within German society on the further development of historical museums must also be closely monitored. Left-wing circles – as illustrated by the examples discussed above – may seek to weaken the identity-building character of historical institutions by amplifying critical narratives and introducing additional challenging themes, today above all the question of responsibility for the colonial legacy. Conversely, the growing strength of the AfD may lead to the re-emergence of revisionist themes – for example, presenting Germans as victims of the Second World War or downplaying the importance of coming to terms with the crimes of the Third Reich.

The failure of 'exclusive reconciliation' – the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum

Ryszarda Formuszewicz

MAIN POINTS

- After Germany's reunification, the museum located at the original site of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender was granted unique binational status, with emphasis placed on institutionalising Germany's and Russia's reconciliation. In an unintended consequence of this arrangement, the Russian Federation gained influence over how Germany's culture of remembrance is formed.
- The museum primarily focuses on the German war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. This priority has structurally narrowed the scope of its exhibitions and research, both in terms of the chronology of the Second World War and the role of the other members of the anti-Hitler coalition. The museum has also struggled to develop a response to the growing divergence of memories across the post-Soviet space.
- Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has exposed the conceptual and structural flaws that had already drawn criticism. The fundamental challenge facing German policymakers is to adapt both the museum's institutional model and its exhibition concept to the current context.

Introduction

In the spring of 2025, German institutions launched a number of initiatives to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe. As part of one of these projects, in early May the Federal Foreign Office released a short film by Wim Wenders focusing on the act of unconditional surrender by German forces, signed on 7 May 1945 in Reims.¹ The decision to commission this film and to focus public diplomacy in the field of politics of memory on this particular event can be justified by several factors, ranging from the importance of Franco-German relations to the decision to give precedence to the first act of Nazi Germany's surrender.

In an unintended effect, the film's production and release highlighted the impossibility of using a closer location – the second authentic site of surrender in Karlshorst in Berlin. In principle, it would have been possible to reference both sites – the French region of Champagne and the German capital – and to frame this connection within a contemporary interpretative context. Both historical locations now house museums funded by French and German public funds, respectively. For the intended message of peace, a joint commemorative project marking the anniversary would have seemed a natural course of action. However, the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum is unable to function as an instrument of culture of remembrance aligned with the preferences of the German institutions involved, nor can it act as a fully credible partner from the perspective of other museums.

This study examines the factors and circumstances that have led to this situation. It traces the history of the site – from its origins as a Soviet military museum to its transformation into a German-Russian undertaking – in order to explain the legal form adopted by the operator of the museum, the name of the institution and the underlying concept. The post-reunification effort to transform the institution into an institutionalized vehicle for German-Russian reconciliation is critically assessed. The study also discusses the difficulties in developing a new operational framework for the museum and in formulating its position towards Russia as an aggressor.

The focal point of the following analysis is an assessment of how the institution has operated under its current status in relation to Germany's culture of remembrance. The role of the museum – and of other sites in Berlin commemorating the Red Army – in Soviet and post-1991 Russian politics of memory is only briefly noted here, though it certainly merits more in-depth research.

1 W. Wenders (dir.), *The Keys to Freedom*, YouTube, 5 May 2025, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...).

A historic site

The Berlin-Karlshorst Museum is housed in the preserved building where the final act of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender was signed. The location was selected due to practical considerations: the building, dating from the 1930s and originally serving as the officers' mess of the Wehrmacht pioneer school, had previously been converted into the headquarters of Soviet forces.

On 7 May 1945, the unconditional surrender of all German forces was agreed at the headquarters of the Western Allied forces in Reims, with 8 May designated as the binding date for the cessation of hostilities. The signing ceremony at Karlshorst, held at Stalin's insistence and attended by Red Army commanders, was originally intended to serve as a 'ratification' of the earlier act and was fulfilled by senior German military officers: Colonel General Hans-Jürgen Stumpff of the Luftwaffe, Grand Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg of the Kriegsmarine and Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, who represented the Army and also acted as the highest-ranking commander of the German Armed Forces.

This second act, which took place on the night of 8–9 May in the capital of the Third Reich, was ultimately framed as a repeated surrender to the victorious Allied powers. Nonetheless, this underscored the symbolic importance of the capture of Berlin, a victory achieved by Soviet forces. Moreover, as the signing took place outside the originally agreed timeframe, two divergent interpretations of the surrender emerged, anchored in two different dates: 8 and 9 May. At this point, memory of the end of the war began to diverge between the West and the Soviet-dominated Eastern bloc. This was particularly true in the western and eastern parts of Germany.

The building contains the preserved historic hall (complete with its original parquet flooring), which forms the centrepiece of the museum's current exhibition. The wall decorations added by the post-war Soviet authorities were intended to commemorate and glorify the military effort of the Red Army. As the building was used for administrative and military purposes for more than two decades after the surrender, its movable furnishings needed to be reconstructed at a later stage. Between 1945 and 1949, the building housed the headquarters of the Soviet Military Administration in Germany; subsequently, the Soviet Control Commission was based there until 1954. The fact that the highest-ranking Soviet officials in Germany operated from this site until the mid-1950s carried significant symbolic weight.² On a practical level, however,

2 J. Morré, 'Das Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. Deutsch-russische Zusammenarbeit am historischen Ort' [in:] C. Defrance, U. Pfeil (eds.), *Verständigung und Versöhnung nach dem „Zivilisationsbruch“? Deutschland in Europa nach 1945*, Brussels et al., pp. 481–497 – here p. 483.

this function meant that for many years public access to the building remained restricted.

The historic site began to function as a museum relatively late on – only in 1967. This change reflected a new political approach adopted by the Soviet leadership towards the victory over Germany. In 1965, 9 May was elevated to the status of a national holiday called ‘Victory Day’. The instrumentalised memory of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ became one of the tools for stabilising communist rule. The Soviet military museum established at Karlshorst, named ‘The Museum of the Unconditional Surrender of Fascist Germany in the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945’, operated until 1994.

The primary aim of the original exhibition was to commemorate the Red Army’s capture of Berlin.³ The institution fully supported the official historical narrative, which rested on a dual omission: domestically, it disregarded the experiences of the civilian population while externally it marginalised the contributions of the US and British allies, reflecting the Cold War-era confrontation between the two opposing blocs.⁴ This focus on the heroism of the Red Army remained largely unchanged even after the exhibition was redesigned in 1984, as the overhaul did not introduce any significant conceptual changes. Over its 27 years of operation, the museum had more than two million visitors.⁵

It is important to remember that the museum’s original target audience consisted of Soviet soldiers, rather than citizens of the East Germany. However, the propaganda message of the Soviet Union’s politics of memory largely aligned with the preferences of the ruling Socialist Unity Party of Germany. Between 1950 and 1967, and again in 1985, 8 May was officially celebrated as Liberation Day. It should also be emphasised that not only in the immediate post-war years, but also after the opening of the Soviet military museum at Karlshorst, other sites in Berlin served as the primary venues for highlighting the Red Army’s victory.⁶

The most prominent memorial site intended to influence residents of Berlin was the Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park, located in the eastern part of the city. Between 1946 and 1948, an extensive complex was created there to commemorate the approximately 80,000 Red Army soldiers who fell in the Battle of Berlin between 16 April and 2 May 1945 and to serve as the final resting place for around 7,000 of them. The memorial complex is dominated by a statue unveiled on 8 May 1949 depicting a soldier using his sword to break a swastika beneath his feet. The child he carries on his shoulder was meant to symbolise

³ *Ibid.*, p. 483.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 485.

⁵ G. Camphausen, P. Jahn (eds.), *Museum Berlin-Karlshorst* / Музей Берлин-Карлсхорст, Berlin 2005, p. 3.

⁶ See: K. Weise, *Gedenkstätte Berlin-Karlshorst*, Berlin 1981.



■ The Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, where the final act of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender in the Second World War was signed.

■ A memorial at the Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, with a T-34 tank in the foreground. Photograph taken on 8 May 2025.

the new German generation liberated from fascism and, more broadly, to convey a message of 'liberation' not only for Germans but for other nations as well.⁷ At the opposite end of the complex stands an artistic representation of the Motherland. This setting was chosen for the official farewell ceremony for the Soviet troops leaving Germany in 1994.

The first commemoration of the Red Army's wartime effort was a monument, also serving as a war cemetery for around 2,500 soldiers, which was erected at remarkable speed in Tiergarten. It was located in the British sector of the divided city; today, it stands near the main institutions of the German state. In terms of symbolism and messaging, its emphasis was placed on highlighting victory – an intent conveyed unambiguously by the placement of T-34 tanks and howitzers at the memorial site.⁸ Unlike the mausoleum in Treptower Park, the Soviet Union could not actively use this monument for propaganda purposes as Berlin remained divided.

The third major Soviet memorial site in Berlin is the Schönholzer Heide cemetery that opened on 7 November 1949, located in the borough of Pankow. It serves as the final resting place for 13,200 Soviet citizens – those who fell during the Battle of Berlin and prisoners of war from earlier stages of the conflict. This site most closely resembles a traditional cemetery, as it lacks the dramatic features and propaganda messaging found in the other two memorials, though it does also include Soviet symbolism and quotations from Joseph Stalin.

Against the backdrop of these Red Army commemorative sites in Berlin, the Karlshorst Museum stands out for its purely historical character – it is not a burial site with of the fallen.⁹ The other sites have the status of war cemeteries that enjoy special protection.¹⁰ Across Germany, there are over 3,000 locations containing Soviet war graves, including those of Red Army soldiers, prisoners of war and forced labourers.¹¹ They are maintained using German public funds; any modifications to these sites are subject to legal restrictions. The Karlshorst Museum is not bound by these strict regulations; consequently, at the time of its establishment, decision-makers in reunified Germany enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom in shaping its future form and function.

⁷ H. Köpstein, *Die sowjetischen Ehrenmale in Berlin*, Berlin 2006, p. 203.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁹ Following the exhumation and relocation of the remains of the soldiers buried there, the monument in the Buch district now serves a purely commemorative function.

¹⁰ 'Russische Kriegsgräberstätten in Deutschland', Wissenschaftliche Dienste, Deutscher Bundestag, Sachstand, WD 10-3000-015/23, p. 5 ff.

¹¹ The number of Soviet war grave sites across Germany has been estimated at approximately 3,400; see: F. Schumann, *Denkmale der Befreiung: Spuren der Roten Armee in Deutschland*, Berlin 2020. The database developed by the Karlshorst Museum in cooperation with its Russian partner includes 4,185 graves of Soviet war victims in Germany. See: 'Sowjetische Kriegsgräberstätten in Deutschland', sowjetische-memoriale.de.

The site containing the museum building at Zwieseler Straße 4 remains the property of the Federal Republic of Germany and falls under the administration of the Institute for Federal Real Estate (*Bundesanstalt für Immobilienaufgaben*). It has been designated as a protected historical monument.

Institutionalising Russian-German reconciliation

A turning point for the museum of Germany's surrender in its original military form came with German reunification and the decision made during that process to withdraw Soviet forces from the former East Germany. Under the new circumstances, policymakers fairly quickly agreed to retain the museum function of the site, reaching a bilateral agreement to this effect. A German-Soviet expert commission was established in 1991 to conceptualise this decision. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was transformed into a body composed of representatives from Germany and the Russian Federation. It met regularly until 1995 and was later replaced by the scientific advisory board of the reconstituted museum. It should be emphasised that the discussions about the museum's future were conducted exclusively on a bilateral basis, without the involvement of representatives from the United States, France or the United Kingdom.¹²

The reconstituted institution opened as a cooperative undertaking between the reunified Germany and Russia on 10 May 1995, in a symbolic reference to the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. The establishment of a new formal and organisational framework was presented as the successful outcome of the long process of the German-Soviet (or German-Russian) rapprochement, which ultimately made it possible to transform the historic site into a form of institutionalised reconciliation.¹³

The main organisational innovation in the new concept was the decision to grant the museum a binational status, reflected in its official name: the German-Russian Museum Karlshorst. This institutional arrangement realised an idea that had already emerged in Soviet thinking regarding the future of the museum in the post-reunification context.¹⁴

The museum's founding and governing body is a non-profit association established in 1994, currently operating under the name Museum Berlin-Karlshorst (*Trägerverein 'Museum Berlin-Karlshorst e.V.'*).¹⁵ It serves as

¹² J. Morré, 'Das Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. Deutsch-russische Zusammenarbeit...', *op. cit.*, p. 485.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 482.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 486.

¹⁵ Basic information about the museum's legal status is available on its website: museum-karlshorst.de.

the museum's legal operator and the recipient of public funding. As an association registered under German law, it is subject to German legal jurisdiction. Its current statute was adopted on 16 November 2015.

The international legal basis for the establishment of the association and for the participation of Russian institutions as its members is set out in binding verbal notes exchanged between Germany and the Russian Federation. The note sent on 12 April 1994 from the German Embassy to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is of particular importance; it stipulates that any amendments or additions concerning the museum must be made by mutual agreement.¹⁶ The formal anchoring of the institution within the framework of interstate commitments was regarded as "documenting Germany's will to reconcile with the Soviet Union".¹⁷

On the German side, the institutions involved in the association's activities include the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media, the Federal Foreign Office, the Federal Ministry of Defence, the Governing Mayor of Berlin – Senate Chancellery: Cultural Affairs (*Der Regierende Bürgermeister von Berlin Senatskanzlei – Kulturelle Angelegenheiten*), the German Historical Museum, the Saxon Memorial Foundation (*Stiftung Sächsische Gedenkstätten*), the Topography of Terror Documentation Centre (*Topographie des Terrors*), the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History (*Militärhistorisches Museum der Bundeswehr*) and the Institute of Contemporary History (*Institut für Zeitgeschichte*). On the Russian side, participating institutions include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Culture, the Central Museum of the Armed Forces, the Central Museum of the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945 and the State Historical Museum, all of which have their headquarters in the Russian capital. Russian representatives hold 41% of the voting rights at the association's meetings, which makes it impossible to amend the statute without their approval.¹⁸

The final shape of the reconstituted museum emerged as a result of German-Russian cooperation, an outcome attributed to an alleged lack of interest from Ukraine and Belarus during the crucial preparatory phase.¹⁹ Only at a later stage did the association admit two additional members: the Kyiv-based National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War joined in 1997, followed the next year by the Minsk-based Belarusian State Museum of the History of the Great Patriotic War. However, limiting

16 D. Banse, U. Müller, 'Wie Claudia Roth verzweifelt versucht, sich von einer russischen Altlast zu befreien', *Die Welt*, 20 February 2023, welt.de.

17 J. Morré, 'Das Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. Deutsch-russische Zusammenarbeit...', *op. cit.*, p. 488.

18 D. Banse, U. Müller, 'Wie Claudia Roth verzweifelt versucht...', *op. cit.*

19 J. Morré, 'Das Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. Deutsch-russische Zusammenarbeit...', *op. cit.*, p. 493.

participation to museum institutions created an asymmetry impossible to reduce: the representation of Ukraine and Belarus is much smaller than that of Russia, whose members include government ministries. This move can be seen as an attempt to diversify viewpoints and perspectives, but it fell far short of providing the partners with the equal means of forming the direction the institution takes. Representatives of other post-Soviet countries, such as the Baltic states, Moldova, Georgia and Kazakhstan, have remained outside this formalised framework of cooperation; their involvement is restricted to academic and project-based collaboration.

The statute of the museum stipulates that its scientific advisory board shall be composed of up to five members from Germany and five from the Russian Federation. It can be expanded to include members from other countries, a provision first applied to Ukraine and the Republic of Belarus.²⁰ The board's responsibilities include advising the institution on scholarly, curatorial and strategic matters.

The chairmanship of the association was assigned on a rotating basis to two institutions: the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the Central Museum of the Armed Forces in Moscow. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the German side suspended this rotational arrangement.²¹

The museum's ongoing operations are funded from the German federal budget. Since 1994, the institution has received institutional support from the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. Between 2020 and 2022, this core funding totalled €4.6 million, with an additional €1.5 million awarded for the implementation of specific projects.²² Although the Berlin authorities are represented in the association, the city does not contribute to the museum's operational costs.

As a result, the German capital is home to a state-funded institution with a unique status. The binational museum model adopted, which was created by the descendants of former enemies to commemorate a war they fought against each other, is unprecedented. Germany has not gone this far in coordinating its politics of memory even with France, its closest partner.²³ Despite certain formal similarities, the arrangement applied to Berlin's Allied Museum,

20 Until February 2025, German members of the scientific advisory board included Prof. Dr Thomas Sandkühler (Berlin), Prof. Dr Anke Hilbrenner (Göttingen), Prof. Dr Beate Fieseler (Düsseldorf), Prof. Dr Stefan Creuzberger (Rostock) and Prof. Dr Tatjana Tönsmeier (Wuppertal). The Russian side was represented by Dr Evgeny Artemov (St. Petersburg), Natalia Kalantarova (Krasnogorsk), Oleg Pankov (Podolsk), Dr Victor Skryabin (Moscow) and Prof. Dr Alla Kirilina (Moscow). The board also included Veronika Skok (Minsk) and Oleksandr Lysenko (Kyiv).

21 Drucksache 20/4852, 9.12.2022, BT-Drucksache 20/4852 (Schriftliche Fragen), p. 1.

22 D. Banse, U. Müller, 'Wie Claudia Roth verzweifelt versucht...', *op. cit.*

23 Presented as a German-French project, the Historial at Hartmannswillerkopf, which opened on 3 August 2017, is actually a French museum developed with German involvement. See: memorial-hwk.eu/de/historial.

which focuses on the actions of the three victorious Western powers, has not strengthened the position of any single foreign partner to such an extent.²⁴

It is worth noting that in political terms, the concept behind the Karlshorst Museum stands in clear contrast to the model adopted in Reims, where the city itself acts as the founding institution of the museum established in 1984. The primary mission of the Reims museum is to commemorate the 1945 surrender that took place in the city, along with the final months leading up to it.²⁵

It is particularly significant that, whereas the activities of the Soviet museum were confined to the former East Germany and held no practical relevance for the former West Germany, the reconfigured German-Russian museum was intended to serve an all-German mission. In effect, the Russian Federation, acting as the successor to the Soviet Union, gained an instrument, grounded in international legal agreements, to influence the formation of Germany's politics of memory concerning the Second World War and German-Russian relations. By contrast, Germany's capacity to influence Russia in these areas remained extremely limited, if not negligible.

The limits of consensus

There was one immediate question which arose during the design of the new institutional framework for the museum: how much would the agreed arrangement shape exhibition practice?

In November 1991, the bilateral expert commission working on the new concept presented a policy document (*Grundsatzpapier*) that proposed preserving the historical rooms and converting the remaining part of the building into a space for a future exhibition on German-Soviet relations in the 20th century, with the Second World War as its central focus. At this stage of the negotiations, the planned exhibition bore the working title 'Between Hostility and Friendship. The History of German-Soviet Relations in the 20th Century'.²⁶ The sides also agreed that the existing collection, owned by the Central Museum of the Armed Forces in Moscow, would be loaned on a long-term basis to

24 The museum is operated by an association with public-benefit status established in 1996. Its members include the Federal Republic of Germany, the federal state of Berlin, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich. 'Der Trägerverein des Alliierten Museums', alliiertenmuseum.de.

25 'Musée de la Reddition', musees-reims.fr. Between 12 May 2025 and March 2026, the museum is undergoing redevelopment. It is also worth noting that it is housed in the building of a school now known as Lycée Franklin Roosevelt.

26 J. Morré, 'Das Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. Deutsch-russische Zusammenarbeit...', *op. cit.*, p. 491.

the association as the museum's new operator. However, items of particular significance to the Soviet side were taken back to Moscow.²⁷

As part of the implementation of the museum's new operational concept, the building housing the institution was remodelled. At the same time, key Soviet-era elements were preserved, including a diorama depicting the storming of the Reichstag, a relief referencing the monument in Treptower Park and thematic stained-glass windows. It was also decided that the museum would continue to display the 'victorious' military equipment in its garden.

The first permanent exhibition, eventually titled 'Memory of a War' (*Erinnerung an einen Krieg*),²⁸ established the museum's new specialisation as the only institution with a permanent display dedicated to the German-Soviet war of annihilation. An earlier exhibition at the Topography of Terror centre, which commemorated the 50th anniversary of Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, laid the groundwork for active expansion of the Federal Republic of Germany's politics of memory in this area.²⁹ According to Peter Jahn, the former director of the Karlshorst Museum, it was particularly important that the permanent exhibition presented a comprehensive picture of the war, including both military operations and civilian suffering.³⁰ In this way, the project sought to address a significant gap in Germany's remembrance of that period, in which only a marginal role was played by the Soviet victims of German wartime actions and occupation policies.³¹

In the view of the museum's next director, the Russian side's restraint during the institution's early years made it possible to align temporary and special exhibitions with the German memory discourse.³² Consequently, the museum explored topics such as prisoners of war, the Siege of Leningrad,³³ the Battle of Stalingrad,³⁴ the outbreak of war in 1941,³⁵ everyday life in wartime Moscow³⁶ and women in the Red Army.³⁷ It also featured exhibitions on figures such as

27 *Ibid.*, p. 492.

28 The permanent exhibition was on display from 1995 to 2012.

29 See: R. Rürup (ed.), *Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941-1945. Eine Dokumentation zum 50. Jahrestag des Überfall auf die Sowjetunion*, Berlin 1991.

30 P. Jahn, '22. Juni 1941: Kriegserinnerung in Deutschland und Russland', Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 30 November 2011, bpb.de.

31 B. Quinkert, 'Einleitung' [in:] B. Quinkert, J. Morré (eds.), *Deutsche Besatzung in der Sowjetunion 1941-1944: Vernichtungskrieg, Reaktionen, Erinnerung*, Paderborn 2014, pp. 19-20.

32 J. Morré, 'Das Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. Deutsch-russische Zusammenarbeit...', *op. cit.*, p. 495.

33 The exhibition 'Blockade Leningrads. 1941-1944. Dossiers', 15 May - 5 September 2004.

34 The exhibition 'Stalingrad erinnern. Stalingrad im deutschen und russischen Gedächtnis', 15 November 2003 - 21 March 2004. Also on display in Moscow and Volgograd.

35 The exhibition 'Juni 1941: Der tiefe Schnitt', 22 June - 20 September 2001. On display simultaneously in Moscow and Kyiv.

36 The exhibition 'Moskau im Krieg. 1941-1945', 22 November 2001 - 17 February 2002.

37 The exhibition 'Mascha, Nina und Katjuscha. Frauen in der Roten Armee', 16 November 2002 - 23 February 2003.

Ilya Ehrenburg³⁸ and Nikolai Berzarin, the first Soviet commandant of Berlin,³⁹ it regularly presented the photographic work of Soviet war correspondents⁴⁰ and addressed issues related to the post-war period, particularly the Soviet military presence in East Germany.

In parallel, the museum expanded its educational and outreach activities, for example by organising a dedicated programme to commemorate the anniversaries of Germany's surrender.

After 15 years, work began on revising the exhibition concept for the Karlshorst Museum, an effort motivated by the passage of time as well as changing visitor preferences, advances in presentation technology and the need to incorporate the latest research.⁴¹ As a result of this initiative, a new permanent exhibition entitled 'Germany and the Soviet Union in the Second World War' (*Deutschland und die Sowjetunion im Zweiten Weltkrieg*) opened in April 2013.⁴² Its narrative focused particularly on the years 1941–45, aiming to narrow the gap between the memory discourses in Germany and Russia, or more broadly across the post-Soviet space.⁴³ The bilateral discussions held during the preparatory phase were evaluated positively, as a reflection of "a lasting relationship of trust that has developed over the past 20 years and which forms the basis for practical cooperation".⁴⁴

At the same time, differences in the German and Russian approaches had already begun to emerge. One striking example was the diverging interpretations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.⁴⁵ In response, the scientific advisory board developed a method of balancing narratives (*Waagschalenprinzip*), leading to an agreement to highlight the repressive actions by both the Soviet and German sides prior to 1941 while explicitly ruling out any implication of equivalence between the National Socialist and Stalinist dictatorships.⁴⁶ From the perspective of an external observer operating outside the context

38 The exhibition 'Ilja Ehrenburg und die Deutschen', 27 November 1997 – 18 January 1998.

39 The exhibition 'Nikolai Bersarin, Generaloberst, Stadtkommandant (Berlin)', 7 September – 21 September 1999, 8 May – 1 June 2003 and 1 April – 9 May 2004.

40 The exhibitions: 'Das mitfühlende Objektiv. Michail Sawin. Kriegsfotografie 1941–1945', 30 April – 31 May 1998; 'Nach Berlin! Timofej Melnik. Kriegsfotografie 1941–1945', 22 October – 13 December 1998; 'Heimatfront. Iwan Schagin. Kriegsfotografie 1941–1945', 10 December 1999 – 6 February 2000; 'Dokument und Konstrukt. Arkadij Schaichet. Fotografie zwischen N.E.P. und Großem Vaterländischen Krieg', 29 March – 27 May 2001; 'Diesseits – jenseits der Front. Michail Trachmann. Kriegsfotografie 1941–1945', 16 April – 18 August 2002; 'Kunst im Auftrag. Boris Ignatowitsch. Fotografien 1927–1946', 17 November 2006 – 11 February 2007; 'Chandogin – Kriegsfotos aus Karelien und Leningrad 1939–1944', 15 October – 28 November 2010.

41 J. Morré, 'Das Deutsch-Russische Museum Berlin-Karlshorst als Erinnerungsort' [in:] A. Wirsching, J. Zarusky, A. Tschubarjan, V. Ischtschenko (eds.), *Erinnerung an Diktatur und Krieg: Brennpunkte des kulturellen Gedächtnisses zwischen Russland und Deutschland seit 1945*, Munich 2021, pp. 271–279 – here p. 277.

42 'Katalog zur Dauerausstellung', Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, Berlin 2014.

43 J. Morré, 'Das Deutsch-Russische Museum Berlin-Karlshorst als Erinnerungsort', *op. cit.*, p. 277.

44 *Idem*, 'Das Museum Berlin-Karlshorst. Deutsch-russische Zusammenarbeit...', *op. cit.*, p. 497.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 496.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 496.

of German-Russian relations, the exhibition's shortcomings included the narrow framing of the Soviet Union's development up to 1939/1941, Soviet policy towards Germany between 1939 and 1941 and the imperialist policy which the USSR applied towards Central and Eastern Europe from 1944 onwards.

Alongside the presentation of the 1941–45 period, the second pillar of the new concept saw a renewed emphasis on the historic moment of Germany's surrender, prompted by visitor interest.⁴⁷ At the same time, the exhibition acknowledged the ambivalence in how the end of the Second World War was viewed in Germany by oscillating between the themes of defeat and liberation.

As a result of the agreements reached between Germany and (ultimately) Russia, a museum dedicated to the German war of annihilation against the Soviet Union was established at the authentic site of Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender.⁴⁸ By its very design, this institutional framework encouraged a narrowing of both the curatorial and scholarly perspectives in terms of the chronology of the Second World War and the roles played by members of the anti-Hitler coalition.

The level of public interest in the museum is reflected in its annual visitor numbers: in 2013, it was visited by 45,500 people; in 2014 by 37,347; in 2015 by 52,006; in 2016 by 49,749; in 2017 by 48,530; in 2018 by 48,550; and in 2019 by 51,530.⁴⁹

Rebus sic stantibus...

The museum has long faced criticism for its institutional model and its willingness to accommodate Russian preferences, including in curatorial matters. In 2021, during the commemorations of the 80th anniversary of the German attack on the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian ambassador, Andriy Melnyk, protested in particular against the overly narrow name of the institution, which omitted the nationalities of other Soviet republics. However, it would not be until Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 that the museum's conceptual and structural flaws became fully apparent.

Chief among these flaws was granting the Russian Federation the ability to exert unilateral influence over how Germany's culture of remembrance

⁴⁷ See: B. Quinkert (ed.), *Die deutsche Kapitulation im Mai 1945*, Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, Berlin 2015.

⁴⁸ See: Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, Drucksache 19/13827, 'Traegerschaft und Eigentumsverhaeltnisse des Museums Berlin Karlshorst II', November 2022, p. 2.

⁴⁹ 'Finanzielle Absicherung der Arbeit der NS-Gedenkstätten in Deutschland', Antwort der Bundesregierung auf die Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Jan Korte, Nicole Gohlke, Gökay Akbulut, weiterer Abgeordneter und der Fraktion Die Linke – Deutscher Bundestag, Drucksache 20/4280, Drucksache 20/4599, p. 6.

regarding the Second World War is formed. In retrospect, it is only possible to attempt to reconstruct the motivations and arguments that led to the mid-1990s decision to adopt an arrangement granting Russia such far-reaching concessions. After all, Germany could have taken over the institution and retained its museum function, particularly as the German government was responsible for providing the organisational and financial framework for the facility. Moreover, the artefacts from the Russian museum deposit could presumably have been obtained through alternative means or replaced with two-dimensional objects (*Flachware*).

The second fundamental flaw was the readiness to make far-reaching compromises that led to the marginalisation of controversial topics in the name of prioritising reconciliation with Russia. While the emphasis was placed on the martyrological dimension of the Soviet war effort, critical assessments of the Soviet Union's early cooperation with Nazi Germany and its post-war actions were played down. This inevitably led to a tolerant attitude towards narratives that disregarded the sensitivities of other Central and Eastern European countries (the Baltic states, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary), creating friction in relations with them. As a result, the museum's presentation of the Second World War failed to provide a comprehensive account of the Stalinist dictatorship, particularly with regard to its external aggression. The exhibition's creators did not adequately address the fact that several countries were effectively stripped of their sovereignty after the war as they fell within the Soviet sphere of influence, a loss reflected in the imposition of regimes subordinate to the Kremlin and in the establishment of totalitarian rule. Over time, crafting an approach to the increasingly divergent cultures of remembrance within the post-Soviet space became a significant challenge – one that those involved in the project were aware of.

The third mistake was that the museum unintentionally reinforced Russia's propaganda narrative. This also includes the trivialisation of Soviet symbolism, which was reduced to a form of 'folklore' intended to attract visitors.⁵⁰ The emphasis on institutionalising reconciliation with Russia helped solidify the Soviet, and later Putinist, narrative of the Soviet Union's dominant role in the victory over fascism. A similar form of instrumentalisation serving the Kremlin's political agenda involves the portrayal of the Great Patriotic War primarily as a Russian legacy while minimising the contribution and sacrifices of other Soviet nations. The result is a dual form of appropriation: a quasi-monopoly on the victory and a quasi-monopoly on its legacy.

50 A remark made by one of the panellists during the debate 'Das Gedenken zum 8. Mai. Die Rolle des Museums Berlin-Karlshorst im Wandel', held at the museum on 8 May 2025.

Russia has now employed the falsification of history as a means of justifying its aggressive actions, primarily against Ukraine. The Karlshorst Museum has also become a tool of this instrumentalisation, and is struggling to counter the practice of treating the site as a kind of rallying point for pro-Russian activists.⁵¹ Challenges have also arisen at the level of official interactions, as illustrated by the joint visit to the museum by the Ambassador of the Russian Federation, Sergey Nechayev, and the Ambassador of the Republic of Belarus, Andriy Shuplyak, in July 2024 to mark the 30th anniversary of the institution's operation in its current form.

Ultimately, instead of the anticipated reconciliation, Germany has been confronted with harsh reality. The pressure to change the status of the museum has come primarily from Ukraine. However, the legal structure of the founding association constrains the scope for reform. Moreover, political decision-makers, though aware of the problem, have shown a lack of resolve, focusing on “an intensive dialogue with the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum about the future structure of the association” and on exploring “the possibility of a medium-term change to the structure of the association”.⁵² The museum's director has openly admitted that he does not favour any rapid structural changes.⁵³ In addition, some policymakers may have been guided by the hope of a swift resolution to the conflict and an eventual return to normalised relations with Russia. It is also possible that they wished to avoid stirring controversy ahead of the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War. At the same time, the Russian side took actions targeting the German academic community specialising in Russian studies; the absence of a political response to these measures drew criticism within Germany.⁵⁴

The museum's leadership did attempt to adapt to the new circumstances, but did so in a half-hearted manner, without engaging in any critical reflection on its previous approach. This is well illustrated by a remark from the museum's director: “The Russian Federation is trying to nationalise the Soviet victory, to monopolise it, and in some cases, [this effort includes] taking advantage of our willingness to cooperate. At the moment, keeping our distance will do us good. Only very clear signals are of any help here”.⁵⁵ The name of the museum was changed, removing the label ‘German-Russian’, and the inscription in front of

51 D. Banse, U. Müller, ‘Wie Claudia Roth verzweifelt versucht...’, *op. cit.*

52 Antwort der Staatsministerin Claudia Roth vom 14. Oktober 2022, Drucksache 20/3987, p. 2. (Schriftliche Fragen).

53 D. Banse, U. Müller, ‘Wie Claudia Roth verzweifelt versucht...’, *op. cit.*

54 M. Schulze Wessel, ‘Halbe Transformation’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 30 October 2024.

55 V. Friedrich, ‘Dyskusja o pomnikach sowieckich w Niemczech’, *Deutsche Welle*, 7 May 2022, [dw.com](https://www.dw.com/en/dyskusja-o-pomnikach-sowieckich-w-niemczech/a-63844444).

the building was changed to read: 'Site of the Capitulation in May 1945'. This was undoubtedly a necessary gesture, but an insufficient one.⁵⁶

As a sign of solidarity with Ukraine, only the Ukrainian flag currently hangs in front of the museum building, whereas previously the Russian, Belarusian and German flags were also displayed. As part of the museum's established format for commemorating the anniversary of the end of the Second World War, the traditional 'toast to peace' has been discontinued. In light of the ongoing Russian invasion, it has been replaced by a minute of silence.

However, the permanent exhibition has remained unchanged. An attempt to supplement it and provide a degree of contextualisation through a temporary exhibition dedicated to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a welcome signal, though its impact was very limited.⁵⁷

The special exhibition prepared for the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War also reflected a cautious approach. Titled 'The Last Year of the War. June 1944 – May 1945 from the Perspective of Soviet War Photographers', it aligned with the museum's previously established thematic priority of highlighting the work of war correspondents.⁵⁸

The fact that the existing legal framework remains in place continues to affect the institution's operations. The annual general meeting of the association's members, though formally required, is no longer being convened. Consequently, a written circulation procedure has replaced meetings of officials involved in the museum's operations as the method for taking decisions. This procedure is permitted under its statute, provided that no more than two member objects. In this way, Germany is seeking to preserve the association's decision-making capacity.

A change in the composition of the scientific advisory board carried out in February 2025 represented the most significant development affecting the functioning of the institution.⁵⁹ Previously composed mainly of experts from Russia and Germany, the board had not convened since 2022, as the institution's statute did not require it to do so. A statement published on the museum's

56 The association's name was changed in 2015. See: Abgeordnetenhaus Berlin, Drucksache 19/13827, 'Traegerschaft und Eigentumsverhaeltnisse des Museums Berlin-Karlshorst II', November 2022, p. 4.

57 'Riss durch Europa. Die Folgen des Hitler-Stalin-Pakts', Ausstellung zum 85. Jahrestag der Unterzeichnung des Hitler-Stalin-Pakts, Museum Berlin-Karlshorst; A. Hilbrenner, Ch. Meißner, J. Morré, *Riss durch Europa: die Folgen des Hitler-Stalin-Pakts – eine Einleitung* (*Rift through Europe: the consequences of the Hitler-Stalin Pact – an introduction*), Berlin 2024.

58 The special exhibition 'Das letzte Kriegsjahr. Juni 1944 – Mai 1945 aus der Perspektive sowjetischer Kriegsphotografen', 8 May – 14 September 2025.

59 'Das Museum hat einen neuen Wissenschaftlichen Beirat', Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, 12 February 2025, museum-berlin-karlshorst.de.

website emphasised that the newly reconstituted board now included eleven members representing seven countries.⁶⁰

The museum's website still features a cautiously worded statement acknowledging the need to consider changes: "When, on 24 February 2022, Russia expanded its military actions against Ukraine in violation of international law, the museum was confronted with fundamental questions: What form can institutional cooperation take in the future? What changes to the exhibition's concept and content are necessary? The discussion on these issues is currently ongoing".⁶¹ It is difficult to escape the impression that the main stakeholders are playing for time.

Conclusions

These critical observations regarding the museum's concept and operations are not intended to call into question the good intentions of those who have been involved in the project over the years. For a long time, the German culture of remembrance has indisputably been plagued by significant shortcomings concerning the victims of the war and occupation in Eastern Europe. The current instrumentalisation of Berlin's memorials to the Soviet war effort for propaganda purposes in no way diminishes the gravity of the human losses or the individual suffering endured by victims of the Second World War. Nevertheless, these considerations must not obscure the fact that the original concept of institutionalised German-Russian reconciliation within the framework of the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum has failed to withstand being confronted with reality. The illusory vision of 'exclusive reconciliation' has rendered one of the most historically significant sites associated with the Second World War unable to fulfil its role with integrity.

The museum's continued thematic focus on the German-Soviet war is likely to remain a source of tension in relations with other partners from Central and Eastern Europe. It is important to reiterate that criticism of this is by no means intended to relativise the scale of the suffering endured by the population of the former Soviet Union. However, the emphasis which the museum's

⁶⁰ Composition of the board: Prof. Dr Thomas Sandkühler (Humboldt University of Berlin) – Chair, Prof. Dr Stefan Creuzberger (University of Rostock), Prof. Dr Beate Fieseler (retired researcher, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf), Prof. Dr Tatjana Tönsmeier (University of Wuppertal), Dr Agnieszka Wiercholska (Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe), Dr Ludmila Cojocar (National Museum of Moldova), Dr Iryna Kashtalian (Buchenwald Memorial), Oleg Lutokhin (Centre for East European and International Studies), Prof. Dr Oleksandr Lysenko (National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine), Dr Gintarė Malinauskaitė (Lithuanian Institute of History) and Prof. Dr Vita Zelče (University of Latvia).

⁶¹ Information published on the museum's website – 'Kapitulacja niemiecka w maju 1945 r.', Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, museum-karlshorst.de.

narrative places on 22 June 1941 as a pivotal date weakens the historical link between the German surrender on 8 May 1945 and the outbreak of the war on 1 September 1939. Portraying the Soviet Union primarily as a victim of German aggression while downplaying the brutal and repressive policies of the Stalinist dictatorship serves no one but the current Russian regime.

It is becoming increasingly problematic to maintain the status quo. Public subsidies for an institution that continues to operate under the shaping influence of Russian state actors have become the subject of criticism from politicians and the media. Using German funds to support a museum that grants privileged legal status to Russian ministries responsible for the invasion of Ukraine will become increasingly difficult to justify, even within a purely domestic context. So far, policymakers have lacked the courage to unilaterally terminate the long-standing commitments under international law and the German law on associations. As a result, the museum currently represents a stark example of the difficulties faced by Germany in formulating a policy towards an aggressive, neo-imperialist Russia. Despite the critical tone of public debate, there is still little resolve to undertake a thorough revision of the existing frameworks.

When assessing the structural flaws of the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum, it is important to consider that the redefinition of the site of the 1945 surrender as an institutional anchor for German-Russian reconciliation has made it possible for Germany to partly obscure the ambivalence surrounding the date of 8/9 May in German public consciousness – namely, the experience of defeat coupled with the fall of a criminal regime. The issue of the divergent experiences of East and West Germany is gaining increasing relevance, both in the context of the memory of the Second World War and in shaping perceptions of contemporary Russia.

The urgently needed new concept for the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum could also incorporate a critical examination of Germany's post-reunification policy towards Russia. An attempt to undertake this assessment and convey it through curatorial means would likely prove far more challenging than formally limiting the Kremlin's influence over the institution's operations. Nonetheless, without a fundamental overhaul of its legal framework and exhibition concept, the museum will remain a place where memory continues to divide.

A German house.

**Controversy over the commemoration
of the Polish victims of the Second World War**

Kamil Frymark, Anna Kwiatkowska

MAIN POINTS

- Commissioned by the German state, a German-Polish House (GPH) is to be built in Berlin. This concept is the result of a debate lasting several years about whether it would be legitimate for the German capital to see the creation of a monument to the victims of crimes perpetrated against the Polish nation during the Second World War. The concept of establishing the GPH emerged in response to pressure from the Polish side and a local civic initiative concerning the construction of a monument. It was intended to replace the idea of building a monument, or at least to 'encompass' it with an institution funded from the state budget, tasked with implementing historical policy and propagating the German perspective. In line with the currently valid concept, the initiative will be based on three main elements: commemoration (the creation of a 'modern monument'), the construction of a museum housing a permanent exhibition and temporary displays, and educational projects. The substantive aspect will focus on the Nazi German aggression against Poland and its brutal occupation in 1939–45. Neither the Polish side nor the original initiators abandoned their efforts to secure priority for the construction of a monument to the victims of crimes against the Polish nation.
- The project will be carried out by two German institutions: the Foundation of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which prepared the GPH's concept, and the German Institute of Polish Affairs, which is responsible for the initiative's operational aspect and the preparation of educational programmes. Political supervision of the project is being carried out by the Federal Chancellery. In the coalition agreement of the CDU/CSU–SPD government of April 2025, emphasis was placed on efforts to swiftly establish in Berlin a memorial site for the Polish victims of the German occupation and to construct the GPH.
- Uncertainty remains regarding the provision of funds for the continued implementation of the GPH project and the creation of posts for independent staff dedicated solely to this project, which concerns both of the institutions involved. The future of the construction of the monument to the Polish victims in Berlin will likewise depend on political will and the pressure exerted by groups supporting the initiative – above all in the context of the allocation of funds for both the GPH and the monument itself, which are in competition with many other projects within the framework of German policy of remembrance.
- The concept of the GPH continues to be debated and sparks a lot of controversy and doubts. Fundamental objections have been voiced by the German initiators

of the original idea of a monument to the Polish victims, who call for the separation of the issue of the monument and the commemoration of the victims from that of the museum and educational centre. It was solely down to their determination, persistence and commitment that, on 16 June 2025 a memorial site – a commemorative plaque and a glacial erratic boulder – was unveiled opposite the Bundestag to serve as a temporary monument to the Polish victims. It remains unknown when the final monument will be built; in Germany, the construction of both museums and monuments are undertakings calculated over many years and linked to enormous logistical and financial challenges.

- The current concept of the GPH, as well as the manner of its presentation and the statements of its authors, reflects a conviction that the project has an exceptional character and that the German remembrance culture has superiority over other forms of commemorating victims. This may lead – and already has led – to the argument being raised that the construction of the GPH is essentially an initiative replacing other important measures relating to history in relations with Poland, including compensation for wartime losses. At the same time, contrary to assurances, this is not a bilateral project but an entirely German one – in terms of content, financing, the selection of experts, and the manner of commemoration.

Władysław Bartoszewski strongly believed that a monument to the Polish victims of the Nazi German occupation should be constructed in Berlin. In his capacity as the Polish prime minister's plenipotentiary for international dialogue (2007–2015), he sought to have such a monument built for many years, but to no avail. The most frequent argument presented to him by the German side was the allegedly sufficient number of memorials commemorating the crimes perpetrated on Poles which were already in place across Germany.

The issue only began to be taken more seriously at the end of 2017, when a group of former German politicians and social activists¹ came up with an initiative to build such a monument (*Polendenkmal*) in Berlin. Their proposal sparked heated debates;² and various groups, including German MPs, expressed their support for the construction of this memorial. On 30 October 2020, following a motion tabled by the CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP and the Greens parliamentary groups, all parties represented in the Bundestag except for the AfD supported the concept to establish 'a commemoration and meeting place to present the truth about the nature of Polish-German history and to contribute to the development of special bilateral relations' (hereinafter: the Polish Memorial).

A year later, a team of experts led by former German ambassador to Poland Rolf Nickel devised a concept which was later unveiled by the then German foreign minister Heiko Maas (SPD), according to which 'a memorial should be the central element of this site. This place should serve as a reminder, should admonish and provoke reflection. It should create an opportunity to mainly think about the Polish victims of the Second World War and the German occupation of Poland'.

Following the 2021 federal elections, the task of enforcing the Bundestag's resolution on the Polish Memorial was transferred from the MFA to the Federal Chancellery. This was motivated by the intention to concentrate the most important history projects in one place, i.e. in the hands of the minister of state for culture and the media (BKM). This official is also supervising the enforcement of the Bundestag's resolution regarding another initiative: the construction of the 'German Occupation of Europe in the Second World War' Documentation Centre (see Appendix).

In May 2022, the then BKM Claudia Roth (Greens) ordered the preparation of a new concept of the Polish Memorial. Two institutions are responsible for

1 This group included the retired head of the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, Florian Mausbach, former director of the German Institute for Polish Affairs Prof. Dieter Bingen, former speakers of the Bundestag Rita Süßmuth (CDU) and Wolfgang Thierse (SPD), and a Berlin-based rabbi and former director of the Topography of Terror memorial place Andreas Nachama.

2 S. Lehnstaedt, 'Plädoyer für ein polnisch-deutsches Museum: Die Nachbarn verstehen lernen', *Tagesspiegel*, 2 August 2018, [tagesspiegel.de](https://www.tagesspiegel.de).

this: the Foundation of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (hereinafter: the Memorial Foundation) and the German Institute of Polish Affairs (DPI). Despite the declared close coordination of actions, a clear division has formed between these entities. The Memorial Foundation is mainly working on the conceptual part of the project, while the DPI is mainly involved in taking care of the operational aspects and preparing educational programmes.

At the beginning of 2025, representatives of the DPI suggested that the bulk of responsibility for the project's implementation should be transferred to the Memorial Foundation.³ However, it remains unclear how the provision of funds in both institutions for the continued work on the project will be secured, as both organisations lack a workforce dedicated exclusively to this matter. For 2023–2025, the Foundation received a €1 million target subsidy from the BKM for preparing the concept of the memorial.

Selected aspects of the new concept

The German government approved the GPH's executive project⁴ in June 2024. According to its authors, "the GPH is Germany's key project in the sphere of memory policy – it represents an important contribution to a new perspective on Polish-German relations". They also point out that "the central issue is the commemoration of the victims of the German occupation of Poland during the Second World War. Almost every family in Poland lost someone close to them in that war. However, this knowledge is not sufficiently clearly present in German culture of remembrance". In its present form, the project consists of three main elements (see Appendix):

1. commemoration in the form of a 'modern monument',
2. a museum in the centre of Berlin housing a permanent exhibition and temporary displays, a lecture hall, office space, a library and a museum shop,
3. educational projects focused on issues such as the German occupation of Poland and Polish suffering and resistance; these are planned to be carried out not only in Berlin but nationwide.

In line with the assumptions, each of these points can be implemented separately, which may for example accelerate the creation of the monument. The June 2025 unveiling of a 30-tonne glacial erratic boulder and a commemorative plaque opposite the Federal Chancellery in Berlin is a step towards

³ Forum Transparentności, 22 January 2025, deutschpolnisheshaus.de.

⁴ *Commemorate, encounter, understand. Realisation proposal of the German-Polish House*, Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, German Institute of Polish Affairs, Berlin, June 2024, deutschpolnisheshaus.de.



A temporary memorial in the form of a boulder commemorating the Polish victims of Nazism and the German occupation of Poland, unveiled in June 2025 near the Federal Chancellery on the site of the former Kroll Opera House.

its construction; the plaque bears the inscription: “To the Polish victims of Nazism and the victims of German occupation and terror in Poland 1939–1945”.⁵ They were prepared under pressure from and thanks to the persistence of the German initiators gathered around Florian Mausbach, Dieter Bingen, Rita Süssmuth, Wolfgang Thierse and Andreas Nachama. The DPI and the city-state of Berlin also cooperated in this project. The stone is intended to serve as a temporary monument, reserving the site for the final memorial.

Despite the placing of the ‘memory stone’ on the site where the Kroll Opera House once stood and the fact that this is the preferred location, two proposed locations are still being considered for the GPH. The location already selected is in Berlin’s city centre, near the Bundestag and the Federal Chancellery – in Tiergarten park; if this is maintained, this would encourage not only Berlin residents and Germans in general, but also tourists to visit it. However, there is a problem with obtaining a permit to use a portion of this highly popular park. Civil society organisations will likely protest against it (some trees would need to be cleared for it to be built, which will face resistance). The chances for situating the memorial in this location are increased by support from Berlin’s local government (senate), headed by the city’s mayor Kai Wegner (CDU), and by the personal involvement of Florian Hauer (CDU), who has served as secretary of the city-state of Berlin for federal, European and international affairs and the city-state’s plenipotentiary at the federal government since April 2023.

The Kroll Opera House played a key role in the history of Nazi Germany. After the Reichstag fire in 1933, it was converted into the temporary seat of the German parliament. It was there, on 23 March 1933, that the so-called Enabling Act (*Ermächtigungsgesetz*) was passed, granting Hitler almost unlimited power and marking the beginning of the Nazi dictatorship. The most symbolic event associated with this building was his speech on 1 September 1939, in which he announced the attack on Poland. In his address, Hitler falsely accused Warsaw of aggression and declared the commencement of military operations.

The other location proposed by the authors of the GPH concept, popular particularly at the early stage of proposing the initiative, is the Anhalter Bahnhof, an area in the vicinity of the former railway station at the Askanischer Platz. This location is more favourable because the official spatial planning strategies have already received approval, which could significantly accelerate the construction process. This advantage is also emphasised by the initial authors of the concept to commemorate the Polish victims. They argue that, since the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation

⁵ According to unofficial reports, the Polish and the German sides argued over almost every word of the inscription on the plaque.

A German house

is located⁶ nearby, it could facilitate the selection of this location. However, it is far from the city centre.

A new idea involving the construction, in the same location, of a museum dedicated to German emigration in 1933–1945 (Exilmuseum) may be another potential problem. Thus far, a foundation has been established to build this museum and a competition for an architectural concept has been announced. Cornelia Vossen, the curator of the Exilmuseum foundation in Berlin, has said that the initial stage of the design work is underway. This museum will cost €60 million, and by mid-2024 a third of this sum was collected under a crowd-funding initiative. According to initial plans, the museum will open in 2028 and an exhibition presenting its concept and visualisation has been set up in the vicinity of Anhalter Bahnhof.

The involvement of young people in developing the GPH is viewed as one of the most important aspects of the initiative. Targeting young people with educational activities – both the permanent exhibition and temporary displays and accompanying activities (such as the Flying Academy and the Youth Centre of Ideas) is intended to boost their knowledge of history. This is a task of key importance, especially considering that a mere 10% of young Germans agree with the statement that their forebears were the ‘perpetrators’ (*Täter*) of the Second World War.⁷

Notably, research has shown that in Germany’s western federal states the level of knowledge of Poland is lower than in the former East Germany.⁸ Taking this into account, the prospect of the GPH carrying out its activities outside Berlin is of huge importance. This may for example involve temporary exhibitions and other initiatives (workshops, seminars, nationwide competitions) which will be organised outside its headquarters. In addition, although the debate regarding the GPH is mainly taking place among experts, in the long term it may facilitate awareness-raising activities among the public to spread knowledge about the crimes perpetrated in occupied Poland. It may also help to promote the knowledge of Poland in the German public space.

6 ‘Otwarcie wystawy stałej Fundacji Ucieczka, Wypędzenie, Pojednanie’, Institute for Western Affairs, 18 June 2021, iz.poznan.pl.

7 *MEMO Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor 2023*, Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG), Research Institute Social Cohesion (RISC), Stiftung Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft, 2023, stiftung-evz.de.

8 R. Formuszewicz (ed.), *Polska w oczach Niemców*, PISM, 9 October 2023, pism.pl.

Controversy and challenges

The construction of the GPH has sparked controversy and posed long-term challenges. These mainly involve the lack of major progress in implementing the Bundestag resolution and the modification of the initial concept of the GPH. This has come under criticism from the initiators of the project. In March and again in June 2023, they wrote a letter to Ms Roth, in which they indicated that the framework plan from 2023 does not contain the word ‘memorial’, which was a key element of the initial version of the project. They also emphasised that the most important goal of this initiative should be to spread knowledge of Polish-German history among the German public. “Poles know what they suffered during the German occupation. They attach importance to a dignified commemoration of their plight in the German capital, in which this tragedy was born, to a sign of Germans publicly pleading guilty, mourning the victims, bearing responsibility and seeking reconciliation”.⁹ In addition, the authors of the letter have proposed that at least a temporary memorial be set up in the form of a boulder and a plaque, and argue that it is necessary to separate the victim commemoration memorial from the museum and educational centre.¹⁰ They are not alone in presenting these arguments, as similar proposals have also emerged in the expert debate.¹¹

Although the current version of the concept does envisage a ‘modern monument’, which is intended to be the central element of the GPH and available to anyone regardless of the GPH’s opening hours, its interpretation may vary greatly. This has also been raised by the document’s authors during meetings. They argue that the form of commemoration depends on the results of an international competition for its design, which will be carried out once the final location is agreed upon. It will encompass both the monument and the GPH’s headquarters. The concept also states that “the monument and the building will form a whole – they will be visibly connected and will enter into dialogue”. The project emphasises that visitors should be allowed to lay wreaths and light candles at the site. This was not obvious, as in previous years during the celebrations commemorating the outbreak of the Second World War (which were effectively organised by the GPH on the site where the former Kroll Opera House once stood) neither flowers nor candles were allowed, most likely due to security reasons and the proximity to the Federal Chancellery.

⁹ Letter from the initiators of the appeal to commemorate the victims of the German occupation of Poland to minister of state Claudia Roth from June 2023.

¹⁰ G. Gnauck, ‘Streit über Polen-Denkmal in Berlin’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 14 March 2023, faz.net.

¹¹ W. Meyer zu Utrup, I. Kąkolewski, S. Lehnstaedt, ‘Langzeitprojekt Deutsch-polnisches Haus: Es braucht endlich einen starken Impuls aus Deutschland’, *Tagesspiegel*, 11 May 2025, tagesspiegel.de.

Another challenge involves the need to compete with other government projects focused on the culture of remembrance of the victims of the Second World War. This mainly involves the above mentioned 'German Occupation of Europe in the Second World War' Documentation Centre. The concept of constructing this institution is more recent and was conceived in response to repeated demands to commemorate the Polish victims. However, it was intended that it would comprise all individuals who suffered as a result of the Nazi occupation, and thus to ensure a very broad context of victim commemoration. This was intended to enable Germany to avoid being accused of tolerating a certain 'victim competition' on the historical map of Berlin.

The GPH concept has not clarified its relations towards the Documentation Centre (the Memorial Foundation is involved in the development of both these initiatives). During meetings, the Foundation's head Uwe Neumärker clearly states that his tasks include efforts to avoid repetitions as regards the commemoration of the Polish victims in the two projects. This prompts the conclusion that the Documentation Centre will pay little attention to the memory of the Polish victims because 'the Poles already have a museum'. The competition between these two initiatives seems important, especially as, for example, in the event of having to choose one exhibition on the German occupation during the Second World War, most visitors (including groups of schoolchildren) would likely prefer the Documentation Centre as a place which houses a comprehensive presentation of these issues. Moreover, since work on developing this centre is much more advanced, it may be assumed that it will be opened sooner than the GPH.

The most urgent problems facing the GPH include the torpidity of the system and the issue of funding the construction works. Previous German experience, including the debate on the creation of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in the heart of Berlin, which lasted more than twenty years (it began in 1988 and the memorial was inaugurated in 2005), suggests that it may take more than a decade until the place of commemoration of the Polish victims is built. In addition, in Germany, the implementation of large construction projects (such as the airport in Berlin, the headquarters of the Federal Intelligence Service, the concert hall in Hamburg) is often delayed and runs over budget.

Another obstacle to the Bundestag allocating funds (approximately €150–200 million) for the GPH involves a permanent lack of interest in this initiative on the part of Germany's most prominent politicians and the public (except for individual journalists). An opportunity to allocate these funds arises from the CDU/CSU–SPD government including into the coalition agreement a commitment to "the swift establishment of a memorial site for the victims of German

aggression and occupation in Poland (1939–1945) on the square of the former Kroll Opera, as well as the construction of the German-Polish House as a place of remembrance and encounter in the centre of Berlin”.

Other important barriers include Germany's budget problems and economic stagnation, as well as the expected rise in the cost of this project in the coming years, resulting from its expansion. Moreover, as regards funding, the above mentioned overt rivalry between individual historical projects planned by the government is of key importance in this context. This involves not only the 'German Occupation of Europe in the Second World War' Documentation Centre,¹² but also the future Centre for European Transformation and German Unity.¹³ It may be impossible to provide funding to all these initiatives in line with the initial plans. The GPH is the least advanced, which additionally jeopardises its future funding. However, as serious as this is, it is not the controversy which has sparked the most heated debates.

Doubts regarding the concept of the German-Polish House

Reservations have also been voiced in particular regarding the plan of the permanent exhibition. Its main narrative will present the German occupation of Poland, including the aspects of everyday life and forms of resistance. The project also explicitly refers to more than five million victims, who were citizens of Poland. However, the assumption which had been included in the version prepared by the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September 2021, saying that 60% of this part of the exhibition is to focus on the Second World War and, in particular, the German occupation, has been removed from the concept. Another problem involves the failure to highlight the role of the perpetrators, who are very often omitted from the debate¹⁴ or remain anonymous, unlike with the manifestations of German resistance to Nazi Germany, which are presented for example in the German Resistance Memorial Centre

12 M. Wagińska-Marzec, 'Uchwała Bundestagu zielonym światłem do budowy Centrum Dokumentacyjnego „Druga wojna światowa i okupacja niemiecka w Europie”', Institute for Western Affairs, 24 October 2023, iz.poznan.pl.

13 The Future Center for European Transformation and German Unity (Zukunftszentrums für Deutsche Einheit und Europäische Transformation) will discuss the transformation that occurred in Germany and in Europe post-1989 and will pay special attention to East German experience. It will be located in Halle (Saale). The facility will be inaugurated in 2028 and its cost stands at around €200 million.

14 S. Salzborn, *Kollektive Unschuld: Die Abwehr der Shoah im deutschen Erinnern* [Collective Innocence. The Wish to Repress the Shoah in German Collective Memory], Hentrich und Hentrich Verlag, Berlin 2020; G. Paul (ed.), *Die Täter der Shoah. Fanatische Nationalsozialisten oder ganz normale Deutsche?*, Göttingen 2002.

in Berlin. Moreover, the concept of the exhibition does not contain information that the overall purpose of the occupation was to destroy the Polish nation.¹⁵

Despite the relative progress of the work, a number of issues need to be clarified. For example, it is unclear what is meant by the statement that the permanent exhibition “must present unexpected themes and perspectives and present people from Poland and Germany with unusual questions, so that visitors to the German-Polish House are keen to find out more about each other’s society and the diverse features of each country”. One of the GPH’s goals is to educate Poles and this is directly communicated by the design of the facility presented: “The goal should ultimately be for Germans and Poles to gain new and diverse insights into each other’s country and the people who live there, but also for both Poles and Germans to learn more about their own country and its population”.¹⁶

Other doubts concern the omission of certain issues, such as post-war antisemitism in the Federal Republic of Germany – particularly in view of the reference to similar phenomena in Poland (as exemplified by the Kielce pogrom) – or, more broadly, the failure to include the differing approaches of the two German states to coming to terms with the history of the Second World War in the permanent exhibition.

The lack of interest among the German public as regards their participation in historical projects is another contentious issue. Schools and youth organisations have been reluctant to become involved in developing the GPH’s educational programmes and some individuals who are taking part in these activities are from a migrant background (most often Polish and Ukrainian).

Conclusions: the future is uncertain

The authors of the GPH concept have repeatedly indicated that, during its preparation, they were in contact with selected representatives of the Polish side. They also note that Poles “should be included” in the future bodies responsible for the GPH. It should, however, be remembered that the House – as the authors of the concept themselves emphasise – is “a key project of the Federal Republic of Germany in the field of memory policy”. As such, it is being created at the behest of the government in Berlin, financed from the German state budget and – most importantly – intended to implement the principles of Germany’s policy of memory and to promote that perspective both on history and how it is commemorated.

15 According to the definition of genocide proposed by Rafał Lemkin, for more see the website of the Pilecki Institute regarding the Lemkin Collection, instytutpileckiego.pl.

16 *Commemorate, encounter, understand...*, op. cit., p. 12.

The most important example of the intention to promote the German culture of remembrance was Germany's clear reluctance to build a memorial, despite the fact that the aim of the grass roots initiative behind the project was just to build a memorial to the Polish victims of the German occupation (which turned out to be an excessive initiative for some). It is primarily due to the pressure exerted by the German initiators of the project that the term 'monument' was added to the GPH concept; in its earlier versions, it was absent, and a vague expression such as 'artistic element' was used instead. Other notions considered problematic from the perspective of German historical policy are also deliberately avoided. The focus of the narrative on the occupation rests not on the 'nation' or the 'state', but rather on 'cities' or 'regions' (which most often were in some way Polish-German) and on 'society'. This may lead to a relativisation of the political agency of the German state in relation to the Polish one.

The involvement of Polish experts in the initiative is also problematic. Their absence would strip the Polish side of access to information and of the possibility of influencing the form of the project and would expose it to accusations of boycotting the initiative. Their participation, on the other hand, equates to them legitimising a project on which they effectively have only an illusory influence, all the more so because the German side decides which Polish researchers should be invited to participate. Experience gathered thus far suggests that these decisions are arbitrary and fail to reflect the actual diversity of figures and views present in our historical debate.

This choice of researchers triggers numerous questions, for example whether Poles employed at German universities and state institutions (such as the German Historical Institute) and Germans holding similar positions in Polish institutions are viewed as researchers representing the broadly understood 'Polish side'. This is especially important because the project's organisers frequently refer to 'consultations with the Polish side'. If, in line with their declarations, they intend to 'create a place for intellectual debate on Polish-German issues in the European sphere, both those which unite and those which divide', it is surprising that no scholars representing a view of the politics of memory different than the German one have been invited to the project.

The manner in which the specific elements of the GPH take form will be the primary concern. Considering what tasks have been assigned to the project, for example in the informational aspect, it seems that its purpose is mainly compatible with the German perspective. At the same time, a certain openness can be observed on the part of the authors of the concept to take into account, at the planning stage, the issues raised by critics, including those from Poland. These issues include questions that had not previously been asked at all. This involves, for example, challenging the image of Germany as a state which has

come to terms with its past in an exemplary manner (this has been promoted for years) and answering the following questions: Why did Germans seek to exterminate the Polish nation? Why did they carry out mass killings of representatives of the Polish intelligentsia? Why have the perpetrators remained unpunished and how does this affect Polish-German relations? What was the origin of the conviction that Poles and Poland represent an inferior civilisation? Can the manner in which Germans treated the Poles be analysed in colonial terms? What about the issue of compensation, and why should it not constitute an element of reconciliation?

The optimal and compromise solution seems to be a speedy construction, in a prestigious neighbourhood in Berlin, of a monument commemorating the victims of the German occupation of Poland and, subsequently, of a Berlin-based educational centre on German-Polish relations. Both sides should contribute to these equally, in terms of both funding and research. They would thus have an equal right to decide on the initiative's form and content. The main aim of this facility would be to provide contemporary Germans, in particular young people, with knowledge of the details of the German occupation of Poland.

APPENDIX

The concept of the German-Polish House and the permanent exhibition¹⁷

- Location: the site of the former Kroll Opera House (Tiergarten district).
- The building will be designed by a team of international architects selected in a competition; the planned total floor area is approximately 7,500 m²; the cost of its construction is estimated at approximately €85 million – not including the cost of land purchase – and the GPH's annual operational cost is expected to be approximately €6 million (the expected total cost of similar facilities – the Documentation Centre and the Centre for European Transformation and German Unity – is approximately €200 million).
- A special place will be arranged on the premises to enable visitors to lay wreaths and light candles to commemorate the Polish victims.
- Temporary exhibitions will be offered in the future GPH and will expand some topics presented in the permanent exhibition and complement it. One of the elements of the permanent exhibition could involve “historical or contemporary disputes in the Polish-German dimension”.

¹⁷ On the basis of *Commemorate, encounter, understand...*, op. cit., and information shared by the organisers at a later date, for example at the Transparency Forum.

- The educational programmes should focus on the Second World War and the German occupation of Poland. Furthermore, one important objective of “Polish-German educational work is to combat anti-East European racism, stereotypes and discrimination”. It has also been noted that the political, social and cultural ties between Poland and Germany will be discussed within a European framework. The educational offer will be based on standards such as ‘research-led learning’ and the co-creation of an active culture of remembrance.
- The GPH will also offer space for holding seminars, a lecture hall/screening room, office space, a library, a shop with items related to the museum’s subject matter and a café serving traditional Polish and German dishes.
- Advisory bodies will be formed: a Conceptual Council (ten individuals from Poland and Germany), a Polish-German Project Support Group (comprising individuals involved in the project’s development, that is: politicians, representatives of various institutions, researchers) and a Academic Council; the GPH’s final legal form is still unclear – the concept’s authors prefer a public law foundation directly supervised by the federal government.

The concept mentions the need to ensure the participation of the Polish side and of the representatives of non-governmental and youth organisations in the decision-making bodies which will be formed later.

Permanent exhibition

According to the concept put forward by the authors of the GPH, the goal of the permanent exhibition is to expand and improve the perspective of looking at several hundred years of common and shared Polish-German history up to recent times. This exhibition will present issues such as the perception of oneself and of others, the migration-related experience and the process of mounting ‘hostility’, as well as rapprochement and reconciliation. The exhibition’s narrative will not be chronological but thematic. It is intended to present selected medieval, modern and recent historical events and myths, which are of special importance to Polish-German history and to the remembrance culture observed in the two states. The period between 1939 and 1945 will be the central element of the permanent exhibition.

Main assumptions of the permanent exhibition:

1. **Long history of neighbourhood** – presenting the following topics:
 - a. “power and governance” – including the issues of Poland’s partitions and loss of sovereignty (“Prussia’s governance of the part of Poland it seized was characterised by a colonial habitus”);

- b. “the sense of belonging” – the concepts of the state and the nation, and their significance for both societies (including minority issues – e.g. “both in Germany and in Poland, in various eras Jews were perceived as ‘aliens’. Starting from the second half of the 19th century, the exclusion of Jews was an element shared by German and Polish nationalism”);
 - c. “images and emotions” – including an answer to the question “what images and clichés are still present in today’s culture and continue to stir emotions?”;
 - d. “the economy” – the exhibition is expected to explain the origin of both the actual economic inequalities and the stereotypes;
 - e. “everyday life” – including family, school, religion, gender roles and employment;
 - f. “migration” – including its significance for the urban development in both states.
2. **The Second World War and the German occupation of Poland in 1939–1945** – the exhibition supplements knowledge on this subject and poses questions about the long-term consequences of the war for both societies and their mutual relations. Who were the victims, and how did the population of the occupied country respond to German terror? What motivations guided the Germans in invading and occupying Poland and in ruling it with brutality? What culture were they intending to destroy? The main elements of this part of the exhibition are:
- a. “the beginnings” – including the clarification of the importance of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact;
 - b. “the new order” – emphasising the fact that Poles were regarded as ‘subhumans’; indicating, among other things that, for many Germans, the occupation of Poland primarily meant previously unimaginable opportunities, as it created the possibility of social advancement and enrichment, for example through the takeover of expropriated enterprises or rapid career progression within the occupation administration;
 - c. “crimes–resistance–everyday life” – emphasising, among other things, the fact that the Polish nation was to be annihilated through the systematic extermination of representatives of the social elites; at the same time, the exhibition shows how people in occupied Poland coped with terror and which strategies they sought for their survival; highlighting that resistance to the German occupation in Poland was an exception in Europe, the most visible expression of which was the Warsaw Rising of 1944;

- d. “the Holocaust” – this part of the exhibition shows how the German occupation of Poland is interwoven with the Holocaust; it poses questions about what the mass murders committed by the Germans meant for the occupied society. What were the consequences of creating ghettos? It highlights the various reactions of neighbours, including the rescue and hiding of Jews – acts for which Poles faced the death penalty – but also points out that some profited from the persecution of Jews by the Germans by looting their property, while some Poles denounced or robbed Jews;
 - e. “exploitation and looting” – discusses issues such as forced labour, and stresses that “many German companies later had to confront their involvement in the exploitation of Poland; some of them are still to face this task”;
 - f. “the end of the war” – discusses when the war ended and what the cessation of violence and lawlessness meant for Poland.
3. **The post-war period, the contemporary and the future** – devastation, losses, expulsions, and the experience of violence and fear form the starting point for the story of the post-war period. In which directions did Poland and the two German states move after the catastrophe?
- a. “violence” – how was the experience of violence passed from generation to generation within Polish families, and to what extent does it remain visible today in families, culture and the landscape? It has been noted that “Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust and returned to their hometowns often feared for their lives. Hundreds, if not thousands, fell victim to antisemitic attacks and murders”;
 - b. “spaces” – the post-war border shifts entailed long-term political, social and cultural consequences for both Germany and Poland;
 - c. “rapprochement” – selected examples of the historical process of cultural, social and political rapprochement;
 - d. “everyday life” – a space devoted to individual biographies and personal experiences – the exhibition sheds light, among other things, on everyday life in cities divided by the new border along the Oder and Lusatian Neisse rivers.

The 'German Occupation of Europe in the Second World War' Documentation Centre¹⁸

- The decision to build the centre was the result of a debate held in 2017–2020 on the commemoration of the victims of German crimes in Europe and was made by the Bundestag on 9 October 2020, coming several days prior to the decision to build the Polish Memorial. The centre's establishment was to some degree conceived as a supplement to the construction of the memorial in order to avoid so-called 'victim rivalry' as seen from the German perspective.
- The German Historical Museum (DHM) is responsible for devising the centre's concept. The permanent exhibition focuses on specific issues, whereas the perspective highlighting the individual nations' experience with specific forms of occupation has been abandoned. Plans have been made to focus on issues such as forced labour, camps, looting, the destruction of culture, hunger, the killing of hospital patients, the Shoah, the genocide of Sinti and Roma, proposals of collaboration and coercion, the resistance movement and, in the epilogue, the legal settlements carried out post-1945. Issues linked with Poland form elements of the individual exhibitions (for example in the context of the extermination of the Jews and the intelligentsia).
- The centre's construction work is much more advanced than the design of the Polish Memorial. In May 2022, the federal government approved a plan for the centre's development, which specified the details of the thematic scope of the permanent exhibition and the aspects of the temporary displays. Their main emphasis will be placed on expanding the knowledge of specific facts from the Second World War period (for example the massacres) and of events linked with the war which occurred after it had ended (for example the Nuremberg trials). There is also the intention to prepare new publications as part of the centre's work and to carry out a comprehensive education and research programme. The cost of the centre's construction is €120 million, the preparation of the permanent exhibition will cost €14 million, and the annual remuneration for the employees will be €6 million. The estimated cost of the first three temporary exhibitions is €21 million. The concept's authors expect that around 756,000 individuals will visit the exhibition annually.
- The faster pace of constructing the centre is in part due to the fact that it represents one side (the German one) and, unlike in the case of the Polish

18 *Realisierungsvorschlag, Dokumentationszentrum «Zweiter Weltkrieg und deutsche Besatzungsherrschaft in Europa»*, DHM, 18 March 2022, dhm.de.

Memorial, only one institution (DHM) is responsible for its construction and interior design.

- The problems faced by the authors of both initiatives include issues linked with the commemoration of the victims according to their nationality. On the one hand, the German experts are concerned that “the facility [that is the centre but also the memorial] may be politically seized, in a nationalist sense, by those groups of victims which have thus far been less visible”. Furthermore, the German capital is very reluctant to ritualise the practice of commemoration (for example by laying flowers). This is the implied meaning of the passage in the centre’s concept which says that “specific places of historical suffering in Germany and Europe are the right locations for solemn commemoration ceremonies”, rather than Berlin.

**Historical maps of the Germans.
German perspectives on 20th-century history
and Poland**

Mateusz Fałkowski, Hanna Radziejowska

MAIN POINTS

- The results of a public opinion survey conducted in Germany have revealed clear gaps in knowledge about Poland and German crimes during the Second World War. This lack of knowledge extends beyond Polish history; it reflects broader patterns in Germany's culture of remembrance and includes its key element: the memory of the Holocaust. For example, 59% of respondents mistakenly believe that German Jews constituted the largest group of Holocaust victims. Only 28% correctly identify Polish Jews as the largest victim group.
- Contemporary German society also has a distorted view of the geography of Nazi terror. When asked about the punishments for helping Jews, 46% of respondents say that the death penalty for doing so applied in the Third Reich. Significantly fewer (31%) correctly indicated that this penalty was enforced in occupied Poland, even though the occupation regime there was extremely repressive. One might even conclude that, paradoxically, German collective memory has, in a sense, 'appropriated' elements of the Polish experience of occupation as its own – both in perceptions of the scale of German victimhood and in beliefs about the penalties imposed for acts of resistance.
- The respondents also tended to view responsibility for the Holocaust as shared between Germans and citizens of the occupied European countries. 57% assigned equal blame to Germans and collaborators in the occupied countries; only 34% assigned primary responsibility to Germans, while as few as 9% attributed blame exclusively to Germans.
- Awareness of the Holocaust, accountability for Nazi crimes and coming to terms with the past are central to contemporary German identity. They are widely regarded as evidence that a nation of perpetrators has transformed itself into a leading democratic state. Most Germans believe that they have successfully come to terms with their history and that the crimes committed against the Polish population have been adequately addressed. They also hold the view that Poland should learn from Germany how to reckon with the past, rather than the other way round.
- The findings also highlight the limitations of Germany's culture of remembrance as a form of post-national and European memory. Attempts within German historical education to universalise the experience of the war – notably by avoiding national categories in commemorating its victims – have led to simplifications and generalisations. This perspective leaves little room

for acknowledging the distinct experience of the nation and state that were attacked on 1 September 1939 and subsequently endured six years of brutal occupation.

Introduction

What does historical ignorance actually mean? Tatjana Tönsmeyer, a German historian specialising in occupation regimes and societies under occupation, draws on the sociology of knowledge: “Ignorance is not simply a lack of knowledge, but a product of cultural and political wars”.¹ If we want to understand Poland’s place in German historical consciousness, we must bear this in mind.

German ignorance of the crimes committed in Poland and, more broadly, of Poland and its history does not merely stem from a lack of knowledge – it is the product of long-term social and political processes and conflicts. Some of these date back to the era of Prussia and the partitions of Poland, while others unfolded during the Cold War, such as post-war reckonings and omissions. Some have emerged more recently, following Germany’s reunification.

Moreover, in recent decades, German knowledge – or lack of knowledge – of Polish history has become a political issue in bilateral relations. It has been discussed in the press and in political statements concerning reparations, the proposed memorial to Polish victims in Berlin and, more broadly, Polish-German relations. These issues have featured more prominently in the Polish debate. However, even in Germany, there is growing recognition that Polish history and, in particular, the tragedy of Germany’s occupation of Poland in 1939–45, remains largely unfamiliar to the German public.

Konrad Schuller opened his article ‘Poland, an unknown country’, with a confession: before taking up his post in Poland as the correspondent of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), one of Germany’s most influential newspapers, he had heard of places wiped off the map by German occupying forces, such as Oradour-sur-Glane in France and Lidice in Czechoslovakia, but he knew of no comparable Polish places or symbols. He had been unaware that more than 700 localities had been destroyed together with their inhabitants during the German occupation. The editors published his article under the strapline ‘German ignorance’. Schuller presented his own experience as symptomatic of the historical awareness of his generation, including his former classmates, whose education had paid little attention to Polish history.²

For Dieter Bingen, a political scientist and former head of the German Institute for Polish Affairs, the absence of German public memorials to Polish victims of the German occupation raised the question of whether the Nazi regime’s policy towards Poland in 1939–45 constitutes a serious ‘gap in German

1 T. Tönsmeyer, ‘Vernichtungskrieg und deutsche Besatzung im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Von Sagbarkeitsregimen, Meistererzählungen und erinnerungspolitischen Fehlstellen’ [in:] J. Zimmerer (ed.), *Erinnerungskämpfe. Neues deutsches Geschichtsbewusstsein*, Ditzingen 2023, pp. 154–174.

2 K. Schuller, ‘Polen, das unbekannte Land’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 15 June 2020.

memory'.³ This gap can be explored by analysing German institutions of political and historical education, as well as museums.⁴ However, these institutions operate within deeper structures of collective memory, societal attitudes to history and the historical consciousness of contemporary German society.

This text is not intended to provide a comprehensive overview, but rather to highlight certain features of German collective memory and attitudes towards 20th century history, particularly in relation to the history of Poland. It draws on a study that we designed and conducted at the Pilecki Institute in Berlin, with Ipsos carrying out the fieldwork in the summer of 2024 among a representative sample of 2,000 people living in Germany.⁵ The study reconstructs the mental maps of contemporary German citizens regarding their own history, the history of Poland, the Holocaust and Germany's reckoning with the legacy of the Third Reich. It also compares perceptions of Poland with those of France, Germany's other large neighbour.

The full study will be presented in a longer, standalone publication featuring a deeper analysis of a wider range of variables. This text highlights only a few themes and interpretations drawn from this broader, multifaceted study. We intentionally begin with an issue that is certainly not a 'gap' in German memory. On the contrary, it is an issue that has featured most prominently in German historical debates: the extermination of European Jews, the vast majority of whom were citizens of the Polish state – the Second Polish Republic – in 1939.

Coming to terms with the Holocaust: a ticket to modernity?

In the epilogue to his monograph on post-war Europe, Tony Judt observed that today "the pertinent European reference is not baptism. It is extermination", adding that "the recovered memory of Europe's dead Jews has become the very definition and guarantee of the continent's restored humanity".⁶ This historiographical reflection carries a clear political message and expresses the belief that European societies' historical awareness and knowledge of the Holocaust play a key role in a society's development and in securing its place

3 D. Bingen, S. Lengemann (eds.), *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Polen 1939–1945. Eine Leerstelle deutscher Erinnerung?*, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Bonn 2019.

4 See the texts by Marek Cichocki, Robert Kostro and Ryszarda Formuszewicz in this volume.

5 Repräsentative Online-Mehrthemenumfrage von 2000 Befragten im Alter von 16–75 Jahren in Deutschland. Durchgeführt im Auftrag des Pilecki-Instituts in Berlin von der Ipsos GmbH, Feldzeit: 25.07–29.07.2024 (A multi-topic online survey conducted on a representative sample of 2,000 residents of Germany aged 16–75 by Ipsos GmbH on behalf of the Pilecki Institute in Berlin. Fieldwork period: 25–29 July 2024).

6 T. Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, Penguin Press, 2005.

within the community of democratic European states. According to Judt, for every European country, recognising and commemorating the scale of the crime and suffering of six million Jews – victims of German totalitarianism – in the public consciousness constitutes a “contemporary European entry ticket”.

In modern Germany, coming to terms with the Holocaust is seen as the fundamental proof of a successful reckoning with a dark past and as the reason why a nation of perpetrators could become one of the world’s leading democracies. Awareness and knowledge of the Holocaust in Germany are often held up as a model for other cultures of remembrance. In relation to Poland and the memory of the German occupation, examining German knowledge of the Shoah is of particular significance, as three million of the murdered Jews were Polish citizens. The German scholar Katrin Steffen argues that “after the Holocaust, both Germans and Jews, as well as Poles and Jews – and Poles, Germans and Jews in their triangular relationship – had to find their place within a ‘new frame of reference’ (Dan Diner). The attitude of Germans towards Jews has been shaped by the Holocaust just as strongly as that of Poles towards Jews. This also influences internal Polish and German debates and the mutual perceptions among Poles and Germans”.⁷

Our survey therefore included a number of questions designed to ‘map’ Germans’ perceptions of themselves and of Poland in the context of the Holocaust.

How does contemporary German society assess the prevalence of antisemitism in different European countries before the Second World War? The respondents concluded that in the years leading up to the outbreak of war antisemitism was most pervasive in Nazi Germany. Some 55% said it had been fairly widespread or very widespread there, followed by the Soviet Union (38%) and Poland (34%). By contrast, respondents regarded antisemitism as less widespread or far less widespread in countries such as France (29%), Romania (26%), the Netherlands (21%) and Denmark (16%).

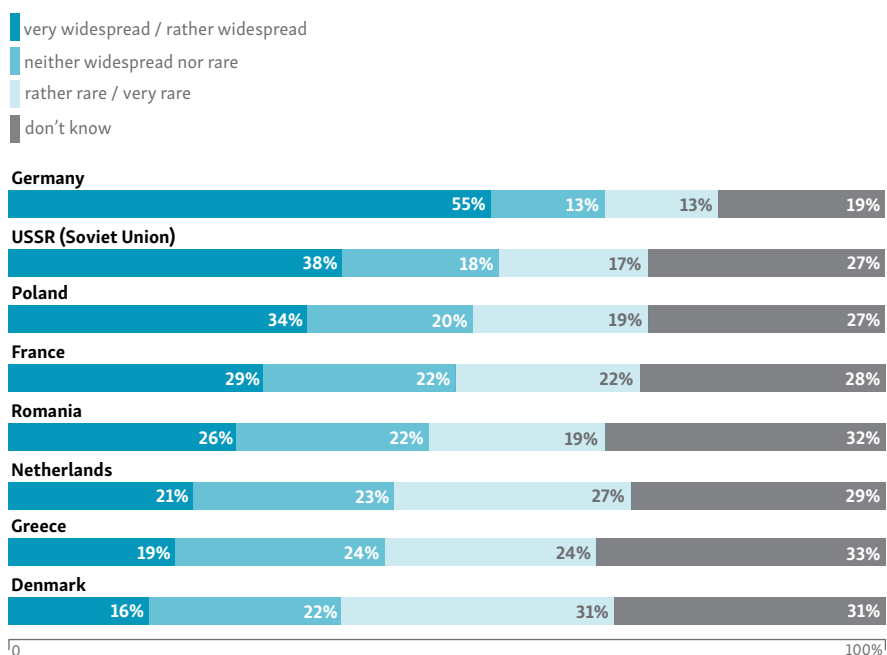
The responses to this question reflect both historical knowledge and a widespread belief that pre-war Germany was antisemitic. However, contrary to the reality of antisemitism’s prevalence across Europe, respondents singled out two Eastern European countries in particular: the Soviet Union and Poland. In this context, it is worth citing Antony Polonsky, one of the leading historians of European Jewry, who argued that antisemitism in interwar Poland, though pronounced and growing, was not an isolated phenomenon: “The breakdown of the democratic Constitution in Poland and the worsening situation of its

7 K. Steffen, ‘Druga wojna światowa i Holocaust w Polsce i w Niemczech: pamięć zbiorowa i komunikacja międzykulturowa’, [in:] *Interakcje. Leksykon komunikowania polsko-niemieckiego*, polska-niemcy-interakcje.pl.

national minorities – who made up over a third of the population of the new state – were not exceptional in the Europe of those days, but rather conformed to the norm”.⁸

German perceptions of the countries in which antisemitism was most widespread before the war also reflect the geography of the Holocaust – that is, the territories in which Nazi Germany carried out the mass murder of European Jews. This factor should also be taken into account when interpreting the responses.

Question 1: In your view, how widespread was antisemitism in the following European countries before the Second World War (that is, before 1939)?

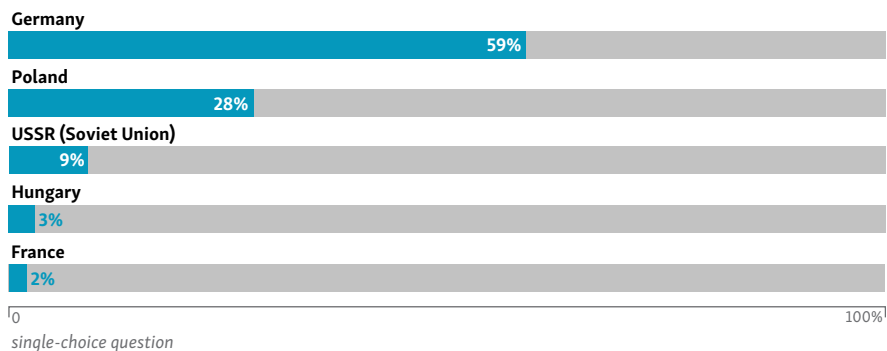


Which countries did respondents believe the majority of Holocaust victims came from? A majority of Germans believe that the primary victims of the Holocaust were their fellow citizens, namely German Jews. As many as 59% of respondents expressed this view. Only 28% identified Polish Jews as the largest group of victims and Poland as the country from which most Holocaust victims originated. In fact, around 165,000 German Jews were murdered, from

⁸ A. Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia: A Short History*, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, Liverpool 2013, chapter 'From the First War to the Second', p. 58.

a pre-1933 Jewish population in Germany of around half a million, compared with approximately three million murdered Polish Jews.

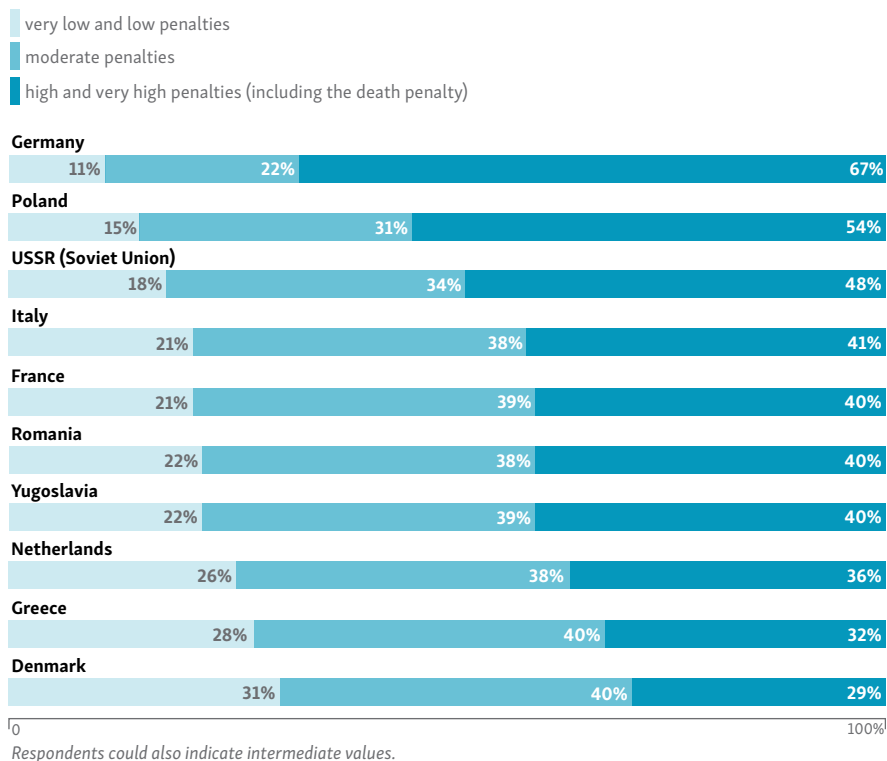
Question 2: Millions of Jews were murdered during the Holocaust. Which country do you think they mainly came from?



The belief that the persecution of German Jews was more extensive than the measures taken by the occupying authorities against Jews in other European countries is also reflected in the responses to the questions concerning the severity of the penalties imposed for helping Jews.

In which countries in Nazi-occupied Europe did respondents believe the harshest penalties applied for helping Jews? Respondents believed that the penalties applied for assisting Jews were most severe in the Third Reich and less severe in the occupied countries, including Poland. Some 46% said that in Germany such acts were punishable by death, while significantly fewer (31%) selected this answer in relation to occupied Poland. Respondents did recognise the highly repressive nature of the occupation regime in Poland compared with those in the other occupied countries, but they nevertheless believed that the harshest penalties for assisting Jews were imposed in Germany itself. On a scale from 1 (mildest penalty) to 5 (death penalty), the proportion of respondents selecting the two most severe options (4 and 5) for each country was as follows:

Question 3: In German-occupied Europe, helping Jews was punished in different ways. In your view, how severe were the penalties imposed by the German authorities in the following countries? Please answer on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represents an administrative penalty and 5 the death penalty.



When analysing data indicating a profound lack of knowledge about the brutality of the German occupation regime in Poland, it is worth noting that if, according to the respondents, the penalties for aiding Jews were most severe in Germany, then, by the same logic, the scope for resistance and providing assistance would also have been correspondingly more limited in Germany than in occupied Poland.

What, then, was the reality? A useful comparison is provided by the fate of those who helped to save Anne Frank and her family in the German-occupied Netherlands and that of the Ulma family, who hid their Jewish neighbours in German-occupied Poland. Western Europe remains largely unaware that virtually all those who helped to rescue Anne Frank and her family – whose fate has become one of the defining symbols of the Holocaust in Germany and

Western Europe – survived, whereas the entire Ulma family was murdered together with the Jews they were hiding.

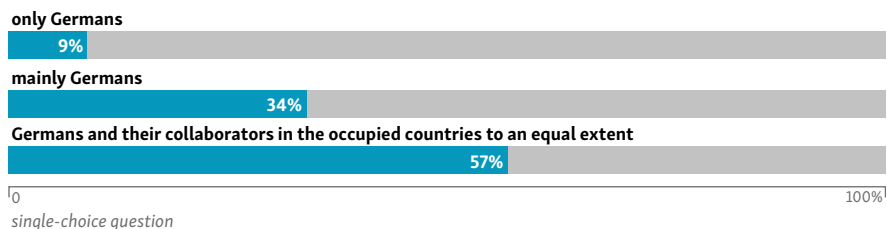
Above all, however, and paradoxically, German collective memory has, in a sense, appropriated elements of the Polish experience of occupation as its own. This is reflected in German perceptions both of the number of their own victims (namely, the supposed three million German Jews) and of the risks associated with resistance, including the death penalty for helping Jews and the allegedly exceptional ‘specificity’ of the German occupation of Poland compared to the other occupied countries in Europe. In a troubling development, the fate of persecuted Jews is increasingly treated as part of the history of Germans themselves. In effect, Germans come to see themselves as one of the principal victims of the Second World War. In 2014, Katrin Steffen wrote that “in Germany, there is increasing talk about German suffering during the Second World War, which means that the expulsions of Germans from Eastern Europe and the bombings of German cities continue to gain prominence, although the central place of the Holocaust in German memory of the Second World War is still strongly emphasised”.⁹ Thus, she contrasted these tendencies towards self-victimisation with the German discourse on the Holocaust. A decade later, we may therefore ask whether, and to what extent, the discourse on German ‘victims’ (which at that time was developing around the ‘expellees’) has also been extended to Jews themselves, recasting them as German victims and thereby deepening German society’s tendency towards self-victimisation and reinforcing a coherent self-presentation as victims of National Socialism.

How do Germans perceive their responsibility for the Holocaust?

One of the recurring themes in the international debate on 20th-century history concerns perceptions of responsibility for the Holocaust in relation to the actual distribution of responsibility under Nazi occupation in Europe. In our survey, we therefore posed the ‘question of guilt’. More than half of the respondents (57%) said that, in their view, Germans and collaborators from the occupied countries were equally guilty. Far fewer (34%) selected the response ‘mainly Germans’. Only 9% selected ‘only Germans’.

9 K. Steffen, ‘Druga wojna światowa i Holocaust w Polsce i w Niemczech: pamięć zbiorowa i komunikacja międzykulturowa’, *op. cit.*

Question 4: In your view, who was responsible for the Holocaust?



These findings can be regarded as an empirical contribution to a debate that has repeatedly played out in the Polish media over the past two decades. The question of whether there is a tendency in German society to ‘share the blame for the Holocaust’ has stirred passions not only among historians but also among commentators in Poland. The dispute over Polish ‘co-guilt’ or ‘complicity’ has continued for years among Holocaust scholars and has too often become the subject of heated political argument rather than scholarly debate. The findings presented here suggest that this debate has a clear point of reference in German society.

The question of whether Germans wish to share the blame for the Holocaust with other countries can no longer be dismissed as mere journalistic conjecture. It obviously requires further analysis and more in-depth research. Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether the ‘entry ticket to modernity’ described by Judt might, for many European countries, amount to little more than a mechanical imitation of the German approach to reckoning with the past. This would in turn entail acknowledging guilt on behalf of an entire community without taking into account the fundamental distinction between the political responsibility of Germany’s totalitarian regime and the criminal responsibility of individual members of occupied societies who betrayed and murdered their Jewish neighbours.

Victims: does German memory include the east?

To gauge German society’s knowledge and perceptions of the scale of Nazi Germany’s victims, we asked respondents to estimate the death toll in the following categories: German civilians, Polish civilians, Jews, homosexuals and Roma and Sinti. For each group, respondents could choose from the following options: a few thousand to several tens of thousands, several hundred thousand, 1–3 million, 4–6 million or 6–10 million murdered.

The responses show, first, that German society regards Jews as by far the largest group of victims. A large majority (81% of respondents) selected answers

between 1 and 10 million, with the largest share (29%) choosing the 6–10 million range. Second, respondents had very similar perceptions of deaths among Polish and German civilians. As many as 47% estimated the number of German civilians killed to be between a few thousand and several hundred thousand. Similarly, 49% estimated Polish civilian losses within the same range, with a comparable distribution of responses. For German civilians killed, 32% and 15% selected the 1–3 million and 4–6 million ranges, respectively. For Polish losses, the corresponding figures were 36% and 11%.

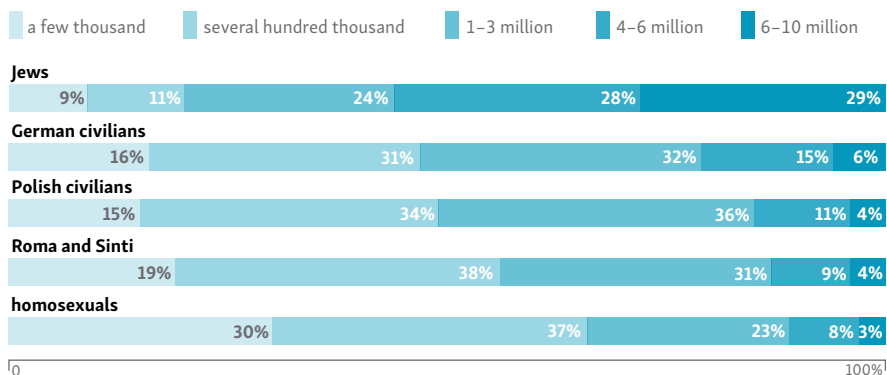
Third, the results reveal a significant overestimation of the number of victims in two minority groups: homosexuals and Roma and Sinti. As many as 40% of Germans believe that between 1 and 6 million Roma and Sinti were killed by Nazi Germany, whereas historical estimates put the figure at around 250,000–500,000. Responses concerning homosexual victims, whose death toll is generally estimated at more than 10,000, are also far from the truth. In this category, 37% of respondents indicated several hundred thousand victims, while 31% selected a range of between one and several million. This means that well over half of German society (68%) vastly overestimates the number of victims in this category.

The purpose of these questions is not to test school-level historical knowledge, but rather to identify certain reference points in collective memory. It is worth noting that around 30–40% of Germans have a reasonably accurate sense of the number of people killed in each victim group. However, the vast majority appear to respond intuitively, relying more on the visibility of specific groups of victims in the public sphere than on historical knowledge.

When estimating the number of Holocaust victims, 57% of respondents gave the correct answer. Some 36% correctly estimated the number of Polish victims (assuming a figure of 2.7 million, excluding Jewish victims), while 38% did so for Roma and Sinti. For homosexual victims, 30% of respondents gave the correct figure. This raises the question of why, in the case of the Holocaust, the effort invested in German education, commemoration and popular culture has clearly translated into markedly better knowledge in German society, whereas the increased attention devoted in recent years (for example, in popular culture) to the persecution of homosexuals under the Third Reich has not (yet?) had a similar effect. It is worth noting that, historically, Nazi persecution of homosexuals between 1939 and 1945 affected a relatively small group of German homosexuals, primarily men. Two hypotheses may be advanced. The first concerns the impact of contemporary education and of a culture that links history to present-day debates about values. The second seeks to explain this overestimation in terms of universalisation, that is, the projection of German historical experience onto other countries. Respondents

may be extending and universalising the experience of persecuted German homosexuals as though it were a universal one. In this context, it should be stressed that Polish men imprisoned in concentration camps or executed in the Piaśnica and Palmiry forests, and Polish women subjected to pseudo-medical experiments at Ravensbrück, even if they were homosexual, were not persecuted and tortured on those grounds, but because of their national identity.

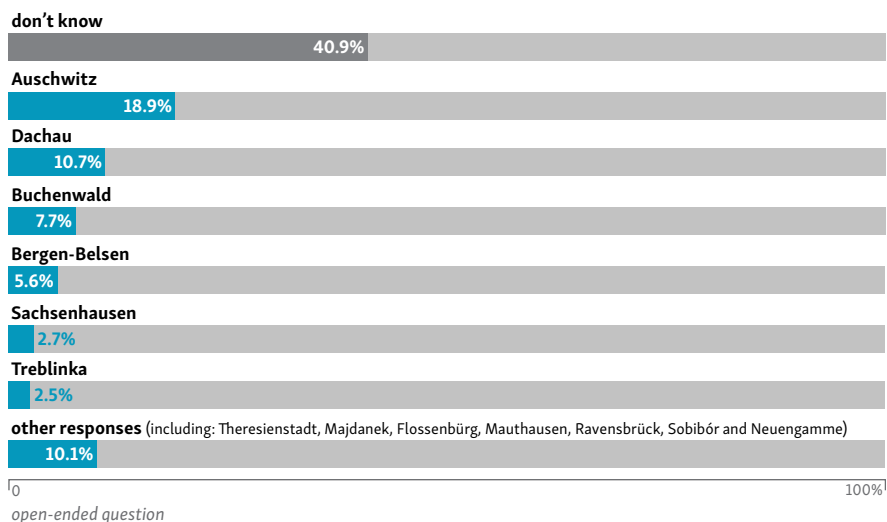
Question 5: What is your perception of the number of victims? Please estimate the number of victims in each of the following categories.



Mapping the camps

Today, concentration and extermination camps are among the most tangible material symbols of the Second World War, occupation and the Holocaust. In response to an open-ended question asking respondents to name specific concentration and extermination camps, nearly 41% answered ‘I don’t know’. Unsurprisingly, Auschwitz was the most frequently cited site (almost 20%). As with the responses to the question on memorial sites, respondents also named the three best-known German concentration camps: Dachau, Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald. Just over 3% mentioned the extermination camps at Treblinka and Sobibór, while barely more than 1% named Majdanek. Leaving aside the special case of Auschwitz, a universal symbol of the Holocaust, these results suggest that the extermination camps located in German-occupied Poland, where most of Europe’s Jews were murdered, and more broadly mass murder in occupied Poland, are largely absent from Germany’s topography of memory.

Question 6: Please list any concentration camps you are familiar with.



We also asked respondents to name and describe sites in Germany commemorating the victims of National Socialism that they were familiar with. We then asked which additional groups of victims, in their view, should be commemorated.

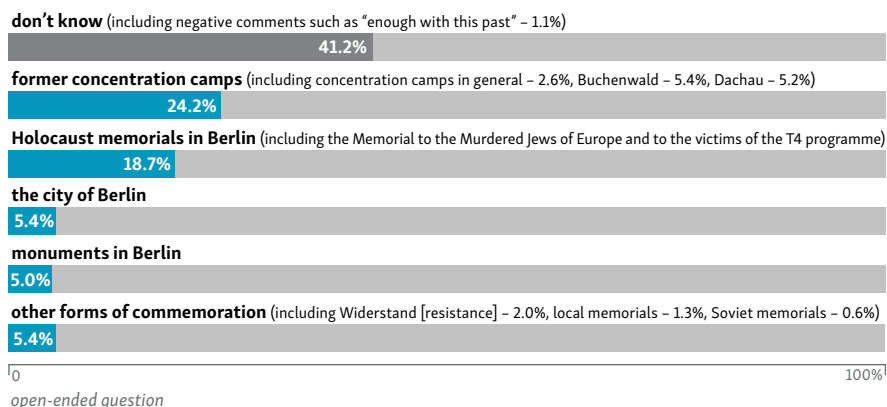
In response to the first question, we identified three broad categories of answers. Almost half of the respondents (930 people) either could not or did not wish to answer the question. The second-largest group referred to memorials in the German capital. Around 20% (423 respondents) mentioned memorials to Jewish victims, particularly those commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, and referred specifically to Berlin. One hundred respondents named the four main memorials in the German capital, commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, homosexuals, Roma and Sinti, and the victims of the Nazi 'euthanasia' programme, while 123 respondents mentioned Berlin itself. This indicates that, for German society, the capital is the primary site of remembrance of National Socialist crimes, particularly in relation to commemorating Europe's Jews and four other key groups of victims.

The third category of responses referred to former concentration camps in Germany. Respondents most frequently named Buchenwald (122 respondents), Dachau (119), Auschwitz (108) and Bergen-Belsen (79), while Sachsenhausen (37), Ravensbrück (10), Neuengamme (10), Flossenbürg (7) and Mauthausen (4) were cited less frequently.

Answers of particular interest to a Polish audience were very rare: only 45 respondents mentioned sites commemorating the German resistance and just five referred to memorials to crimes committed in Poland.

The survey indicates that German society regards Berlin as the most important location on its topography of memory of the Third Reich, with particular emphasis on commemorating the victims of the Holocaust. Former concentration camps come next in this hierarchy of remembrance. The memory of various non-national groups of victims is clearly present, whereas the memory of Polish victims and the sites associated with their suffering remains entirely marginal.

Question 7: In Germany, there are memorial sites dedicated to various victims of National Socialism. Are you familiar with such sites and do you know which groups of victims they commemorate?



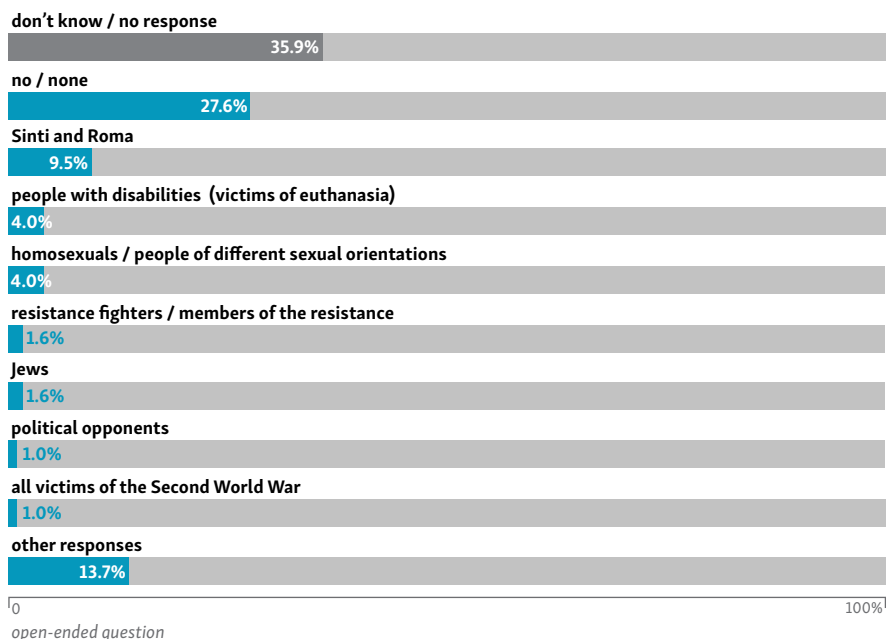
These preliminary findings were confirmed by the responses to the second question, which asked about groups of victims that had not been sufficiently commemorated. 9% of respondents named Roma and Sinti, while 4% each identified homosexuals and people with disabilities – the victims of the T4 programme. Around 1.6% of responses referred to members of the German resistance, while just under 1% referred to Jews and the Third Reich's political opponents. As many as 63% responded 'I don't know' or refused to answer the question, while 13.7% of the responses were unrelated to the question.

Regardless of political disputes and historical debates, it is worth noting that issues of commemoration engage around 30–50% of Germans. The victim groups identified by the respondents overlap to a significant extent with those already commemorated in Berlin.

In response to the open-ended question about which groups of victims should be commemorated more prominently, a large share of the respondents, as expected, said they had no opinion on this issue. Nevertheless, a clear pattern emerges from the responses: three groups of victims were mentioned repeatedly. These are precisely the groups that have received increased attention

at memorial sites and in public debate over the past decade: Sinti and Roma (9.5% of respondents called for commemorating Roma more prominently), people with disabilities (4%) and homosexuals (4%). To a certain extent, public awareness therefore reflects the landscape of memory and commemoration in Berlin over recent decades.

Question 8: In your view, are there any groups of victims who are not remembered sufficiently, or hardly at all, and who should be commemorated more prominently?



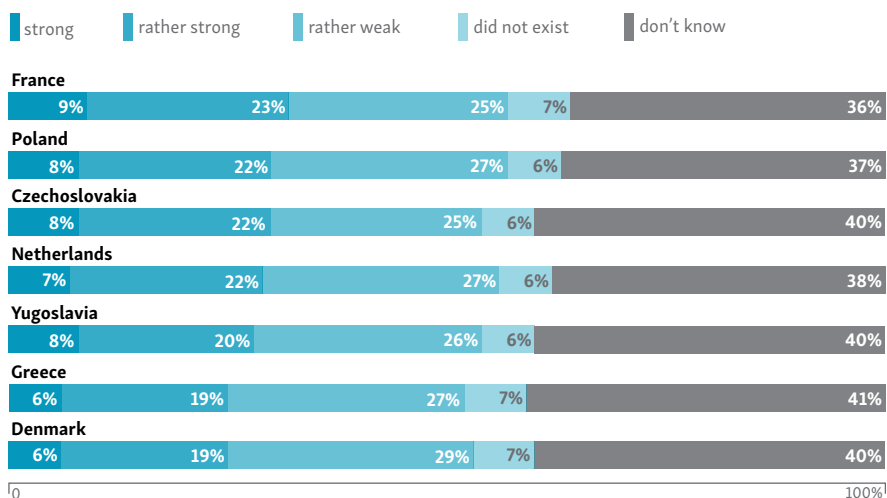
This raises the question of the extent to which the official memorial sites, all located in central Berlin, have shaped respondents' views that these groups, previously less present in public awareness, should now and in the future be commemorated more prominently. These memorials commemorate the following groups of victims of National Socialism: homosexuals (memorial unveiled in 2008), Sinti and Roma (2012) and people with disabilities murdered under the 'euthanasia' programme (2014). Respondents did not mention Polish victims in this context.

'Mapping' resistance and collaboration

An important aspect of Polish identity and Poland's 20th-century experience, one that has been widely discussed, is the history of the Polish Underground State and the scale of Polish resistance to both totalitarian regimes. In recent decades, an academic and public debate has also developed around collaboration, particularly following the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbours* in 2000, which prompted extensive commentary in Germany. We sought to examine German perceptions and knowledge of these issues by asking the respondents two questions. We asked them to rate, on a scale from 1 to 4, the extent of collaboration in selected occupied European countries, and using the same scale, to indicate which of those countries had the strongest resistance movement. The second question also included Germany as a response option.

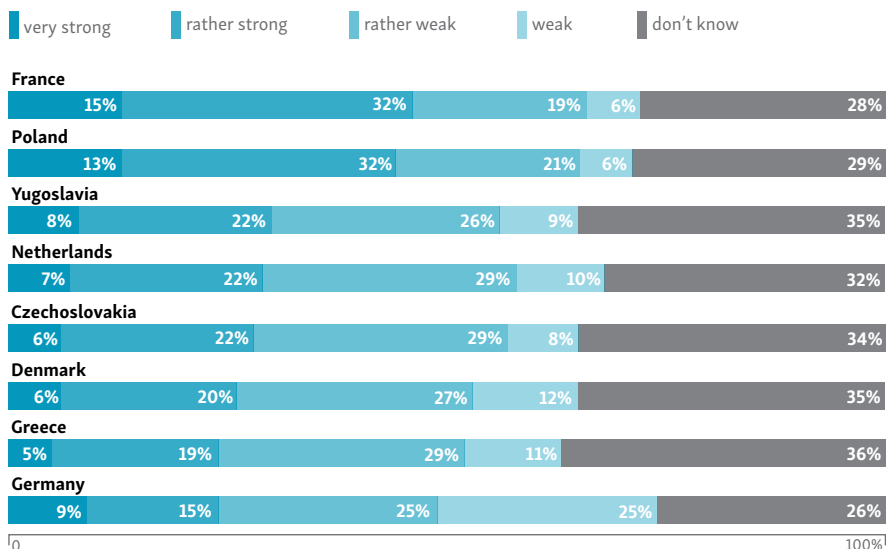
When filling in the questionnaire, 30% of respondents indicated that collaboration with the occupying authorities had been rather strong or very strong in occupied Poland, even though in reality there was no state-level, institutional or political collaboration there, unlike in some other occupied European countries. German respondents thus perceived levels of collaboration across occupied Europe as broadly similar. For Vichy France, 32% indicated strong or very strong collaboration, broadly in line with the figure for occupied Poland. These findings suggest that German respondents did not see any significant differences in the degree of collaboration between Nazi Germany and individual states and societies under its occupation. These responses clearly reveal a lack of knowledge and a failure to distinguish between different occupation regimes, the varying levels of terror they imposed and the fundamental distinctions between individual and state collaboration and the responsibility associated with each.

Question 9: In occupied Europe, collaboration, that is, cooperation between the local population and the occupying authorities of the Third Reich – took place to varying degrees. In your view, how close was this cooperation in the following countries?



An interesting difference emerged in the responses to the second question, in which respondents clearly identified two societies as having offered the strongest resistance to the Third Reich: France (47%) and Poland (45%). This reflects the enduring strength of French culture of remembrance, which, partly through popular culture, has effectively highlighted the role of *La Résistance* while somewhat blurring the memory of the Vichy regimes collaboration with Germany. In reality, both the scale and organisational structures of the French resistance were far smaller than those of the Polish Underground State, with its government-in-exile and its civilian and military structures operating in occupied Poland. Even so, it is striking that although knowledge of Polish history in German society remains limited, respondents rated the scale of Polish resistance highly, placing it on a par with that of France. The results also draw attention to Germans’ perceptions of themselves and of German resistance (*Widerstand*), which was selected by 24% of respondents. Despite its marginal significance compared with other countries, respondents viewed it as comparable in strength to the resistance movements in Greece (24%) and Denmark (26%). In reality, the *Widerstand* was largely confined to small-scale initiatives within specific circles, such as the White Rose.

Question 10: How strong was social, military and political resistance to the German occupation in the following countries during the years 1939–45?



East vs West? Perceptions of Poland and France

In the Enlightenment imagination of Western European societies, including German society, Poland’s location in the eastern part of Europe has traditionally been associated with backwardness and peripherality.¹⁰ In addition, the ethnic and cultural boundary between Germans and Slavs has long been central to German identity, with no equivalent in relation to France.¹¹ Historically, as Hubert Orłowski has written, Germans regarded Poland as a ‘repository of modernisation deficits’.¹² Given the historical and cultural longevity of certain perceptions, assumptions and attitudes, we decided to include parallel questions in the survey about Germany’s western neighbour, France, with which Poland has frequently been compared, and continues to be compared, in the context of relations with Germany.

To explore how historical stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of the two countries located to Germany’s east and west, respectively, we asked respondents about their perceptions of Poland and France in the interwar

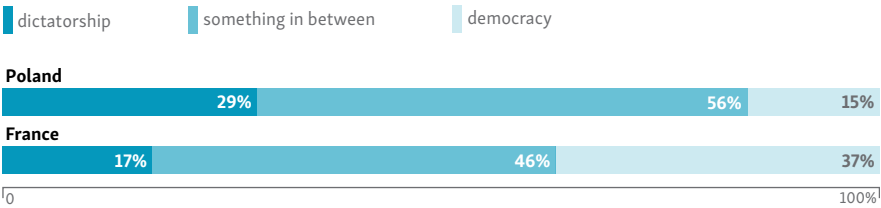
¹⁰ L. Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization in the Mind of Enlightenment*, Stanford UP, Stanford 1994.

¹¹ R. Brubaker, *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany*, Harvard UP, Cambridge Mass, 1992, p. 5.

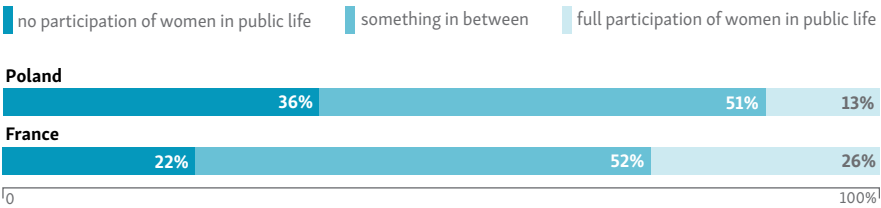
¹² H. Orłowski, *Z modernizacją w tle. Wokół rodowodu nowoczesnych niemieckich wyobrażeń o Polsce i Polakach*, Poznań 2002.

period. The results show that Germans perceive pre-war Poland, one of the first countries in the world to grant women the right to vote in 1918, as a country in which women had far fewer political rights than in France, where they gained suffrage only in 1946. Similarly, multiculturalism, a form of society now widely associated with modernity, is attributed to pre-war France rather than to the multi-ethnic Poland of the interwar period.

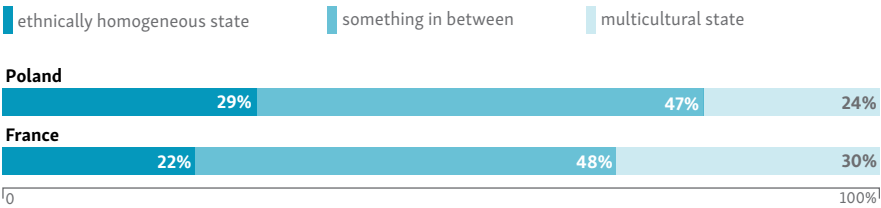
Question 11: In your view, was the Second Polish Republic (Poland) / France in the interwar period (1918–39) more of a democratic state or more of a dictatorship compared with other European countries at the time?



Question 12: In your view, did women in the Second Polish Republic (Poland) / France during the interwar period (1918–39) enjoy full participation or no participation in civic and political life compared with women in other European countries at the time?



Question 13: In your view, was Poland/France before 1939 an ethnically homogeneous state or a multicultural one?

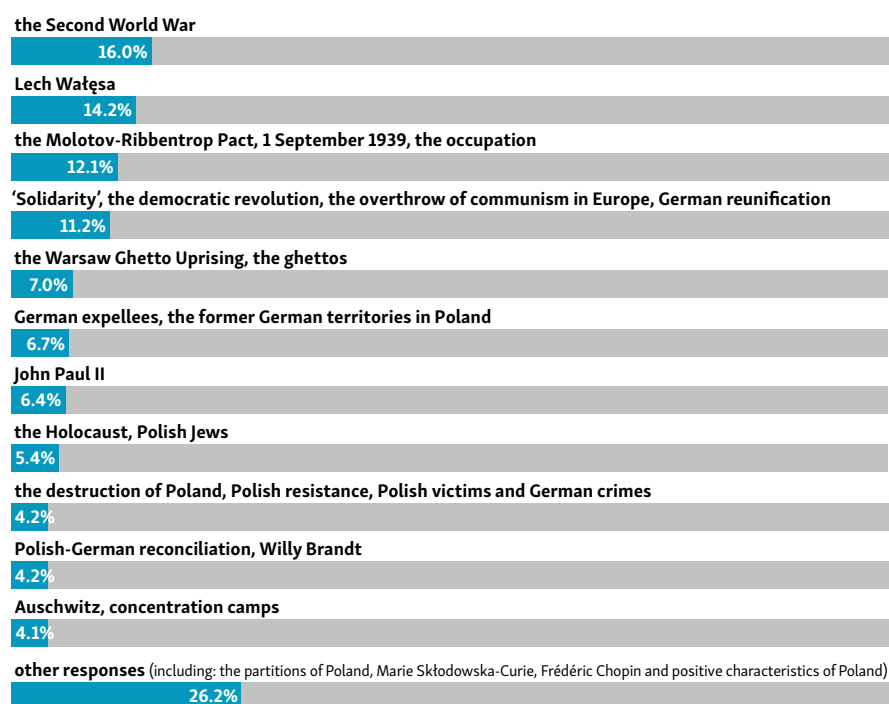


Stereotypes and perceptions – broadly positive about France and broadly negative about Poland – are rooted in a lack of knowledge about both countries.

They also form part of a broader set of assumptions about Eastern and Western Europe.

We applied a similar approach in a series of open-ended questions about associations with each country. First, however, to further explore German perceptions and knowledge of Poland, we asked respondents which aspects of Polish history they believe should be included in German school textbooks. We expected that only a minority of the 2,000 respondents would answer this question. That indeed proved to be the case: 25% provided a response, while 75% either could not or did not want to do so. Those who did answer (note: in the breakdowns below, these 500 respondents are treated as representing 100%) identified three main areas of Polish history.

Question 14: In your view, what aspects of Polish history should be included in German school textbooks?



¹⁰

open-ended question

'Don't know' responses have been omitted from the results.

100%

The largest share of responses related to the Second World War (nearly 16%) with particular emphasis on the German invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939, the occupation and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (12%). More than 4.2% pointed to the significance of Polish victims, the Polish resistance and

the Polish Underground State. A total of nearly 16% mentioned topics relating to the Holocaust, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the history of the ghettos and Auschwitz and other concentration camps. Katyn and the Warsaw Uprising were mentioned only rarely, by 0.8% and 1.6% of respondents, respectively. Overall, issues relating to the Second World War accounted for half of all responses. One notable theme was the reference to Willy Brandt's kneeling at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw and to Polish-German reconciliation, identified by more than 4.2% of respondents as topics that should be included in school textbooks. More than 6.6% referred to the history of the former German territories in Poland and the expulsion of Germans after 1945.

The second major theme concerned the history of 'Solidarity' and the overthrow of communism. Many responses focused on the movement's role in the collapse of Soviet dominance in Europe (just under 11.2%). Respondents identified Lech Wałęsa (14%) and John Paul II (almost 6.3%) as key figures. Two percent pointed to the success of Poland's economic transformation and its accession to the EU. Taken together, these themes accounted for 34% of all responses.

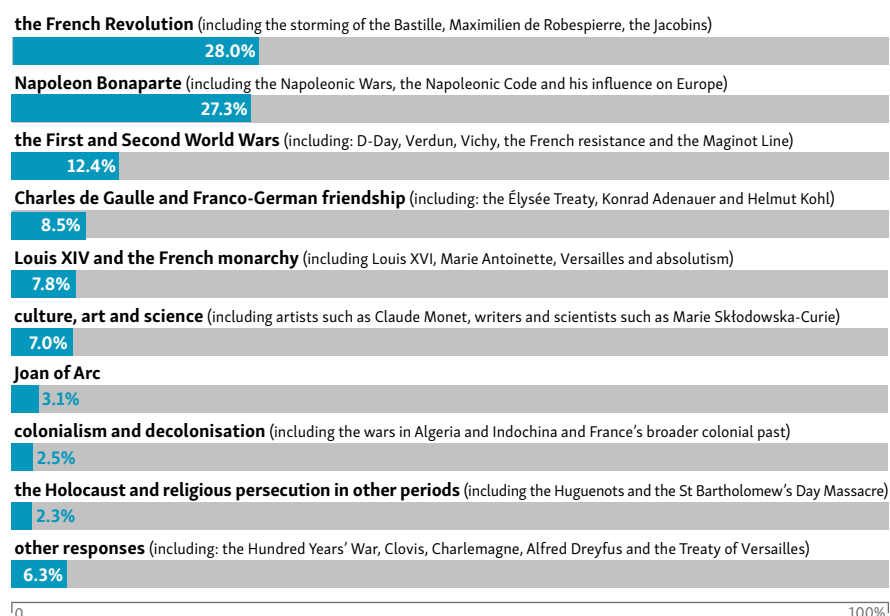
The third group of responses concerned primarily Marie Skłodowska Curie (3.4%) and Frédéric Chopin (2.9%), as well as Polish history before the First World War. Almost 3.5% of respondents mentioned the the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, while just over 1.8% referred to the relief of Vienna, the 'defeat of the Islamic threat' and King John III Sobieski. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that knowledge of Polish history among Germans is generally limited (75% did not answer this question). Those who did respond focused primarily on the Second World War, followed by the overthrow of communism and, to a much lesser extent, iconic historical figures from before the First World War and the history of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Below are several examples of responses to the question, "In your view, what aspects of Polish history should be included in German textbooks?": "That the Germans were not to blame for everything"; "I was not born here, I don't know"; "More than about ancient Egypt"; "I don't know – Kant, Chopin?"; "Kafka"; "In 1941, Germany used the territory to attack Russia"; "That Poles were more often ruled by others than by themselves"; "I don't know – Blitzkrieg and motorway construction?"

We also asked the same question in relation to France, namely which aspects of a neighbouring country's history should be included in German history textbooks.

Almost half of the respondents (approximately 47%) did not answer this question. The remainder (as with the question on Poland, only those who responded are included in the analysis and treated as representing 100%) pointed

primarily to key events and figures from French history in the 18th and 19th centuries, accounting for almost 65.6% of all responses. Around 9.5% referred to even earlier periods. The 20th century featured in 24.9% of the responses, including 8.5% that referred to the process of Franco-German reconciliation. The Holocaust and the Second World War accounted for only 7.5% of all responses. These findings suggest that, for German society, the two world wars play only a limited role in perceptions of French history, in stark contrast to perceptions of Polish history – where more than half of the responses identified the Second World War as a theme that should be included in German school textbooks. It is also worth noting that most respondents were willing to answer the question about France, whereas as many as 75% either declined to respond or were unable to provide an answer when asked about Poland.

Question 15: In your view, what aspects of French history should be included in German school textbooks?



open-ended question

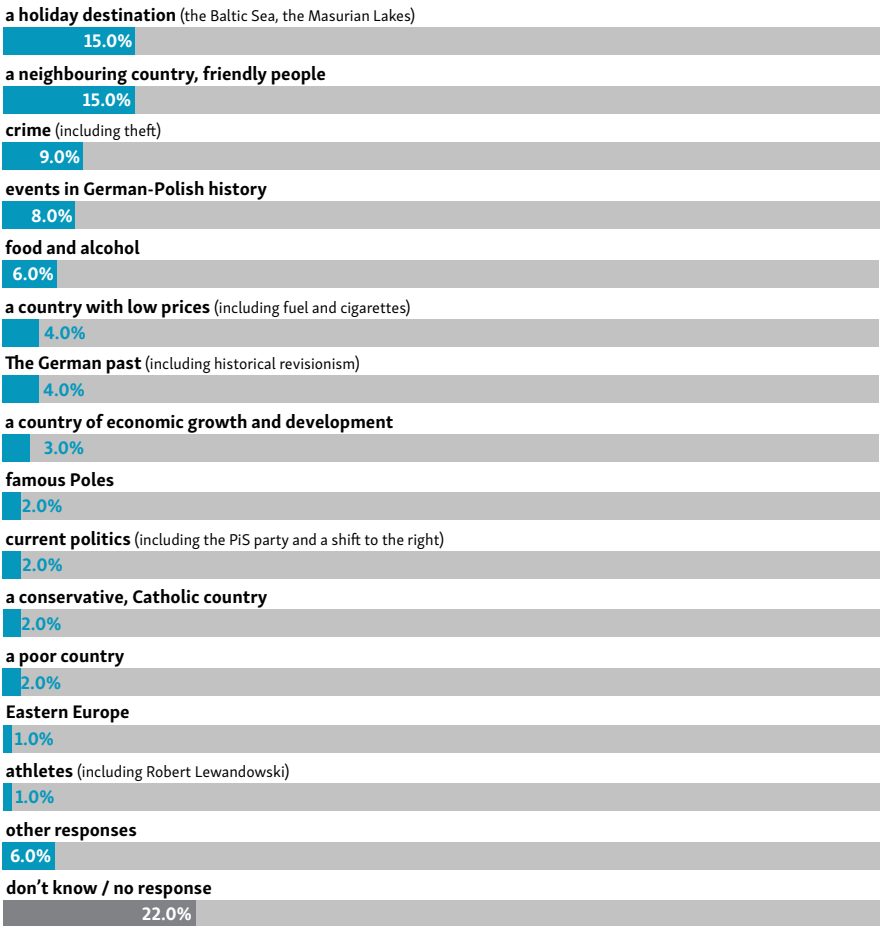
'Don't know' responses have been omitted from the results.

We also asked open-ended questions about respondents' associations with the two countries. In the case of Poland, almost 10% of answers were negative, referring to car theft and crime. Four percent described Poland as a country of cheap cigarettes and petrol, while 6% mentioned poverty, conservatism and right-wing politics. Taken together, these responses accounted for 20% of the total. Three per cent of respondents described Poland as a country of economic

growth and development, while 15% regarded it as friendly, neighbourly country with welcoming people. Another 15% mentioned it as a holiday destination. Six percent gave neutral associations relating to food and alcohol. Together, these responses accounted for 39% of the total.

Historical associations accounted for 8% of the responses, while 4% referred to themes that clearly relate to German historical revisionism. Overall, 12% of responses mentioned historical themes. These responses suggest that associations with Poland are often superficial, reflecting limited historical knowledge and the persistence of deeply rooted stereotypes, shaped primarily by brief shopping trips or holidays in Polands.

Question 16: What associations do you have with Poland?



0 100%
open-ended question

To compare these findings with associations relating to France, we asked the same open-ended question about that country. Just under 14% of respondents had no view on this matter or did not provide an answer. Among those who did respond, as many as 67% of the associations were positive, relating to food, Paris, culture, landscapes, tourism, sport, values and the economy. Around 8% of the responses were negative, referring to politics, certain stereotypes, or historical issues such as the Vichy regime and colonialism. The range of these associations is broader and more diverse than in the case of Poland. Although this does not necessarily imply a deeper knowledge of French history, it does indicate greater interest in France among Germans and a remarkably high proportion of positive associations with Germany’s western neighbour.

Question 17: What associations do you have with France?



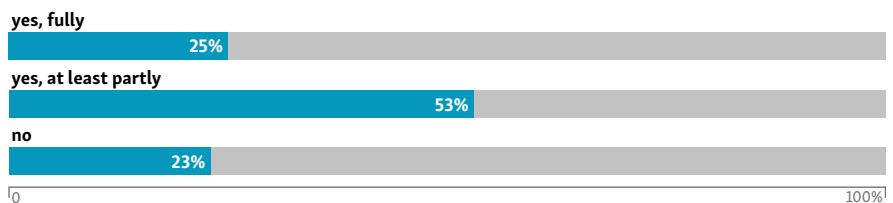
0 100%
open-ended question

Germany, world champion?

German is a richly expressive language. Several coined expressions circulate in German public debate, used with a hint of irony but often in earnest, portraying Germany as a world champion in overcoming a difficult past (*Weltmeister der Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), in coming to terms with the past (*Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*) and in remembering and commemorating (*Weltmeister des Erinnerns / des Gedenkens*). These and similar expressions appear in dozens of publications. They are frequently cited in newspaper articles and in radio and television programmes on Germany's 'culture of remembrance' (*Erinnerungskultur*). At the heart of this culture of remembrance lies the imperative to properly come to terms with the country's difficult past. We addressed this issue in our survey by asking respondents whether, in their view, Germany has reckoned with its past adequately.

Most respondents believed that crimes committed by Nazi Germany against Polish victims have been addressed at least in part (53%) or in full (25%). 23% took the opposite view.

Question 18: In your view, has Germany adequately addressed Nazi crimes committed against Polish victims?

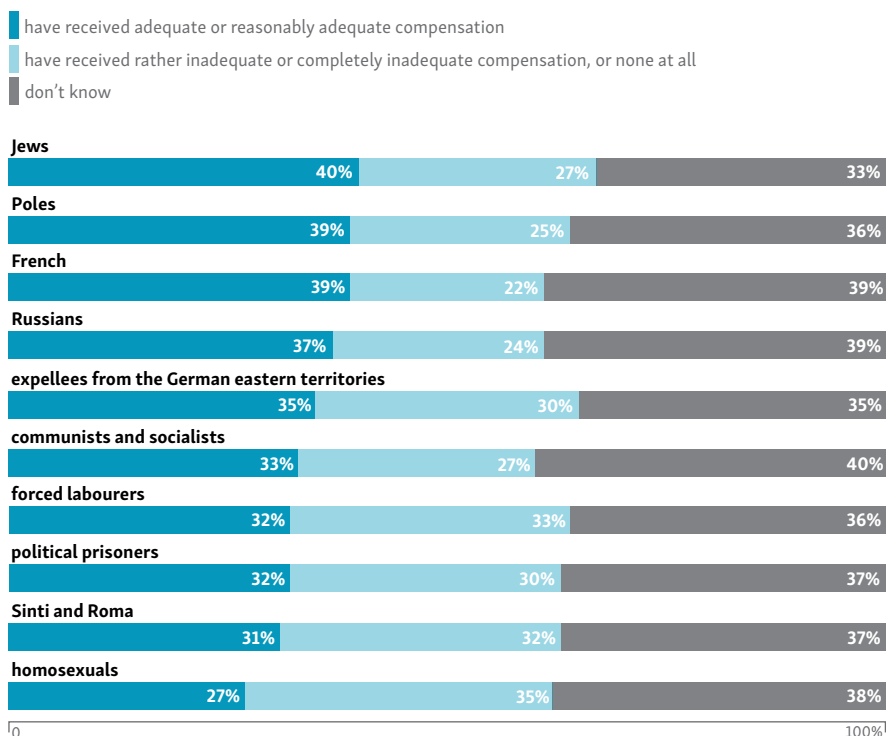


0
single-choice question

100%

Germans are also more likely to believe that Polish victims have already received adequate, or at least reasonably adequate, compensation from the German state (39% agree with this view) than to believe that they have not (25%).

Question 19: The debate on compensation for victims of the Second World War continues. In your view, have the following groups of victims received adequate compensation from the German state?

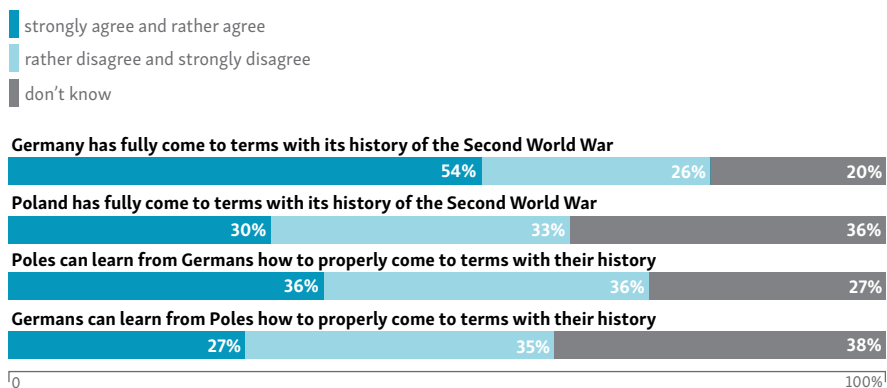


Coming to terms with the history of the Second World War: who should learn from whom?

Previous studies have already indicated a growing belief in German society that the country has dealt with its past well, or even in an exemplary manner. The number of Germans convinced that their country could serve as a model for others in coming to terms with the past has increased. MEMO surveys found that 44.3% of respondents held this view in 2017, rising to 49% in 2018. In our survey, as many as 54% of respondents agreed wholly or in part with the statement that Germany has fully come to terms with its history of the Second World War. By contrast, only 30% agreed that Poland has fully reckoned with its history of the Second World War. More than a third of Germans (36%) believe that Poles could learn from them in this regard, rather than the other

way round. Meanwhile, 27% agreed with the statement that “Germans can learn from Poles how to properly come to terms with history”.

Question 20: It is often said that it is necessary to come to terms with one’s own history of the Second World War. This applies not only to Germany, but also to other European countries. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



The politics of memory and coming to terms with the past form an important component of Germany’s national identity. From a Polish perspective, it is therefore reasonable to ask what precisely this element of contemporary German identity and self-understanding encompasses. Our survey offers an ‘empirical window’ onto this issue, which is also of considerable importance for Poland.

In his famous speech on 8 May 1985, President Richard von Weizsäcker outlined the interpretative framework of the ‘liberation of Germans from Nazism’. He argued that remembrance brings liberation and offered a society that had long seen itself primarily as a victim an opportunity to identify with the victims of the Holocaust. The results of our survey suggest that, paradoxically or not, this identification may increasingly take the form of identifying with Germany’s Holocaust victims, namely German Jews. In this way, the tendency to view the national community as a victim was reconciled with the empathy for Holocaust victims that had developed over time.

This tendency is reinforced by one feature of German politics of memory: an aversion to national categories, evident, for example, in the criticism of a memorial to Polish victims and in concerns about a ‘competition of victims’ between different nations. Paradoxically, however, this policy effectively privileges national categories. This is reflected both in perceptions of who the victims were, namely German Jews, and in the memorials commemorating

German homosexuals, the predominantly German victims of the T4 programme, German communists and, as in the Exilmuseum currently under construction, German émigrés after 1933. This may reinforce the tendency to regard Germans themselves, framed through various socio-demographic categories, as the greatest victims of the Second World War.

More than 86 years after the outbreak of the war, Germans believe that they have come to terms with their own past better than any other nation. In their view, they suffered the most after 1939 and faced the harshest penalties. They tend to greatly overestimate the number of German victims and know little about the crimes committed in Poland. This culture of remembrance and the public debate on history are currently undergoing significant change, driven by Russia's war against Ukraine and by pressure from the increasingly self-confident countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine. This post-colonial perspective is increasingly being called into question. For this reason, the findings of this survey of public attitudes in Germany are particularly important and warrant further analysis.

Germans see themselves as world champions in coming to terms with a difficult past. Somewhat paradoxically, they may be right to some extent. However, they still struggle to find an appropriate place in their culture of remembrance for Polish victims, murdered because they were citizens of the Polish state, even if they were also Jews, communists, priests or homosexuals. Although Germany's politics of memory seeks both to deliver historical justice and to provide political education for the future, the survey results show that many beliefs are rooted in serious gaps in historical knowledge. This is compounded by the German strategy of framing remembrance as post-national and European. This Europeanisation, for all its value, together with efforts to universalise the wartime experience, may also lead to simplification and the homogenisation of diverse experiences. This perspective leaves little room for acknowledging the distinct experience of the nation and state that were attacked on 1 September 1939.

The gaps in German society's knowledge of Poland's experience during the Second World War have been discussed, but largely within a relatively small circle of Polish-German researchers and specialists.

However, the question arises as to how far Polish-German elites have become detached from the real challenges facing Germany's culture of remembrance. The study conducted by the Pilecki Institute represents the first comprehensive attempt to identify the challenges facing both societies in this field. The intense debates in the Polish media, including on social media platforms, indicate that the disparity and asymmetry in knowledge between Polish and German society are also becoming a political issue that requires a stronger

and more sustained Polish institutional presence in Germany, particularly in the fields of education and museum cooperation. The survey discussed here highlights several issues that merit consideration in this context.

First, it underlines the central role that museums located at former concentration camps in Germany play in Germany's culture of remembrance. This is probably where cooperation with German partners should be intensified, alongside efforts to raise awareness of the fate of Polish victims.

Second, the findings indicate that Berlin is the key location for German society's remembrance of the victims of the Third Reich. For this reason, programmes implemented in the city to raise awareness of the scale of the suffering and losses endured by Polish society may be of particular importance. Such efforts include work on a memorial to Polish victims of the German occupation, the activities of the Pilecki Institute and other Polish institutions, as well as various German initiatives.

Third, the history of the annihilation of Polish Jews is equally important in addressing German ignorance of the fate of Polish (non-Jewish) victims and heroes. The martyrdom of Poles and Polish Jews should not be presented as competing narratives. Both stem from the same lack of knowledge and require sustained efforts, together with German partners, to bring them into the 'mainstream' of Germany's culture of remembrance.

Fourth, Poland has not done enough to preserve the memory of Polish forced labourers who were sent to work in towns and villages across Germany. Their stories make it possible to address this history both locally and regionally, at the level of the *Länder*, helping Germans grasp the reality of the occupation of Poland. The responses to the open-ended questions about associations with Germany's eastern neighbour also highlight the need to promote Poland-related topics more actively within the broader context of European values, culture and heritage.

"What kind of culture of remembrance is this, if it does not possess knowledge?" – Professor Tatjana Tönsmeier asked pointedly during a debate at the Pilecki Institute in Berlin on 2 May 2025, referring to the state of historical awareness in German society.¹³ Therefore, when advancing Polish proposals concerning history education in Germany, it is necessary to take account of cultural differences and of the different ways in which concepts, such as heroism, patriotism and courage are understood. Ignorance within German society stems not only from a lack of knowledge, but also from an inability to integrate historical facts into deeper layers of historical consciousness, which are

13 Podiumsdiskussion: „Unvereinbare Erfahrungen. Das Kriegsende in Europa und Asien“ (a debate marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War at the Pilecki Institute in Berlin), Pilecki-Institut Berlin, 15 May 2025, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

structured around semantic categories that differ from those common in Polish society. The cultural mechanisms underlying the failure to remember Poland's experience run very deep. For this reason, efforts to improve Polish-German relations in this area require the building of cross-party consensus in Poland and a commitment to long-term, patient institutional work.

**Memory lessons.
The image of Poland, France and Israel
in German history textbooks**

Kamil Frymark

MAIN POINTS

- History textbooks reflect the principal assumptions of German historical policy. When it comes to the twentieth century, among the most significant of these – clearly visible in the educational materials examined – is the focus on the Holocaust, which remains a key point of reference in public debates, education, and the culture of remembrance. In terms of victim groups, German collective consciousness is dominated by Jews, Germans, and, at times, Russians; while the Polish, Ukrainian and Belarusian victims are almost entirely absent. One may venture the conclusion that the main elements of a German secondary-school graduate's knowledge of the Second World War are: the Holocaust and the National Socialist dictatorship which the society of Nazi Germany was ostensibly itself the primary victim.
- German textbooks continue to apply the hierarchy of victims of Nazism identified by Ralph Giordano (1923–2014) – a journalist and publicist of Jewish origin and author of *Die Zweite Schuld oder von der Last Deutscher zu sein* [*The Second Guilt or the Burden of being German*], a seminal work for German debates on memory politics. This hierarchy is based on “a division between the ‘deserving’ victims (that is, the ritualised invocation of Jews from all countries and the non-Jewish members of Western nations) and the ‘less deserving’ victims (that is, members of all the nations inhabiting Eastern Europe). In this way, a Holocaust-centred perspective on the victims of the war is emphasised, while other victims – Soviet prisoners of war as well as Soviet and Polish civilians – are simultaneously marginalised”.² This approach remains present within the German education system, although elements of change – visible in certain places – are gradually beginning to emerge. In some federal states and in selected textbooks, the catalogue of victims is being expanded to include other nations (among them Poles, Ukrainians and Belarusians).
- The German education system has a federal structure, with schools reporting directly to the ministries of education of the individual federal states.

1 S. Salzborn, *Kollektive Unschuld: Die Abwehr der Shoah im deutschen Erinnern* [*Collective Innocence. The Wish to Repress the Shoah in German Collective Memory*], Hentrich und Hentrich Verlag, Berlin 2020. Own translation.

2 R. Giordano, *Die Zweite Schuld oder von der Last Deutscher zu sein* [*The Second Guilt or the Burden of being German*], Kiepenheuer&Witsch, 2000. Own translation.

Effectively, this means that both curricula and textbooks vary across different parts of Germany and depend on the respective regional authorities. Some textbooks have been approved for use in several federal states. Hence the need to conduct dialogue primarily with the federal states – above all with Brandenburg and Berlin, which both maintain very close relations with Poland and are home to many Poles or German citizens of Polish descent. Brandenburg plays a particularly important role in this dialogue, having acted as the coordinating link among all the federal states in the work of the Joint Polish–German Textbook Commission to date.

- A comparison of the representation of Poland, France and Israel in German textbooks reveals significant disparities. The greatest variety of materials is devoted to France, resulting in the most comprehensive portrayal and the broadest contextualisation of its history. This is partly understandable and stems from the country's size and from the role it has played in the history both of Europe and of Germany in particular. In terms of volume, the level of detail, and prominence in the historical narrative, this stands in marked contrast to the marginalisation of the history of Poland, which rarely appears as an independent actor. Poland is most often mentioned in connection with the Second World War, especially when its outbreak is discussed. However, information on the Warsaw Uprising, the Home Army, or the Polish Underground State is conspicuously absent. There are also further gaps, for instance regarding the partitions of Poland, the Battle of Warsaw and the significance of the Solidarity trade union for the fall of the Berlin Wall.
- As in the case of Israel and the Jews, Poland is generally not presented as an active and modernising agent, nor is Polish society depicted as modern, which contributes to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Information about the Jews is largely confined to accounts of the causes and progression of the Holocaust, with only occasional references to the coexistence of Jewish and German communities prior to the Second World War. Israel, for its part, is portrayed mainly – as of its establishment in 1948 – as one of the Middle Eastern states engaged in a regional conflict with the Palestinians. What is largely missing, though, are analyses of social change within Israel itself, as well as references to its economy or to the life of the Jewish community in the Federal Republic of Germany after the Second World War.
- A change in the content of textbooks in the Federal Republic of Germany – and in the image of Poland they convey – is indeed possible, as demonstrated by comparisons between earlier and more recent editions (over the long term this

is most clearly visible in narratives concerning the Holocaust). Some of the newest textbooks contain more in-depth information about Poland (and other states of the region), including material relating to the nineteenth century. Much, however, depends on both the year of publication (in general, the more recent the textbook, the greater the level of detail) and the region in which it is used. Saxony is a good example, as it uses some of the more recent textbooks that already offer a more accurate and substantive account of Polish history.

- Efforts to promote the *Europe. Our History* Polish–German textbook in schools have so far borne little fruit. This textbook could potentially serve as a valuable resource for expanding and supplementing knowledge about Polish–German relations and about Polish history itself. However, one of the main obstacles is the low level of awareness among teachers that the book has been approved for use in all federal states (with the exception of Bavaria). It is worth noting that the textbook is used relatively frequently outside the school system – particularly in institutions with a specific interest in the history of Central and Eastern Europe.
- The teacher plays the most important role in the educational process. Their knowledge and commitment determine the historical content presented to pupils and the manner in which, for example, the history of Poland is conveyed to them. This shapes the image of a given state and society to a greater extent than the textbook itself. At the same time, one of the fundamental problems facing German schools is the shortage of sufficiently trained history teachers. Moreover, in some federal states (such as Berlin) elements of history taught in the lower grades are combined, for instance, with components of civics or geography, which often has a detrimental effect on how history is taught, since there is simply not enough time.
- Rapid changes are taking place in the ethnic composition of the pupil population in Germany. Already today, more than 40% of pupils have a migrant background, and in major metropolitan areas they sometimes constitute a clear majority. This has an impact on young people’s perceptions, sensitivities, and areas of interest in the broadest sense. According to the German Association of History Teachers (VGD), there is a growing reluctance among pupils to engage with the period of National Socialism and the Holocaust – an attitude often rooted in family and cultural backgrounds. The denial or minimisation of the Holocaust, along with anti-Semitism manifesting itself in school corridors, has also become an increasing challenge, and has been even more visible since the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023. Added to this is pupils’ lack of

knowledge about the Second World War and the role their forebears played in it, as well as a general lack of interest – not only among young people – in Germany’s eastern neighbours.

- The increasing diversity of German society means that many pupils and parents do not feel a sense of connection with German history, including the legacy of the Second World War. As a consequence, the importance of textbooks, teachers and schools as the primary institutions shaping historical consciousness continues to grow. In recent years, new trends in memory policy have also emerged – for example, an intensified debate on colonialism and the search for narratives adapted to a migratory society.
- A particular challenge has arisen from the growing popularity of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a party that relativises history – for example, by claiming that the Second World War is by no means the most important event in Germany’s history, by calling for a “U-turn in the culture of remembrance”, and by glorifying the actions of the Wehrmacht. The party also seeks to exert an influence on culture of remembrance within the individual federal states, especially in eastern Germany. Should the AfD secure electoral victories in these federal states, increased pressure can be expected for changes to the content of curricula, as well as to textbooks and memorials.

Introduction

The school textbook is one of the principal vehicles for disseminating knowledge and shaping historical consciousness. Owing to the universal nature of compulsory education, instruction in schools constitutes both the most effective and the most egalitarian instrument for interpreting the past – that is, for implementing a state's historical policy.³ School textbooks may also be regarded as a unique seismograph registering shifts within this policy. They reflect current historiographical disputes and debates, and their content remains closely linked to the political context. For this reason, they represent a valuable source for analysing memory policy and assessing its specific features against the backdrop of narratives formulated in other countries.

Despite the growing role of new technologies in education, textbooks remain the primary tool for structuring historical knowledge in schools, owing to the prevailing pedagogical guidelines and established teaching practices. Their importance is further heightened in the face of increasing online disinformation, particularly on social media platforms. In this context, the textbook emerges as one of the few stable and reliable sources of knowledge.

The selection of countries whose depictions in textbooks are analysed in this publication is not accidental. Policy discourse in the Federal Republic of Germany has repeatedly emphasised 'friendship', special ties, or strategic partnership with both France and Poland.⁴ The exceptional significance of relations with Israel, by contrast, stems from Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust. On occasion, Russia has also been included in this study as a point of reference and as one of the states of the utmost importance to both German and Polish historical policy. Each of the countries mentioned occupies a distinct position within Germany's historical policy, a fact that becomes clear in the analysis of expert reports devoted to history textbooks and in the examination of the selected textbooks themselves.

The federal structure of German education and the use of different textbooks across the individual federal states necessitate a process of selection.

- ³ The author adopts a definition of historical policy formulated by Michał Łuczewski: "Historical policy is the practice of memory actors who, through memory media, acquire moral capital by (re)constructing moral narratives concerning the real or imagined past of the community. These narratives, which concern the heroes of the past, confer moral status upon their narrators as (the descendants of) heroes, victims, or perpetrators". At the same time, in those parts of the text where the term 'memory policy' is used, it refers to activities concerning collective memory that originate within civil society and are associated more closely with everyday life than with the official policies of the state. See M. Łuczewski, *Kapitał moralny. Polityki historyczne w późnej nowoczesności*, Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, Kraków 2017.
- ⁴ Official German documents regularly refer to France as its closest partner and friend. See for example 'Außenminister Heiko Maas im Vorfeld seiner Antrittsreise', Federal Foreign Office, 14 March 2018, [auswaertiges-amt.de](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de). Germany's representatives also used similar expressions to refer to Poland, see for example 'Außenminister Maas reist nach Auschwitz', Federal Foreign Office, 20 August 2018, [auswaertiges-amt.de](https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de).

For the purposes of this study, we chose textbooks from Brandenburg and Berlin, since both federal states use the same materials and are subject to shared guidelines for their development. Brandenburg, with Berlin at its centre, represent a special case. Owing to their proximity to the Polish border and the inclusion of regional issues in textbooks, it may be expected that these materials would display a heightened sensitivity and would place greater emphasis on the history of Germany's neighbour. In addition, both federal states are home to sizeable Polish communities, and the textbooks are often used by teachers and pupils of Polish origin. Polish citizens in Germany represent one of the country's largest immigrant groups, with approximately 865,000 individuals,⁵ excluding Germans of Polish descent. It is also worth recalling that Brandenburg was responsible for coordinating the work of the Joint Polish-German Textbook Commission on behalf of the German federal states.

The publication also takes into account the views of educators, who are expressing their alarm about the scale of the challenges involved in teaching history. As the German Association of History Teachers (VGD) emphasises, statements such as "Hitler and Stalin got along, after all they were both socialists", "it was Poland that provoked the war", or "the Jews were in some way partly to blame" are being increasingly heard in classrooms.⁶ These observations are not isolated. Numerous studies conducted by both German and Polish research centres point to serious gaps in the collective memory, particularly with regard to the Second World War. These gaps also encompass a lack of public awareness in Germany concerning the fate of occupied Central and Eastern Europe, and particularly of Poland.

As the 2023 MEMO studies demonstrate, only 10% of young people aged 16–25 acknowledge that their ancestors were 'perpetrators' during the Second World War, whereas as many as 62% deny this. At the same time, 20% of respondents believe that their forebears should be counted among the victims, and 15% claim that they offered assistance. Moreover, only 49% of those surveyed are able to correctly identify the period of the Nazi dictatorship in Germany (1933–1945); 31% provide an incorrect or only partial date range, and 12% admit that they do not know when it occurred.⁷

5 Data quoted after the Federal Statistical Office (Destatis), 'Ausländische Bevölkerung nach Geschlecht und ausgewählten Staatsangehörigkeiten am 31.12.2024', [destatis.de](https://www.destatis.de).

6 H. Schmoll, 'Polen habe den Krieg provoziert, glauben manche Schüler. Lehrkräfte beunruhigt über NS-Zeit-Aussagen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 7 May 2025, [faz.de](https://www.faz.net).

7 *MEMO Youth Study 2023*, [stiftung-evz.de](https://www.stiftung-evz.de). The 'MEMO Deutschland – Multidimensionaler Erinnerungsmonitor' research project is carried out by the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence at Bielefeld University (IKG), and funded by the EVZ Foundation (Erinnerung, Verantwortung, Zukunft). According to its authors, "the aim is to empirically document Germany's prevailing culture of remembrance by conducting a representative public opinion poll". Five editions have been carried out since 2018, with *MEMO-Jugendstudie 2023* being their most comprehensive part, focusing on young adults and adolescents.

When the above figures are compared with the findings of a 2023 study commissioned by the Polish Institute of International Affairs, an even more troubling picture emerges: 51% of respondents consider topics related to the course of the Second World War to be too remote for them, while 46% declare a lack of interest in the history of Poland. In response to the key question, “Who was responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War?” only 65% of those surveyed unambiguously identified Germany.⁸

These figures show that, 80 years after the war, many Germans still lack knowledge of the most basic historical facts – particularly regarding the occupation of Poland, which is central to the Polish collective memory of the Second World War. More troubling still is the fact that half of young Germans have no desire to learn about this history at all.

* * *

This text is structured into three principal parts. In the first, the author focuses on issues related to the federal nature of the German educational system, the core curriculum in the field of history, the German publishing market (including a description of the procedure for amending textbook content), and the role of the teacher within Germany’s historical policy. The second part presents the findings of existing research on representations of Poland, the Jews and Israel, and France. The third part constitutes a case study: an analysis of selected history textbooks used in *Gymnasium* (academic secondary schools) in Brandenburg and Berlin.

The research presented here was conducted primarily during a stay at the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media | Georg Eckert Institute (GEI) (*Georg-Eckert-Institut – Leibniz-Institut für internationale Schulbuchforschung*, GEI) in Braunschweig. During this period, a comparative analysis of German school history textbooks was carried out. An equally important component of the work consisted of interviews with experts conducted as part of study visits in the Federal Republic of Germany. These interviews were intended to deepen and verify the conclusions drawn from the textbook analysis. The research was further supplemented by an examination of German public debates on how history is taught and by a review of the relevant academic literature, which made it possible to situate textbook content within a broader context of discussions on history teaching. In addition, the final chapter employs a case-study

8 *Poland in the eyes of Germans. Report summarising the opinion poll carried out in Germany*, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw 2024, pism.pl.

approach, enabling an in-depth analysis of specific textbooks and a detailed presentation of the mechanisms through which their narratives are shaped.

Textbooks in the German education system

Education – and school textbooks in particular – represents one of the key instruments of historical policy. Schools systematically transmit a canon of knowledge to young people about the past, along with its interpretation. Among the various tools of historical policy, schooling has a universal character: education is compulsory, and the curriculum is imposed from above (albeit in a decentralised manner in the Federal Republic of Germany). The aims of history lessons include fostering a culture of remembrance and conveying interpretations of historical facts in the light of social change. The present text confines itself exclusively to issues related to school-based education and does not address topics such as memorials, museums, exhibitions, extracurricular activities, the role of popular culture, or the highly developed system of civic education in Germany.

Compulsory schooling has existed in Germany since the early eighteenth century, although in practice it has only been universally enforced since the mid-nineteenth century. At that time, according to Polish historian Jan Rydel (Head of the Culture and Information Section of the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Berlin from 2001 to 2005), education came to replace religion, which had previously served to explain the world and to provide meaning to human existence. The aim was not merely the acquisition of knowledge about past events; its essence lay in “the didactic use of modern and contemporary history, both political and social”.⁹ Faint echoes of this tradition – while bearing in mind all necessary proportions – can still be discerned today in the principle instilled in young German trainee teachers (*Gegenwartsbezug*, discussed below): to analyse historical events to facilitate the interpretation of current affairs.

1. The federal education system in Germany

German federal states apply non-uniform curricular guidelines and, consequently, use different textbooks – an arrangement stemming from the federal structure of the education system. Responsibility for organising schooling lies primarily with the federal states. Each of the sixteen states has its own Ministry of Education (*Kultusministerium*) and independently determines the

⁹ J. Rydel, *Polityka historyczna w Republice Federalnej Niemiec. Zaszczości. Idee. Praktyka*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, Kraków 2011, p. 27.

structure of its schools, the core curriculum, detailed syllabuses, assessment criteria, and examination requirements, resulting in substantial variation between the regions. The body responsible for coordinating education policy at the national level is the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (*Kultusministerkonferenz*, KMK), established in 1948 by the ministers of the three western occupation zones. After German reunification, representatives of the eastern federal states also joined the Conference. Curricula and teaching content are developed so as to align with the national educational standards adopted by the KMK. These standards define the educational objectives, while the curricula specify the means of achieving them and exert a direct influence on the content of textbooks.

After completing primary school – typically lasting four years (six years in Berlin and Brandenburg) – German pupils are directed, on the basis of their grades and teachers’ recommendations, into different types of secondary schools. These include:

- *Hauptschule* (general secondary school) – prepares pupils for a range of simpler professions and for further vocational training;
- *Realschule* (intermediate secondary school) – enables pupils to obtain an intermediate level of education and to continue their studies in higher-tier vocational schools;
- *Gymnasium* (academic secondary school) – prepares pupils for the *Abitur* and enables them to pursue higher education;
- *Gesamtschule* (comprehensive school – in some federal states) – combines elements of the three types listed above and postpones the point of selection.

In secondary education, two main stages are distinguished: *Sekundarstufe I* and *Sekundarstufe II*. In the case of the *Gymnasium*, the first stage typically comprises Years 5–10 (in Berlin and Brandenburg: Years 7–10) and constitutes the general-education phase, in which all subjects – including history – are taught as compulsory within a common curriculum. *Sekundarstufe II* corresponds to Years 11–12 (sometimes 11–13, depending on the federal state) and forms the stage of preparation for the *Abitur*. At this point, pupils choose subjects in the form of courses – at basic or advanced level – although not all of these are subsequently taken as part of the *Abitur* examination.¹⁰ In the field of history, teaching in *Sekundarstufe I* covers periods from antiquity to the twentieth century and is structured as a survey. In *Sekundarstufe II*, by contrast, pupils expand their knowledge within selected thematic modules, such as the history of democracy and dictatorship in Germany, globalisation processes, the history

¹⁰ See B. Edelstein, ‘Das Bildungssystem in Deutschland’, Federal Agency for Civic Education, 23 July 2013, bpb.de.

of Europe and the wider world, twentieth-century conflicts, and issues related to the culture of remembrance.

The choice of textbooks used in a *Gymnasium* depends to a considerable extent on the structure of the future *Abitur* examination. The exam consists of written and oral components, one form of which requires pupils to deliver a presentation on a previously selected topic before an examination panel. Pupils enjoy considerable freedom in this regard, including in the choice of presentation format, and these tasks are often carried out as long-term projects. The foundation of these presentations typically lies in the knowledge derived from the textbooks used in class. Consequently, the most valuable textbooks for both pupils and teachers are those that contain ready-made sets of sources, problem-based questions, and exercises requiring the interpretation of texts, maps, and iconographic materials, all of which can also be used in *Abitur* project work.

2. The core curriculum

In the development of textbooks, the *Kerncurriculum* – the core curriculum established at the state level – plays a pivotal role. This overarching document is binding for all schools and publishers and defines the educational and pedagogical objectives. At the level of individual institutions, these objectives are further specified: each school develops its own *schulinternes Curriculum* (internal school curriculum), which elaborates upon them and adapts them to local conditions, the particular profile of the school, and the interests and needs of its pupils. On this basis, teachers at a given institution decide which specific subject textbooks to purchase.

The document defining the scope of the history curriculum in schools in Berlin, Brandenburg, and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (some federal states share common guidelines) was adopted in 2021 on the basis of an update of earlier regulations.¹¹ The document sets out the principles of instruction, the requirements and standards, and detailed content covering history from antiquity to the contemporary period. It is supplemented by organisational guidelines and information relating to additional courses. The curriculum places a strong emphasis on methodological issues and on teaching pupils the skills of critically analysing materials and conducting discussions. This is likewise reflected in the textbooks approved for use (see below: *Case Study...*).

The core curriculum stipulates that, in addition to the transmission of knowledge, the acquisition of new competences is paramount in working with

11 *Rahmenlehrplan für die gymnasiale Oberstufe. Teil C: Geschichte*, Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend und Familie, Berlin 2022, p. VIII, berlin.de.

textbooks. Pupils should be able to independently analyse and compare historical and political sources and to situate them within a broader social, political, and economic context. All these elements are incorporated into the textbooks, particularly in the summary exercises concluding each topic, which include tasks designed to enhance analytical and argumentative skills. Pupils are also expected to be able to critically assess historical phenomena from multiple perspectives, as well as to present the results of their work in varied formats. The curriculum encourages the development, within history teaching, of multidimensional representations of events, processes and historical figures.

Textbooks are also expected to include the controversies that accompany scholarly debate, presented in an appropriately prepared form. The core curriculum outlines the specific skills pupils are expected to acquire and also specifies the required thematic scope for each semester: from work with ancient and medieval sources, through the interpretation of revolutions and totalitarianisms, to the analysis of the mechanisms of the Cold War and of historical memory after 1945. Nevertheless, the curriculum makes clear that the textbook is only one among many sources of instruction.

Issues related to historical culture (*Geschichtskultur*) are another important component of the core curriculum. The document emphasises that “the past exists not only in scholarly research and in textbooks, but also in the public sphere – in museums, films, literature, art, monuments, and political debates”.¹² Pupils are expected to learn how to recognise different forms of commemoration, analyse their political, aesthetic, and economic role, and evaluate them critically. The curriculum states that, after leaving school, young people will encounter history primarily through culture; for this reason, culture must not be treated merely as a vehicle for conveying factual information about the past, but should itself become a topic to reflect on. The curriculum therefore provides, among other elements, for the analysis of historical films, the review of historical references appearing in the media, the critical examination of monuments and commemorative ceremonies, as well as visits to sites of memory, especially at the local level. In this way, pupils are expected not only to acquire knowledge, but also to develop the ability to participate in public discourse about the past and to form their own independent positions on memory-related controversies.

Polish, French, Jewish-Israeli, and Russian themes appear in the curriculum as part of its international – and, where applicable, comparative – perspectives. Poland is mentioned twice: in the context of Germany’s relations with its European neighbours (it is listed alongside France) and in the module

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

on the Cold War, where events in Poland are cited as an example of a crisis within the Eastern Bloc. In addition, within the optional components of the curriculum, pupils are invited to focus on issues concerning Germans and Slavs in the Middle Ages – such as Slavic culture, eastward settlement, and the German monastic orders.

France, by contrast, appears four times: as an example of absolutism, as an instance of a bourgeois revolution, as part of Germany's relations with its neighbours, and as a topic for more advanced methodological work (specifically, the analysis of Franco-German cooperation after 1945).

Israel and the Jews are included in the section devoted to the Holocaust and the memory of the Second World War – although it is noteworthy that the Second World War appears merely as one subsection within the broader unit entitled 'The decline of the first German democracy – the National Socialist dictatorship of violence'. This section also discusses resistance movements and civil disobedience (implicitly understood as German instances of these). The core curriculum also dedicates a separate thematic block to German-Jewish relations, focusing on their history before 1933 and after 1945.

Similarly, Russia appears in several contexts: as a separate topic within the course on relations between Russia and the West; on multiple occasions in connection with the Cold War; as an actor in international arrangements (e.g. Yalta, Potsdam); and within the section dealing with the socialist labour movement (as one of the optional topics).

Visits to museums and memorials are an important component of the curriculum. Such excursions are assigned to all major modules (in Berlin, for example, they are compulsory). Moreover, for certain types of educational institutions, the curriculum explicitly specifies which sites their students should visit and in connection with which topics.

3. Changes to textbooks

The market for school textbooks in Germany is valued at approximately €650–700 million annually and has effectively been monopolised by three major publishing groups: Ernst Klett Gruppe (Stuttgart), Westermann Gruppe (Braunschweig), and Cornelsen Verlag (Berlin). Together, they control approximately 90% of this segment of the market, while the remaining 10% is divided among numerous considerably smaller independent publishers.¹³ This *de facto* oligopoly has a direct impact on the process of updating school textbooks in Germany. When the education ministries of the individual federal states introduce new

¹³ P. Frohn, 'Raus aus der Kreidezeit: Schulbuchverlage wollen den Unterricht digitalisieren', *Handelsblatt*, 5 December 2020, [handelsblatt.com](https://www.handelsblatt.com).

curricular standards (following consultations with teachers' representatives), they negotiate these changes primarily with the three major publishing houses.

History textbook publishers in the Federal Republic of Germany

Westermann Gruppe, founded in 1838 and headquartered in Braunschweig, has developed into a powerful educational publishing conglomerate, encompassing brands such as Schroedel, Diesterweg, and Bildungsverlag Eins. The group specialises in school textbooks, atlases, and multimedia materials, and its organisational structure enables it to tailor its offerings to the requirements of individual federal states.

In its current form, **Ernst Klett Gruppe** traces its origins to the late nineteenth century (Ernst Klett Verlag was founded in 1897) and has operated as a holding group since the 1990s, with its headquarters in Stuttgart. It comprises numerous entities – including major school publishing houses as well as various educational institutions, such as kindergartens and private schools – making it the largest private educational company in Europe.

Another important player in the market is **Cornelsen Verlag**, founded in 1946 in Berlin. The group publishes a wide range of teaching materials, including history textbooks that are widely used in the eastern federal states.

The decision to approve educational materials for use in schools, which is partly dependent on their compliance with curricular guidelines, is taken by the individual ministries of education of the federal states. This decision is also influenced by the “prevailing trend in historical policy, which determines which events and figures *should* be known and how they *ought* to be remembered within a given federal state”.¹⁴ The economic factor is also of considerable importance, as in many cases it delays the release of new textbook editions or forces publishers to reduce their length or to limit the use of more attractive forms of content presentation – such as maps, images, and diagrams – since their preparation entails additional financial costs. It is often precisely the high costs of modifying educational materials that generate resistance on the part of publishers, rendering strong political pressure necessary in order to enforce new guidelines. Without such pressure, substantial changes to textbooks are in practice impossible. The publishing cycle – from the stage of reflecting on curricular changes, through their implementation and the preparation of new textbook editions, to distribution in schools – takes approximately ten years.

For more than a decade, it has been possible to observe a gradual process of easing the policy of approving textbooks exclusively for use in a single federal

¹⁴ H. Grzempa, ‘Obraz Polski i Polaków w niemieckich podręcznikach do historii’ [in:] *Interakcje. Leksykon komunikowania polsko-niemieckiego*, polska-niemcy-interakcje.pl. In-house translation.

state; this has been accompanied by increasingly frequent initiatives involving joint projects for several federal states. These developments are driven by both practical and economic considerations and are further supported by shared curricular guidelines for groups of federal states. However, analysis to date does not suggest that multi-state textbooks are likely to dominate the German market in the coming years. Owing to the desire to preserve autonomy in educational matters, the federal states generally continue to favour their own textbooks. They also seek to ensure that these contain as large a proportion as possible of material devoted to regional historical references.

4. The decisive role of the teacher

The teacher occupies the most important position in the educational process. It is the teacher's individual commitment that fundamentally shapes the education of young people, including the choice of textbook, the selection of source materials (also those lying outside the established canon), and the workshops or exhibitions that pupils will visit. One possible way of expanding knowledge about Poland is to make use of the Polish–German textbook *Europe. Our History*, at least as a supplementary resource.

One of the fundamental principles of German history education is *Gegenwartsbezug*, that is, reference to the present. Considerable emphasis is placed on this principle both in the academic training of future teachers and in everyday teaching practice. It encourages educators to seek out additional, up-to-date materials not found in the textbook, while simultaneously creating space for institutions that organise workshops and training sessions for pupils and teachers. *Gegenwartsbezug* means that the past is not discussed in isolation from the present, but is always approached through the questions posed by contemporary concerns.¹⁵ Consequently, history becomes meaningful for pupils, enabling them to recognise the relevance of past events to contemporary society and to their own experiences. This principle fulfils both a selective function (justifying the inclusion of particular content in the curriculum) and a reflective one (allowing contemporary problems to be interpreted through the prism of the past). However, it requires vigilance on the part of teachers to avoid anachronisms and oversimplifications, and an awareness on the part of pupils that historical narratives are always constructed in dialogue with present-day questions.¹⁶

In teaching practice, *Gegenwartsbezug* responds to the key questions that pupils pose to history. It therefore seeks, through instruction, to explain “what

¹⁵ T.M. Buck, ‘Lebenswelt- und Gegenwartsbezug’ [in:] M. Barricelli, M. Lücke (eds.), *Praxis des Geschichtsunterrichts*, vol. 1, Schwalbach 2012.

¹⁶ L. Sebening, *Der Gegenwartsbezug im Geschichtsunterricht*, Hannover 2021, repo.uni-hannover.de.

this has to do with me” and “why it is worth learning”. It is also important to demonstrate the significance of historical events from the perspective of contemporary society and the ways in which they help to understand current problems. Ultimately, this principle leads to reflection on what can be learned from the past in relation to the future. Consequently, history ceases to be a collection of facts detached from the present and becomes a tool for interpreting contemporary reality and for critically reflecting on the direction which society’s further development is taking – effectively, an element of civic education.¹⁷

The image of Poland in the consciousness of German schoolchildren is not shaped solely by what they learn in textbooks. Perceptions of Poland are influenced by the entire infrastructure of memory – numerous institutions, including museums and memorials, and, increasingly, the internet, where highly diverse narratives about Poland circulate. In practice, teachers and pupils frequently make use of the educational programmes offered by external institutions, including, for example, *Abitur*-preparatory workshops organised by bodies such as the Pilecki Institute in Berlin.

In the German context, the Federal Agency for Civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, bpb) is one of the pillars of civic and history education. It is a federal institution formally subordinate to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, established in 1952 as an instrument for strengthening democracy in West Germany in the aftermath of Nazism. Its remit includes the dissemination of political and civic knowledge, the promotion of democratic attitudes, and the support of critical thinking among citizens, with particular emphasis placed on history education.

The bpb operates primarily through federal state-level structures, which ensures its presence in all regions of the Federal Republic of Germany and allows it to adapt its programmes and initiatives to local conditions. It conducts extensive publishing activities (including popular book series and the fortnightly journal *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*), it organises exhibitions and conferences, and develops online projects and educational programmes for schools. Topics related to twentieth-century German history, historical policy, the culture of remembrance and political culture occupy a particularly prominent place in its work.

17 K. Bergmann, ‘Gegenwartsbezug – Zukunftsbezug’, *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, no. 55 (2004), pp. 37–46.

The Holocaust and Germany – and not much more. The image of Poland, France and Israel in existing research

The content of German history textbooks – particularly materials relating to the Second World War – has already been analysed on numerous occasions. The largest body of research, including the most recent studies, has been devoted to representations of the Jewish community and the State of Israel. Analyses of Polish themes in German textbooks have also become increasingly frequent. By contrast, the least attention in studies examining the portrayal of individual countries has been paid to France. Given that Paris is Berlin's most important political partner this may be surprising. However, it suggests that relations with France are the most advanced and do not require particularly detailed historical scrutiny in textbooks, as they are generally presented in a correct and unproblematic manner.

Over the years, a clear shift in emphasis can be observed in German textbooks when addressing the period 1939–1945. Whereas textbooks from the 1980s and 1990s presented a comprehensive account of the history of the Second World War, with an emphasis on German occupation policy in the conquered territories, this perspective has largely receded in contemporary textbooks. Earlier publications narrated the war in a more traditional manner: beginning with Germany's invasion of Poland, followed by the confrontation with Britain and France, the invasion of the Soviet Union, occupation policies and the genocide of the Jews, and concluding with resistance movements. The Holocaust appeared throughout these accounts, but did not constitute the central axis of the narrative. In recent years, the situation has reversed.

Textbooks, regardless of the publishing house producing them or the federal state in which they are used, present the years 1939–1945 primarily from the perspective of the Holocaust and the national community of Germans. Only in exceptional cases do they include information about terror directed against the Polish civilian population (or other subjugated peoples), and such references are often stripped of context and of any analysis of the dynamics of change. One may therefore venture the conclusion that a German *Abitur* graduate acquires knowledge of the Second World War largely through the prism of the Holocaust and the National Socialist dictatorship, with German society portrayed as having been its principal victim. What is not conveyed, however, is a comprehensive picture of the German occupation, which impacted the lives of individuals and decimated Polish society.

1. The image of Jews and Israel

In contrast to the relatively limited research on representations of France or Russia, the portrayal of Jews and Israel in German textbooks has already been the subject of extensive scholarly reflection.¹⁸ The authors of most of the analysed studies point out that the Holocaust occupies a central position and is almost always embedded within the context of the Second World War or National Socialism. Its exceptional status is underscored by the organisation of content: illustrations and materials relating to the Holocaust typically appear on the opening pages of chapters devoted to Nazi Germany, signalling that it constitutes the primary point of reference for analysing the period. Unlike other twentieth-century genocides, the Holocaust is rarely juxtaposed or compared with other cases; it is usually presented as a historical rupture in the history of humanity, a notion encapsulated in the term *Zivilisationsbruch*.

According to several researchers, including Katarzyna Woniak from the Centre for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin,¹⁹ the attribution of a central place to the victims of the Holocaust in German textbooks often marginalises other persecuted groups, particularly Poles. She also notes that, although the Holocaust has now become one of the main narrative axes of the Second World War in all textbooks, there is a lack of detailed information on the assistance provided to Jews by various social groups and states. The narrative is usually confined to descriptions of deportations, camps, and executions, and almost entirely omits Jewish organisations, rescue initiatives, and instances of support from, among others, Poles, various Churches, or foreign diplomats. The studies also reveal numerous inaccuracies and simplifications. Factual errors appear as well, for example in the dating of legislation and in the geographical placement of camps. Hence the calls for improved quality control and for greater use of historical sources in teaching.²⁰

Most of the criticism directed at the portrayal of Jews in German textbooks focuses on:

- the dominance of the perpetrators' perspective: textbooks make extensive use of sources produced by the Nazis (legal acts, propaganda illustrations and photographs taken by the perpetrators), which are employed to

18 See for example S. Lässig (ed.), *Deutsch-israelische Schulbuchempfehlungen*, Deutsch-Israelische Schulbuchkommission, Georg-Eckert-Institut, Göttingen 2015, gei.de; M. Liepach, D. Sadowski (eds.), *Jüdische Geschichte im Schulbuch. Eine Bestandsaufnahme anhand aktueller Lehrwerke*, Göttingen 2014; W. Bilewicz, *Die Darstellung des Holocaust in den Schulbüchern und Curricula für den Geschichtsunterricht in der Sekundarstufe I – Ein historisch-pädagogischer Vergleich zwischen Bayern und Österreich*, Linz 2015; J. Spichal, *Vorurteile gegen Juden im christlichen Religionsunterricht. Eine qualitative Inhaltsanalyse ausgewählter Lehrpläne und Schulbücher in Deutschland und Österreich*, Göttingen 2015.

19 See K. Woniak, 'Ujęcie Zagłady w niemieckich podręcznikach szkolnych' [in:] *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, no. (11) 2015, pp. 573–590.

20 J. Friedmann, 'Deutsche Schulbücher sind beim Thema Holocaust unpräzise', *Der Spiegel*, 27 January 2014, spiegel.de.

explain ideology and systems of repression. Although such materials have significant explanatory value, when presented without accompanying victim testimonies they reinforce an image of the Holocaust as a process observed through the eyes of the perpetrators.²¹ The perspective of the victims is presented far less frequently, although some more recent textbooks have begun to include testimonies of survivors;

- the depiction of Jews as an anonymous mass subordinated to the machinery of extermination – active forms of both armed and everyday resistance are rarely highlighted. There is also a lack of in-depth analysis of the conditions in which coercion and the absence of alternatives played a decisive role, making it difficult for pupils to comprehend the extreme circumstances under which the victims were forced to function;²²
- the simplified treatment of responsibility – textbooks do not challenge the notion of the collective guilt of German society, yet they rarely explore the role of ‘ordinary Germans’, such as informers, participants in looting, or the beneficiaries of the exclusion of the Jews. A schematic division into perpetrators, victims, and ‘passive bystanders’ predominates, in which Germans are portrayed as a manipulated collective deprived of agency. This is reinforced by the language used in textbooks: passive constructions dilute responsibility by presenting the perpetrators as components of a ‘killing machine’ rather than as individuals making conscious decisions. The focus on Hitler and his inner circle further strengthens the image of the rest of society as powerless executors, which diminishes the awareness of the broad involvement of many Germans – both functionaries of the apparatus of repression and the beneficiaries of persecution, such as those who took over Jewish property. Reservations have also been expressed regarding the selection of sources, which is sometimes one-sided or proves too demanding for pupils;
- the use of visual material – photographs, most often drawn from perpetrators’ archives, present victims exclusively from a single perspective, reducing Jews to the role of passive objects of violence. There is a lack of materials depicting Jewish life prior to the Holocaust, which prevents pupils from understanding the lost world of Jewish communities. Consequently, a one-sided and simplified image emerges, reinforcing traditional clichés;²³
- the portrayal of Israel, which is discussed primarily as one of the parties to the Middle East conflict – often as the aggressor. The analysed materials highlight the absence of a broader context that would also present

²¹ *Deutsch-israelische Schulbuchempfehlungen, op. cit.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

the country's contemporary achievements in science, research or the high-technology sector.²⁴ The pluralism of Israeli society, democratic processes and the history of migration are rarely addressed, while Jews themselves are usually portrayed exclusively as victims of the Holocaust, deprived of agency. This stems in part from curricular provisions: only a small number of federal states, such as Bavaria, require the compulsory discussion of issues relating to Israel in a broader context than that of the Holocaust and the conflict alone.²⁵ Similarly, Jewish life in Germany is described primarily through the prism of the Nazi period. A serious and recurring problem concerns cartographic materials. In many older textbooks, maps illustrating the spatial extent of the Holocaust reproduce Germany's 1937 borders, which suggests that extermination camps were located in territory controlled by Poland, without indicating that, at the time, Nazi Germany occupied these areas. Consequently, in the reader's perception, these representations – whether intentionally or not – may shift responsibility from the German perpetrators to the Polish nation. In some more recent textbooks, this problem has already been addressed through corrections, either by properly marking occupation boundaries or by explicitly indicating German control over the respective territories.

Over time, the structure of textbooks has changed. Among the topics discussed, this is most clearly visible in the case of the Holocaust. In some older textbooks, it was not accorded a separate chapter; this was revised only in the mid-1990s.²⁶ Moreover, the manner in which the Holocaust is presented has changed. The theme of Jewish resistance does appear in most newer textbooks, but it is treated very briefly. Typically, reference is made only to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and to the 'strategy of survival' adopted by the majority of the Jewish population in the face of terror.

The portrayal of the perpetrators of the Holocaust has also increasingly evolved. The most recent publications encourage reflection on the involvement of ordinary Germans in the Holocaust, including within the administrative apparatus. The textbooks include references to the recruitment of SS members from different social strata, excerpts from Himmler's speeches and from perpetrators' testimonies, and there is discussion of the work of Holocaust historians (such as Hannah Arendt and Daniel Goldhagen). Consequently, pupils are able to engage with questions of morality, obedience and social responsibility.

²⁴ *Darstellung Israels in Schulbüchern nach dem Rahmenlehrplan Berlin-Brandenburg. Eine Analyse ausgewählter Materialien der Fächer Geschichte, Politik und Gesellschaftswissenschaften – Sekundarstufe I*, Amadeu Antonio Stiftung und Mideast Freedom Forum Berlin, Berlin 2023, mideastfreedomforum.org.

²⁵ *Deutsch-israelische Schulbuchempfehlungen*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ See K. Woniak, 'Ujęcie Zagłady w niemieckich podręcznikach szkolnych', *op. cit.*

2. The image of France

The body of literature devoted to the image of France in German history textbooks is surprisingly sparse. In the Federal Republic of Germany, there is a prevailing belief that separate studies are unnecessary, as France's position within the school narrative is considered self-evident – it is Germany's most important partner. As demonstrated by textbook analyses (as well as research conducted by the author – see below: *Case Study...*), France is discussed more frequently than, for example, Poland, and already in connection with much earlier historical periods, with the information provided being more in-depth. These accounts construct an image of a modern and influential state whose history serves as a point of reference for understanding European history. In terms of volume, the level of detail and the prominence within the historical narrative, this stands in marked contrast to the marginalisation of the history of Poland, which rarely functions as an independent subject.

The most significant German–French debate concerning textbooks centred on the creation of a joint volume. Its preparation was undertaken by historians working within the Franco-German Textbook Commission. The project originated in 2003 on the initiative of the Franco-German Youth Parliament and quickly gained political backing from Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder. Its aim was to highlight the exceptional character of German–French reconciliation and European integration, and it was intended that the textbook itself would become the world's first history textbook to be used simultaneously in two countries in an identical version.²⁷ By 2011, three volumes had been published: one on the post-war period (2006), one covering the years 1815–1945 (2008), and one addressing history from antiquity to 1815 (2011). Following the completion of the project, the commission was dissolved.

German history educators criticised the textbook for its insufficient alignment with national curricula and – on more detailed points – for issues such as the overly cursory treatment of the Weimar Republic, an excess of illustrations, and the 'French section', which was regarded as being less modern in educational terms when compared with French textbooks. Attention was also drawn to translation errors and to questions that were thought to have been excessively simplified.²⁸ Despite this criticism, the textbook sold in relatively large numbers – approximately 250,000 copies (mainly in the German–French border regions). In traditional *Gymnasien*, it was used primarily as a supplementary resource, whereas in bilingual schools (*AbiBac*) it found

27 See F. Körner, *Zwischen politischem Willen und schulischer Realität. Das deutsch-französische Geschichtsbuch und sein Einsatz in Deutschland*, Universität Passau 2012, after: dfi.de.

28 R. Bendick, 'Das deutsch-französische Schulgeschichtsbuch. Die Möglichkeit zum binationalen Geschichtsunterricht und die nationalen Reserven der deutschen Geschichtsdidaktik', *Eckert.Beiträge* 2009/4, edumeres.net.

broader application. In its portrayal of France, the textbook moved away from the image of 'Germany's traditional rival', instead emphasising comparisons between the crises of the Third Republic and the Weimar Republic, as well as analyses of the Popular Front and social reforms. In doing so, it presented France as part of a shared European history rather than merely as an actor within bilateral relations.

3. The image of Poland

The body of literature addressing the image of Poland in German textbooks is relatively extensive.²⁹ The works of Anna Wolff-Powęska are among the pioneering studies examining the role of textbooks and history lessons in shaping perceptions of neighbouring countries. She draws attention to the role of history education in the formation of political attitudes, emphasising, for example, that "The anti-Slavism of Nazi Germany was based on the images of Poland, strengthened by school textbooks, as a country inhabited by half-Asians 'who feed on sloppy food and live in holes'".³⁰ This situation did not improve significantly in the early post-war years.

The extent to which ignorance and deficiencies in school education generate or reinforce stereotypes is illustrated by the studies cited by Wolff-Powęska, which were conducted in the mid-1960s among pupils in West Germany. In responses to a question about the most negative associations with Eastern European nations, references to Russians and Poles ranked highest. With regard to Poles, the descriptors considered most appropriate were: dirty, lazy, cruel, sneaky, mean, impertinent and lying. By contrast, Hungarians were described as brave, passionate and musical.³¹

At the same time, Poland appeared in pupils' consciousness as a small and insignificant neighbour of Russia. By contrast, the Soviet Union was perceived

29 A study by Katarzyna Woniak from Centre for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Berlin entitled 'Ujęcie Zagłady w niemieckich podręcznikach szkolnych', *op. cit.* is one of the most important sources of research on the subject. The author reviews earlier analyses, drawing attention, for example, to Jörg-Dieter Gauger's 2008 study covering all federal states of the Federal Republic of Germany, in which he observed that history teaching on the Second World War in Germany was dominated by the Holocaust, and called for this topic to be more firmly linked to Germany's occupation policy in Poland. German scholars such as Bodo von Borries, in turn, examined the evolution of narratives from 1949 to the end of the twentieth century in older textbooks: in these, the Holocaust eclipsed other crimes, while the perpetrators were portrayed as an isolated group, thereby obscuring the full scope of German agency and responsibility. More recent expert assessments – for example that of Thomas Sandkühler (2012) – have highlighted serious factual errors and a lack of contextualisation, particularly with regard to occupied Poland. See also E. Nasalska, *Polsko-niemieckie dyskursy edukacyjne, lata 1949–1999*, Warszawa 2004; R. Maier, *Der Stellenwert des Themas „Zwangsmigrationen“ in deutschen Schulbuchdarstellungen* [in:] T. Strobel, R. Maier (eds.), *Das Thema Vertreibung und die deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen in Forschung, Unterricht und Politik*, Hannover 2008; U.A.J. Becher, W. Borodziej, R. Maier (eds.), *Deutschland und Polen im 20. Jahrhundert. Analyse – Quellen – didaktische Hinweise*, Bonn 2007; J.-D. Gauger, *Deutsche und Polen im Unterricht*, Schwalbach 2008.

30 A. Wolff-Powęska, *Memory as Burden and Liberation. Germans and their Nazi Past (1945–2010)*, translated by Marta Skowrońska, Peter Lang Editon 2015, p. 335.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 339.

as a great power that had defeated the formidable German army. Poles thus became the focus of long-standing prejudices directed against Slavs, portrayed as “verminous” and as people who “need a master”.³² Wolff-Powęska points out that the negative image of Poles stemmed primarily from the isolation of the Eastern Bloc and the lack of contact with its inhabitants in the first decades after the war. Young Germans derived their knowledge of Poland chiefly from the family home, as the subject was not broached at school.

Similar conclusions emerge from a study conducted in the following decade. At the turn of 1976–1977, more than 3,000 German pupils aged between 10 and 23 were surveyed about their knowledge of the Second World War. As Wolff-Powęska writes, the responses submitted revealed the following picture: “Poland was rarely recognised as the first victim of German aggression. Students’ inability to date the war, suggesting it took place in ‘1939–1965’ or ‘1945–1949’, were not rare. The dominating belief was that the war started with the attack on the Soviet Union. There were also opinions that ‘the attack on Poland was planned well’, ‘Hitler gave the order to attack France and Poland in 1945’ or ‘He wanted to restore freedom to Germany so he started the war against Poland’. A few believed that the German army had won a great victory over Poland because ‘Poles thought that German tanks were made of tar paper’ and expressed their regret: ‘Poland, East Germany, Russia etc. used to belong to us. We lost almost a half of it only because Hitler was so greedy’”.³³ As in the earlier studies, respondents acknowledged that they had acquired their knowledge of their country’s recent history primarily at home, and these topics did not feature in school lessons.

The marginalisation of Poland within educational institutions was also reinforced by the activities of expellee associations. Organisations representing Germans forcibly displaced from territories annexed after the war by Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union constructed an image of Warsaw as the “occupier of the Eastern German lands”. As early as ten years after the war, in 1956, the Standing Committee of the Conference of Ministers of Education adopted recommendations concerning education about the East (*Ostkunde*). The principal educational objective in this area was defined as ensuring that the German East remained, in the German imagination, a phantom homeland – “well-known and familiar to the Germans, particularly the youth. Its achievements must be rooted in German historical consciousness. The Germans should treat these lost lands as their homeland, a part of their nation”.³⁴ As Wolff-Powęska further notes, “‘Ostkunde’, as the

³² *Ibid.*, p. 339.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 339–340.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

principle of teaching during the Cold War, cherished the image of the East as a lost paradise, arousing a feeling of injustice caused by Poles". Within this narrative, "The East, formerly the land of German hope and German work... has been broken. It has become the border territory of Asia".³⁵

Today, it is most often school-based education that serves as the primary vehicle for the dissemination of historical policy: 47% of pupils and young adults aged 16–25 express an interest in history and declare that they enjoy the subject, while as many as 85% consider engagement with the past to be important for contemporary society. Among the modes identified for transmitting and sustaining collective memory, school education predominates (35%), followed by visits to memorial sites (22%) and films (7%), which further underscores the central role of textbooks.³⁶ For young people, issues related to family memory and social identification are of particular significance. Nearly half of respondents had not sought to trace connections within their families to the period of National Socialism (48%). Compared with the rest of society, young people are less likely to perceive family biographies as part of Germany's culture of remembrance (26%, compared with 61%).

In assessments of collective guilt, 48% of respondents considered German society as a whole to be co-responsible for the crimes of National Socialism, while a further 37% regarded it as partially responsible. For 76% of young people, the necessity of confronting the past remains obvious, which distinguishes them from the adult population, among whom this figure stands at 57%. This interest in history and willingness to engage with the past of the Federal Republic of Germany create scope for teachers to work towards reducing gaps in knowledge. Without these efforts, it is not possible to provide substantive content to memory policy – particularly given that knowledge concerning the harms inflicted upon Poland and the course of the German occupation between 1939 and 1945 remains insufficient among Germans.³⁷

An article by Hanna Grzempa entitled 'Obraz Polski i Polaków w niemieckich podręcznikach do historii' [*The Image of Poland and Poles in German History Textbooks*]³⁸ is one of the more important studies addressing the contemporary image of Poland in German history textbooks. As the author rightly observes, one of the fundamental difficulties in presenting Poland's historical experience and situation lies in its marginal position within German collective memory, contrasted with the central place occupied by Germany in Poland's culture of

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

³⁶ MEMO Youth Study 2023, *op. cit.*

³⁷ D. Bingen, S. Lengemann (eds.), *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Polen 1939–1945. Eine Leerstelle deutscher Erinnerung?*, Federal Agency for Civic Education, Bonn 2019, bpb.de.

³⁸ H. Grzempa, 'Obraz Polski i Polaków w niemieckich podręcznikach do historii', *op. cit.*

remembrance. This asymmetry is reflected in textbooks, which tend to reduce the history of the Republic of Poland primarily to episodes that coincide with the historical narrative of the Federal Republic of Germany (see below: *Case Study...*).

The main elements of the existing state of research on the image of Poland in German textbooks:

- A comparison of the topics addressed shows that Poland is primarily discussed in contexts intersecting with German history. This most often concerns: “German settlement in the East, presented within a single chapter combined with the role of the Teutonic Order; the personal union between Poland and Saxony – addressed exclusively in Saxony; the great-power ambitions of Prussia, Austria and Russia, one of the consequences of which were the partitions of Poland; the Hambach Festival of 1832; Germany’s territorial losses resulting from the Treaty of Versailles; German foreign policy in the interwar period; the Second World War; territorial changes after the Second World War and population transfers; Germany’s recognition of the Polish–German border along the Oder and Neisse rivers as part of Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* and its confirmation at the ‘Two Plus Four’ Conference; the gradual disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, with the role of the Solidarity movement; and the enlargement of the European Union”.³⁹
- Several factors can be identified as reasons for the absence of certain topics from textbooks. One of these is that some of the omitted subjects relate solely to Poland’s internal history or to episodes from its past that do not directly concern Polish–German relations (such as the Polish–Lithuanian Union, the Polish–Muscovite wars, or Polish relations with the Ottoman Empire or Sweden). It should be borne in mind that – much as in most European countries – history textbooks are written from a national perspective and primarily tend to include those themes that in some way relate to the country’s own history.
- Textbook narratives place the issue of borders and territory at the centre, while almost entirely neglecting the internal development of the Polish state, its culture, and its economy. At the same time, emphasis is placed on German settlement in the East, often framed in the spirit of the nineteenth-century myth of a ‘German civilising mission’. The conflict with the Teutonic Order is treated superficially, as is the Jagiellonian Golden Age. Poland reappears in textbooks in the eighteenth century – as a state in decline and a victim of the partitions. Although some authors stress the illegality of this act and mention the Constitution of 3 May, the broader

39 Ibid.

socio-political context is left unexplained. Discussion of the nineteenth century is in turn limited to brief references to national uprisings or to Germanisation under Bismarck.

- The most important moment in history in which Poland is discussed is September 1939; however, even in these sections, Poland's fate is usually presented in a highly fragmentary manner.⁴⁰ Pupils learn about Hitler's demands regarding Danzig, the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, and Poland's rapid defeat, but they are generally not informed about the September Campaign as a prolonged and determined resistance.
- The crimes committed against Poles during the occupation are usually addressed selectively, and the dominance of the Holocaust within the narrative obscures the experience of Polish society as a victim of mass violence.⁴¹ The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the Warsaw Uprising are mentioned only rarely. The forced labour of Poles is treated with equal marginality. By contrast, the post-war expulsion of Germans is discussed more extensively and in greater detail than the occupation of Poland itself. Some textbooks attempt to place these expulsions within a chain of cause and effect related to the war and the occupation, while others emphasise the motifs of revenge and retaliation on the part of Poles.
- Source texts from the years 1939–1945 relate predominantly to the Holocaust. One textbook includes an excerpt from the diary of Emanuel Ringelblum, but fails to provide any reference to the author's biography.⁴² Another textbook includes numerous primary source texts and excerpts from works by renowned German historians, yet none of them refer to the Polish civilian population.⁴³
- The theme of Solidarity trade union stands out, as it is treated as evidence of the agency of Polish society and its role in the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc. This is, in essence, the only element of the narrative in which Poland appears as an active historical actor.

Textbooks are dominated by a focus on German society in the face of the Nazi dictatorship. This diagnosis is already clear from an examination of the thematic structure of the sections devoted to the wartime period. The narrative typically opens with a discussion of Nazi ideology and propaganda and the total subordination to the regime of social, political, and cultural life. This is followed by information on Hitler's foreign policy and the outbreak of the war. At the centre lies a multi-page account of the Holocaust, after which the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ J.-D. Gauger, *Deutsche und Polen im Unterricht*, op. cit.

⁴² *Anno 4. Das 20. Jahrhundert*, Westermann Schulbuchverlag, Braunschweig 1997, p. 117.

⁴³ For example *Forum Geschichte 11*, Bayern, Cornelsen, Berlin 2010.

remaining chapters address primarily German issues, focusing on resistance movements, the bombing of German cities, and the expulsion of Germans from the eastern provinces.

Some authors of these studies emphasise that this structure of presentation does not result from deliberate omission, but rather from didactic reduction (including an insufficient number of teaching hours and a shortage of teachers)⁴⁴ and from the subordination of Polish history in textbooks to the logic of the German narrative. They nonetheless result in the reinforcement among pupils of the conviction that Poland occupies only a marginal place in European history. A comparison of this image with the Polish school narrative – which emphasises resistance, agency, and heroism – reveals a fundamental divergence in historical imaginaries which hampers mutual understanding.

4. The joint Polish–German textbook

Efforts to change the two countries' mutual perceptions within school education began as early as the mid-1950s. At that time, Enno Meyer (1913–1996), a *Gymnasium* teacher from Oldenburg and one of the pioneers of Polish–German dialogue on the didactics of history, published his *47 Thesen über die Darstellung der deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen im Geschichtsunterricht* [*47 Theses on the Representation of German-Polish Relations in History Teaching*].⁴⁵ The document effectively initiated a process of change in the perception of Poland in German history textbooks. Meyer advocated abandoning stereotypes, emphasising the contribution of Poles to European history, and portraying them as a fully-fledged nation rather than merely as a collective subjected to the policies of external actors.

The idea of reforming history teaching was developed most fully in the concept of elaborating joint Polish–German guidelines and, in the longer term, a joint history textbook.⁴⁶ Responsibility for its content lay with the Joint Polish–German Textbook Commission, which began its work in 1972 under the auspices

⁴⁴ To explain why German schoolbooks are missing an in-depth portrayal of the occupation as a system of terror, Robert Traba mentions the dominance of a national perspective in the presentation of historical events. He argues: "It is not true (...) that German youth today are not taught about the German aggression against Poland or that they are unaware of German crimes (with particular emphasis on the extermination of European Jews). What is true, however, is that despite a modern didactic approach, German history education – like that of all other European countries – remains focused on working through its 'own', national experiences of the past. There is no space for the experiences of 'others', even of such close neighbours as Poland. Consequently, the occupation exists in this narrative as a German crime, but there is no didactic space (including for practical reasons) to engage with the strategies of the biological survival of the occupied nations or to analyse the strategies of resistance movements". See R. Traba, 'O potrzebie nowych badań. Niemiecka okupacja Polski w czasie II wojny światowej w historiografii i pamięci funkcjonalnej', *Historyka*, no 4 (2014).

⁴⁵ M. Mack, 'Rozmowy podręcznikowe' [in:] E. Kobylińska, A. Lawaty, R. Stephan (eds.), *Polacy i Niemcy. 100 kluczowych pojęć*, Biblioteka „Więzi”, Warszawa 1996, p. 449.

⁴⁶ For more on the textbook see for example B. Dziewanowski-Stefańczyk, 'Pojednanie poprzez podręcznik', *Więź*, 11 December 2020, wiesz.pl.

of UNESCO. This commission's activities are coordinated by the Georg Eckert Institute (GEI), which we mentioned earlier. The GEI was established in 1975 as a centre for research on textbooks and history education. Formal intergovernmental agreements concerning the organisational framework for work on the joint textbook were concluded in 2008.

On the German side, political coordination and funding were provided by the Federal Foreign Office as well as by the education and culture ministries of the federal states, while implementation was overseen by the Ministry of Education of Brandenburg. On the Polish side, responsibility rested with the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage. The institutional framework of the project was defined by two bodies: a decision-making panel and an expert group, with the expert group developing the core substantive recommendations in 2010, forming the foundation of the textbook series.⁴⁷

Between 2016 and 2020, four volumes of *Europe. Our History* were published, each simultaneously in the Polish and German versions. This textbook series covers history from antiquity to the present. The final volume received approval for use in Polish schools in the 2024/2025 school year. The publication of each volume sparked lively debate between proponents and critics of the project.⁴⁸ In practice, the textbook functions as a supplementary resource alongside other history textbooks, and its presence in schools results primarily from the initiative of individual teachers. The GEI organises training sessions for teachers, who then act as 'ambassadors' for the textbook. In Germany, considerable emphasis is placed on relating history to the present, which encourages educators to draw on alternative teaching materials such as the Polish–German textbook. All four volumes have been approved for use in 15 of the 16 federal states with only Bavaria failing to authorise them, in part because the content is not fully aligned with the state's examination guidelines and because the Bavarian educational authorities favour traditional approaches to teaching history at the state and federal levels rather than transnational ones. In addition, the absence of references to regional history was cited.

By the end of 2023, approximately 40,000 copies of the textbook had been sold in Germany. Besides the federal structure of the state and the operation of different curricula across the individual federal states, other factors hindering its wider dissemination include: a lack of awareness among some teachers that

47 Wspólna Polsko-Niemiecka Komisja Podręcznikowa Historyków i Geografów (ed.), *Podręcznik do historii. Zalecenia*, Wydawnictwo Neriton, Warszawa 2013.

48 Critical voices include P. Kryszczak, 'Polsko-niemiecki podręcznik należy traktować jako sprawę polityczną – mówi prof. Kucharczyk', *Niezależna*, 23 August 2024, niezalezna.pl. Positive opinions were expressed for example by J. Krzyk, 'Dlaczego polsko-niemiecki podręcznik do historii współczesnej nie dostał akceptacji ministra Czarnka?', *Wyborcza.pl*, 1 September 2023.

the book exists, as well as concerns about its compliance with examination requirements. These concerns relate in particular – according to teachers – to the perceived insufficiency of topics exclusively devoted to German issues, regarded as the most useful for the *Abitur*, and to the additional workload linked to the potential need to supplement the textbook with further materials.

In analysing regional conditions in relation to the content included in textbooks, particular prominence is given to the attitudes of the individual federal states towards the outcomes of the work of the Textbook Commission. One of the earliest results of its activities saw the 1976 publication of the so-called recommendations, which set out agreed guidelines concerning contentious issues. The provisions relating to the post-war period proved the most controversial, especially those addressing border changes and the forced expulsion of the German population from territories awarded to Poland. In Germany, this triggered intense debate and many individual ministries of education did not consider themselves bound by these recommendations when approving textbooks. In several states – most notably Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, and Schleswig-Holstein – the recommendations were explicitly rejected. As Ewa Nasalska stresses, the opposition was so strong and persistent that, until 2002, the authorities of some federal states (including Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg) refused to provide financial support to the GEI.⁴⁹

Case study: a comparison of the representation of Poland, France and Israel

In this chapter, we shall juxtapose and compare the images of the three countries in school-based teaching in the Federal Republic of Germany against the backdrop of the country's history. To date, researchers have focused primarily on describing the narratives concerning individual countries and their position and significance within textbooks. The approach presented below broadens this perspective and facilitates a better understanding of German historical policy.

The analysis is based on the *Horizonte* textbook series published by Westermann and intended for history teaching in *Gymnasien* in the states of Berlin and Brandenburg. Three volumes were examined: the first – *Horizonte 7/8*, published in 2016 – covers material for Years 7 and 8, introducing pupils to the early modern period and to the transformations leading to the events of the nineteenth century; the next two – *Horizonte 9* and *Horizonte 10*, published in 2018 – focus on the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

⁴⁹ E. Nasalska, *Polsko-niemieckie dyskursy edukacyjne: lata 1949–1999*, Warszawa 2004, p. 37.

respectively, presenting the social, political and economic processes that led to the emergence of modern state structures and on contemporary history, encompassing the second half of the twentieth century and the present day, including the division of Germany, the Cold War and the process of reunification after 1989. These textbooks are in widespread use in both federal states, which is reflected in references to local heritage sites, such as castles and other buildings from these regions, as well as to regional memorials.

The analysis encompassed source texts, cartographic materials, supplementary resources and tasks relating to the issues under examination. It focused on comparing aspects such as the placement of a topic within a chapter, how it is treated, definitions, and chronological and territorial frameworks. The context in which issues concerning the countries being studied were addressed was also an important element of the analysis. Accordingly, this chapter seeks to answer the following questions: which issues are discussed; whether they are allocated a separate topic or constitute only part of a broader whole; which topics or (in the case of excerpts) content precede and follow them; how a given issue is presented; and how much space is devoted to it. Differences in the representation of the individual countries are also highlighted, and attention is drawn to which elements of history are emphasised, marginalised, omitted or distorted.

1. Volume I – Years 7 and 8 (2016)

Poland appears only sporadically in this volume, and its image is subordinated to narratives centred on states which from a German perspective are regarded as central, meaning above all France and, to a lesser extent, Russia. The Poles are presented rather as episodic figures. The first individual of Polish origin mentioned in the textbook is Nicolaus Copernicus (p. 48), identified as a scholar from the city of Toruń on the River Vistula who studied in Kraków. His nationality, however, is not specified – in contrast to Galileo, who is explicitly described as Italian (“der Italiener Galileo Galilei”).⁵⁰

The absence of Poland from the narrative is particularly striking in the discussion of the partitions, which are presented as the conquests of

⁵⁰ In Germany, Copernicus is classified among figures associated with the German-speaking cultural sphere. This is most clearly illustrated by the Walhalla – a monumental building modelled on the Parthenon, located on the Danube near Regensburg in Bavaria. Opened in 1842, the Walhalla was intended to symbolise the national unity of the Germans after the fall of the Holy Roman Empire and the Napoleonic era. As Jan Rydel emphasises, from the outset it functioned as an instrument of historical policy, shaping national consciousness and serving an educational purpose. Busts of individuals deemed to have rendered distinguished service to the German cultural sphere are placed there, with this criterion interpreted in a broad sense: decisive importance is attached to the German language rather than to citizenship. Consequently, figures such as Catherine the Great, Barclay de Tolly, and Dutch and Swedish heroes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are also represented in the Walhalla. See J. Rydel, *Polityka historyczna w Republice Federalnej Niemiec. Zaszłości, idee, praktyka*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, Kraków 2011, pp. 30–31.

Frederick II the Great. Pupils in Years 7 and 8 will find no mention of the partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth between 1772 and 1795; instead, they are presented only with a map illustrating these conquests, and Frederick himself is portrayed as a reformer preparing Prussia for modernisation. Criticism of his policies is confined to internal matters (such as the employment of former non-commissioned officers as teachers), while his expansionist policy – although it cost the lives of approximately 500,000 people – is described merely as “controversial today” (p. 91). A similar approach to the partitions can also be found in German museums, and is promoted, for example, by the exhibition opened in 2024 at the Garrison Church in Potsdam.

One of the few sections in which Poland is presented on a more equal footing with Germany is the account of emigration following the November Uprising. It notes that approximately 9,000 Poles fled to Western Europe, where they “served as a model for many”. There is also a reference to expressions of solidarity with Poles during the Hambach Festival, when participants in the procession carried Polish flags to demonstrate support for the insurgents of 1830 (p. 138, see below: *The Hambach Festival*). Nevertheless, even in this context – when reference is made to the November Uprising – there is no information on the reasons for the presence of Russian troops in Poland or on the context of the partitions. A similar pattern can be observed in history textbooks from other federal states.⁵¹

The Hambach Festival (1832)

The Hambach Festival was a political demonstration that took place between 27 and 30 May 1832 at Hambach Castle in the Palatinate. It represented the largest gathering of bourgeois opposition in the period preceding the March Revolution of 1848. Between 20,000 and 30,000 participants attended, primarily from the Palatinate, Hesse, Bavaria and Alsace, as well as from France and Poland – predominantly émigrés who had fled their homeland following the failure of the November Uprising (1831).

The demonstrators demanded civil liberties, freedom of the press, the right to assembly, equality between women and men, and the unification of Germany in a constitutional or republican form. Ideas of a united Europe of free nations were also articulated. In their speeches, the movement’s leaders made explicit references to Poles as allies of the Germans in the struggle for freedom; among others, Jakob Siebenpfeiffer proclaimed: “Long live a free, united Germany! Long live the Poles, the allies of the Germans!”

In front of the castle, white-and-red flags were flown alongside the black–red–gold banners, making the event one of the most important moments of German–

⁵¹ H. Grzempa, ‘Obraz Polski i Polaków w niemieckich podręcznikach do historii’, *op. cit.*

Polish symbolic solidarity in the nineteenth century. These ties with Poles also had a social dimension: liberal and bourgeois parts of German society organised 'Polish associations', collected donations, and welcomed refugees with enthusiasm. There was even a 'fascination with Poland', symbolised, for example, by a paraphrase of the opening line of the Polish national anthem: "Poland has not yet perished, as long as the Germans live".

Since the late twentieth century, the memory of the Hambach Festival has also been invoked in the context of Polish–German relations – for example, in 2001 the Weimar Triangle summit, attended by Gerhard Schröder, Jacques Chirac and Aleksander Kwaśniewski, was held at the castle.

In German historiography, the event is regarded as the first modern political demonstration in Germany. In 1932, Theodor Heuss, the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany, described it as "the first modern political assembly in German history". It remains firmly embedded in the civic consciousness of German society as the beginning of the path towards democracy, freedom and national unity.

France, by contrast, is presented very differently from Poland. It occupies the position of a state central to narratives of modernity, reform and revolution. France is portrayed as a key actor in the historical processes that shaped Europe. A substantial portion of this section of the textbook is devoted to Louis XIV and his era: his reign is discussed in a separate chapter, with particular emphasis placed on Versailles as a symbol of absolutism. Subsequent sections further develop the theme of Colbert's policies and mercantilism, highlighting the importance internal reforms had for the foundations of France's power in the seventeenth century.

The French Revolution is presented in a detailed and multifaceted manner, with discussion of its causes, its progression and its social and political consequences. The authors clearly seek to highlight its contemporary relevance, relating it to present-day realities and engaging in reflections on the continuity of the ideas of liberty, equality, and citizenship. In their view, one of the enduring consequences of the revolution was the emergence of the phenomenon of 'nationalisms in Europe'.

Regional references emerge in the discussion of the achievements of Napoleon Bonaparte, who is portrayed as an ambivalent figure. It is emphasised that in regions such as Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria and Saxony, assessments are distinctly positive, as his actions led to the strengthening of local structures at the expense of Prussia. By contrast, when Prussia and Austria are discussed, emphasis is placed on his dominance and military victories.

Russia, by contrast, appears in the textbook primarily as an external force intervening in the affairs of Central and Eastern Europe. Its presence in

Poland in 1830 is mentioned only in passing – the reader is informed that “Polish patriotic officers and intellectuals expelled the Russians”, yet no information is provided on the reasons for Russian dominance or on the earlier political context of the partitions. Russia is also depicted as a threat: Napoleon’s defeat outside Moscow is presented in dramatic terms – “Napoleon lost almost his entire Grande Armée on Russian soil” – which reinforces the image of Russia as a powerful and impenetrable territory on which even the greatest European military forces were defeated.

The first volume does not contain a single reference to the Jewish community or to Israel.

The second part of the *Horizonte* textbook (for Year 8) includes problem-based topics relating to contemporary social issues such as poverty, migration, and expulsions. Poland also appears only sporadically in this section. One example of the effective omission of an important theme from Polish history is the absence of any reference to John III Sobieski in the context of the Battle of Vienna. The event itself is presented merely as one of many battles during the “wars with Muslims”. Of note is the expansion of the textbook’s content through a spatial narrative. Gdańsk appears as a strictly German city (Danzig). In the case of Wrocław, a different strategy is employed: the city is first referred to as Breslau, followed by the addition that it is “Wrocław today” (“heute Wrocław”). Thus, the post-Second World War change is acknowledged, but it is not embedded within a broader historical context.

In this section of the textbook, France appears on multiple narrative levels – both as the setting of revolutionary events and as an example of socio-political progress. Its role is particularly highlighted in the context of the development of democracy, alongside Germany and Great Britain. France is also presented as a key point of reference in the processes of Europe’s modernisation and democratisation. Notably, unlike Poland or Russia, France recurs consistently throughout the textbook, and the text devoted to it is developed in a more in-depth manner. This is also reflected in the index (see below).

References to Russia are slightly chaotic, as demonstrated, for example, by the absence of any mention of Peter the Great. The narrative also leaves no room for the group known as the *Russlanddeutsche* (Germans from Russia) – people of German origin who were settled in the territories of the Russian Empire, primarily from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards. They were descendants of colonists invited by Empress Catherine II, who were offered economic and religious privileges. Although they constituted an important cultural and demographic bridge between Germany and Russia, their role is omitted from the textbook. The inclusion of information on this specific

population group would undoubtedly have contributed to a better understanding of its influence on German society and of its very presence within it.

The Jews do not make their first appearance until page 234 – and then solely in a religious context, alongside Christianity and Islam. They are not presented as part of German society, but rather as a distinct confessional group. The most extensive section devoted to them concerns antisemitism, which is discussed through examples of specific acts of violence, such as the destruction of synagogues. However, there is no discussion of the structural causes of this phenomenon and references to them remain marginal.

Taking into account the quantitative overview of the presence of the countries examined in the textbook, it should be noted that Poland, Russia and Israel are absent from the index placed at the end of the volume, whereas, for example, France and Austria are included. References to the Jewish community are dispersed and appear under headings such as *Judentum* (Judaism), *Judenhass* (hatred of Jews), and *Antijudaismus* (anti-Judaism). Notably, the entry *Antisemitismus* is missing, which points to a lack of consistency and creates terminological confusion that may hinder understanding of the subject.

2. Volume II – Year 9 (2018)

The textbook opens with an analysis of the end of the First World War. The Treaty of Versailles is presented primarily as an act that placed full responsibility for the outbreak of the conflict on Germany and its allies, resulting in Germany losing a significant amount of territory. Among other measures, the obligation to relinquish Poznań and West Prussia is mentioned, with particular emphasis on the fact that the decision was taken without consultation with the local population (without noting that Greater Poland was an ethnically Polish region). However, this section of the textbook lacks basic information on territorial changes in Europe, including the re-emergence of the Polish state. The narrative moves seamlessly from the provisions of the treaty to Germany's post-war problems – above all inflation and reparations – entirely omitting the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, its consequences for Europe, and key events such as the 1920 Battle of Warsaw.

2.1. The Weimar Republic

In the section of the textbook devoted to National Socialism, the authors clearly emphasise Adolf Hitler's Austrian origins. They note that the rise in popularity of the Nazi Party was made possible by nationalist and racist sentiments widespread within society, which intensified following the overthrow of the Communist Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919. In discussing Hitler's ascent to power, the authors include an explicit warning that, although history does

not repeat itself, it is nevertheless worth analysing in order to draw lessons for the present.

Reservations arise over how the victims of National Socialism are presented. The approach adopted in the textbook is typical of German historical policy, which marginalises national victim groups with the exception of the Jews and the Germans themselves. In the introduction to the section devoted to the Third Reich, there is no mention of national victims of Nazism such as Poles, although reference is made to the “so-called Holocaust” as the tragedy of more than six million Jews, as well as of other groups: Sinti and Roma, persons with disabilities, those persecuted for political reasons, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, prisoners of war and forced labourers. The authors also state that “the crimes are so horrific that they appear almost inexplicable”,⁵² which may suggest that confronting the causes and consequences of German crimes is, in effect, impossible and therefore unnecessary.

The manner in which the illustrative material is described also warrants critical assessment. For example, a photograph from the Warsaw Ghetto is captioned only in vague terms as “In the Warsaw Ghetto”, without any explanation of context. At the centre of the frame lies a child on the pavement, arms hanging limply, with items of clothing scattered around, including a hat. In the background, along the upper edge of the image, the legs of adults – standing or passing by – are visible, clad in winter boots and coats. Their faces are not shown, which intensifies the impersonal and disturbing nature of the scene. The photograph is accompanied only by the laconic caption: “Im Warschauer Getto. Fotografie, Anfang 1941” (“In the Warsaw Ghetto. Photograph, early 1941”), which is clearly insufficient. What is lacking is a broader historical and ethical context – including an explanation of what the ghetto was, how it was established, the scale of the tragedy, and the significance these images have for how the Holocaust is taught. Nor is there a wider perspective depicting the life of Jewish communities (in Germany or Poland) prior to the Holocaust; the few references that do exist appear only in connection with discussions of Judaism and, against the backdrop of the overall narrative, they remain strikingly insufficient.

In the section devoted to the ideology of National Socialism, numerous elements are listed. However, when discussing the key motif of *Lebensraumtheorie* (‘living space’ theory), the account is limited to a general claim about the

52 “Support for the regime went so far that it became possible for one of the greatest crimes against humanity to occur: the persecution and murder of Europe’s Jews, in full view of everyone. The so-called Holocaust claimed the lives of more than six million Jews. In addition, there were other groups who were persecuted and murdered: Sinti and Roma, referred to as ‘Gypsies’, people with disabilities, political opponents, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, prisoners of war, forced labourers, and so forth. These crimes are so monstrous that they seem almost impossible to explain”, after: *Horizonte. Geschichte für Berlin und Brandenburg. Gymnasium. Band 9*, von Westermann, Braunschweig 2018, p. 65.

necessity of acquiring space “at the expense of other nations”. The paragraph concludes with the statement that this theory “served as a justification for the war against the USSR”. There is, however, no mention whatsoever of the Poles or the other nations of Eastern Europe, which in reality were the first victims of this ideology – both in practical terms (extermination and expulsions) and in symbolic terms.

The description of the origins of the concentration camps focuses on the fact that those who initially suffered there were German citizens – above all, the political opponents of Hitler. It is stated that approximately 32,000 such individuals were sentenced to death, although, as is emphasised, this figure “presumably” reached as many as 40,000. The narrative then lists the groups that were subsequently sent to the camps: political opponents, Jews, followed by Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, persons with intellectual disabilities, Jehovah’s Witnesses, criminals and prisoners of war. Although the establishment of 23 main camps and more than 1,000 subcamps by 1945 is mentioned, the nationality of the victims is entirely omitted – there is no reference to Poles, Ukrainians or Belarusians, despite the fact that they represented a substantial proportion of those murdered.

In the chapter devoted to the persecution of the Jews in Nazi Germany, within the section addressing the escalation of racist anti-Semitism and the events leading directly to the November pogrom (the so-called *Kristallnacht*), an account is included of the situation of Jews of Polish origin in Germany. This appears as a separate, visually highlighted textual unit, which suggests that particular significance is attached to this episode: “In 1938, Poland refused re-entry to Jews of Polish nationality who had remained abroad for more than five years. As the Nazi regime was not interested in their continued presence in Germany, 12,000 people were deported to the Polish border at the end of October 1938, where they were held in transit camps in inhumane conditions” (p. 91).

The narrative clearly suggests that, through an administrative decision, the authorities of the Republic of Poland prevented Polish Jews from entering the country, while the German side is described merely as having been “not interested” in their remaining in Germany. This framing can be interpreted as an attempt to distribute responsibility for Jewish suffering between the two states. At the same time, the phrase “inhumane conditions”, used to describe the circumstances in which Jews were held at border points and in transit camps, stands in stark contrast to the neutral description of German actions – despite the fact that it was Germany that carried out the deportations.

This passage may be read as partially relativising responsibility for the fate of Jews on the eve of the Holocaust by emphasising Poland’s refusal while simultaneously omitting the political circumstances and the scale of persecution

within Nazi Germany. There is no mention whatsoever that the deportations resulted from a unilateral decision by the German state and formed part of a broader strategy of excluding Jews from German society. Conversely, the use in this context of expressions such as “inhumane conditions” in reference to Polish actions may lead to a distortion of the proportions of guilt and responsibility.⁵³

The policy of appeasement towards Hitler is presented as a controversial issue that continues to provoke debate. It is noted that the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, “did not anticipate” Hitler’s true intentions when he sought a peaceful resolution to the Sudeten crisis. However, the textbook offers no evaluation of this policy or its consequences, which may lead to an obscuring of political responsibility and the strategic failures of the Western powers. The absence of a contemporary reflection on appeasement – such as is often applied to other historical topics – and the lack of any reference in this context to current events are striking, particularly in light of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine ongoing since 2014.⁵⁴

The textbook includes a reference to the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and even incorporates it into supplementary exercises. However, it lacks a clear statement that the pact’s secret protocol effectively made Poland’s defence in September 1939 impossible and predetermined its partition. Nor is there any mention of the USSR’s co-participation in the aggression against Poland or of the consequences for the civilian population in the occupied territories.

2.2. The war 1939–1945

The account of Poland’s defensive war in September 1939 is limited to a mere eleven lines of text in the textbook and remains superficial. The statement that the Soviet Union entered only after Poland’s capitulation constitutes a factual error, suggesting a one-sided interpretation of events and distorting the realities established by the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. The word “Katyń” does not appear in the text, and the murder of members of the Polish elite committed by the NKVD is described only in vague terms, as an action intended to prevent future resistance. There is likewise no mention of the scale of German crimes: it is not stated that approximately six million Polish citizens perished as a result of the occupation by Nazi Germany. Instead, the narrative appears to create an impression of symmetry, portraying Germany and the USSR as

53 This also applies to an earlier passage, which notes that the “emigration (of Jews) was associated with an almost complete loss of property due to the introduction of the so-called Reich Flight Tax (*Reichsfluchtsteuer*). However, foreign countries were also reluctant to admit Jews”, after: *Horizonte. Geschichte für Berlin und Brandenburg. Gymnasium. Band 9, op. cit.*, p. 91.

54 Although published in 2018, this textbook was produced in the context of a de facto war that had already been ongoing for four years.

comparable aggressors, whose actions are juxtaposed with the passivity of Britain and France.

Equally striking is the complete omission of key events, in particular the absence of any reference to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the Warsaw Uprising, or to the city's destruction. There is also no attempt to convey the scale of civilian casualties or the extent of material devastation. The occupation of Poland is framed primarily in the context of the September invasion and the outbreak of the Second World War. This theme is further exploited in a student exercise analysing the diary of Hans Frank. However, the narrative of the occupation focuses largely on its administrative and cultural aspects (for example, what broadcasts Poles could listen to on the radio, what restrictions were imposed on access to culture, or what kinds of labour they were compelled to perform), rather than on the scale of crimes or the nature of repression and persecution.

In one of the few positive aspects, the occupation of Poland is addressed on a separate page, and one of the photographs – depicting the execution of Polish civilians by German soldiers – is accompanied by an accurate caption. In the section dealing with the racial war, reference is made to “thousands of Poles” who were expelled or shot and killed in order to make room for *Volksdeutsche* resettled from the Baltic states. The text also mentions expropriations and the plundering of Polish property. However, more detailed information is missing on forced labour, the number of victims, deportations to concentration camps, everyday terror and the systematic policies of extermination. In describing German crimes, emphasis is placed on the activities of the SS and special police units (*Einsatzgruppen*). The Wehrmacht appears only marginally, primarily in the context of its participation in the murder of Jews.

This stands in clear contrast to the relatively detailed discussion of the occupation of France, which takes approximately fifteen lines. Attention is drawn both to the collaboration of segments of the population with the occupier (including participation in the deportation of Jews) and to the development of a strong resistance movement, which contributed to the overthrow of the German occupation regime and provided the French with “the moral foundations for a new beginning after the war”. In the corresponding narrative on Poland, there is no reference to an underground resistance (such as the Home Army) nor any indication of the Polish involvement in the overthrow of the occupation, leaving the reader solely with an image of a passive country subjected to aggression.

The German–Soviet war is also treated cursorily. The attack of Nazi Germany on the USSR itself is described in only six lines, although it should be noted that more detailed information on this issue is included in the section

devoted to the racial war. For example, reference is made there to 5.7 million Soviet prisoners of war, of whom 3.3 million were killed, as well as to extensive deportations for forced labour. In this respect, the USSR is addressed in a more systematic manner than Poland. The text also mentions starvation policies directed against the inhabitants of Leningrad and mass killings in Belarus, but makes no reference to the earlier Stalinist Holodomor.

Particular attention is devoted to the suffering of the German civilian population – a topic that occupies nearly four pages in the textbook (pp. 106–109, including two pages of exercises). The consequences of Allied bombing for the inhabitants of German cities are emphasised: a figure of 600,000 victims is given, along with information that four million homes were destroyed. Everyday challenges are described in detail, including the necessity of descending into air-raid shelters with packed bags, spending nights there, and the loss of property and housing. These descriptions are strongly emotionally charged and serve to elicit empathy with the German society living back then. Although the causes of the bombings are also outlined (the destruction of military potential and morale), no comparison is made between the situation of the citizens of Nazi Germany and the suffering of the occupied peoples – Poles in particular.

The textbook also includes a description of social hardships in Germany during the war, such as family separations, the absence of fathers conscripted to the front, and the employment of mothers in factories. This narrative constructs an image of Germans as a society that suffered, was mobilised, but which was generally unaware of the crimes being committed.

2.3. The Holocaust

In the textbook being analysed, the topic of the Holocaust occupies a prominent place: eight pages are devoted to this issue and to the policies of memory relating to it. By comparison, the general account of the Second World War extends to 14 pages (excluding the Holocaust), of which four focus directly on the situation in Germany and are largely centred on the suffering of German citizens.

The description of the Holocaust is thorough, addressing its causes, planning, progression and consequences. It includes both detailed information on the mechanisms of the genocide itself (transports, selections, camps and the number of Jewish victims – estimated at between 5.7 and 6.1 million) and cultural reflection. For example, the authors point to the significance of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin and to the House of the Wannsee Conference (*Haus der Wannsee-Konferenz*). In the case of the former,

however, no mention is made of the difficulties that accompanied its creation.⁵⁵ The important role of memorials is also illustrated by a passage devoted to the commemoration of persecuted groups, which emphasises that “in the centre of Berlin, other victims also have their own sites of remembrance, such as the Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, the sick and disabled, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and many others”.

One of the most characteristic features – clear both in the section on the Holocaust and in earlier chapters – is the absence of any indication of the victims’ national origins. Information is omitted on the number of victims murdered from individual countries, as well as on the fact that the Nazis located the largest number of extermination camps on the territory of the Republic of Poland. A similar approach is adopted in the description of the crimes themselves, where reference is made to “people from occupied countries”, “forced labourers”, “Soviet prisoners of war”, “resistance groups”, and “partisans”.

The use of the term “Poland” to designate the location chosen for carrying out the Holocaust – without any clarification that the country was at the time under German occupation – is particularly troubling: “From 1942 onwards, Jews from all over Europe were deported to extermination camps. These were built far away in Poland in order to keep the crimes secret” (p. 117). One of the textbook’s “Guidelines” describes the deportation of Jews from Nazi Germany to camps, listing Riga, Warsaw, and Auschwitz-Birkenau among the destinations. Yet even in this case, there is no information that these were concentration and extermination camps established and administered by the German authorities.

At the end of the chapter, the statement that “it is impossible to understand why this (the Holocaust) happened” is repeated several times. While this is intended to underscore the inhuman nature of the phenomenon itself, it may simultaneously lead readers to the conclusion that responsibility is distributed. The authors cite examples of the involvement of “ordinary people” – such as a train driver who transported Jews to a camp – but they do not provide a broader, structural analysis showing how the state and military apparatus of the Third Reich functioned.

55 See A. Wolff-Powęska, *Memory as Burden and Liberation...*, *op. cit.* The principal difficulties included: the choice of the commemorative concept and the form the memorial should take – whether it ought to be a purely monumental structure or rather a museum; the failure to select a winner in the first competition (in 1994, with 1,500 participants) and the withdrawal of one of the designers at a later stage in protest against imposed changes to his original concept; disputes over the name; fears that the project might revitalise neo-Nazi movements; and objections from some victim communities (including the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma), who feared that Germany intended to divide the victims of Nazism into first- and second-class categories. The most detailed account of the controversy surrounding the Holocaust memorial in Berlin was prepared by J.-H. Kirsch, *Nationaler Mythos oder historische Trauer? Der Streit um ein zentrales „Holocaust-Mahnmal“ für die Berliner Republik*, Böhlau Verlag, Köln 2003, after: zeitgeschichte-digital.de.

2.4. Resistance

The narrative concerning the resistance to National Socialism, in turn, begins with the assertion that it existed “from the outset”, although it was “rather weak” in its initial phase. Notably, the entire section focuses almost exclusively on German resistance. Specific individuals, names and social milieus (students, youth groups, deserters) are highlighted, and the overall account is geared towards demonstrating the diversity and courage of German society.⁵⁶ In the concluding section of the chapter, a brief reference is made to resistance in other European countries – France, Poland, the USSR and the Balkans are listed in succession, but without any examples of these movements, names, events or organisational structures. All are subsumed under the single category of “partisan warfare” and are then juxtaposed with the reactions of the occupiers: “The Germans brutally suppressed every act of sabotage and resistance – in essence, both sides committed great atrocities in the partisan war” (p. 126). This kind of narrative device once again leads to a process of symmetrisation, in which the crimes of the occupier and the actions of resistance movements are rendered equivalent, thereby blurring the distinction between perpetrator and victim. Here too, there is no mention whatsoever of the uprisings that took place in Poland or of acts of civil and military resistance marked by heroism.

As part of the summary of this section, pupils are asked to provide examples of opposition to the National Socialist regime and to identify its victims (other than Jews). One of the tasks merits particular attention, as it involves a comparison of the German occupation in France and in Poland.

3. Volume III – Year 10 (2018)

The reckoning undertaken by Germany with the crimes of Nazism, including those committed by the Wehrmacht, constitutes an important issue addressed in the subsequent section of the textbook. Attention is drawn to the limited scope of denazification, which was conducted primarily in the American occupation zone until 1947. The textbook’s authors argue that this resulted from the division of Europe and the Cold War, and from the growing perception of West Germany as an ally of the United States. The narrative then turns

⁵⁶ Across all the analysed textbook passages – those concerning the victims, memorials, and resistance – similar narratives are evident. These, moreover, are present not only in history textbooks, but also in museums and historical exhibitions. A good example is the exhibition ‘Gewalt ausstellen. Erste Ausstellungen zur NS-Besatzung in Europa 1945–1948’ at the German Historical Museum in Berlin (24 May – 23 November 2025), which presents materials relating to the occupation and its victims while emphasising the passive stance of occupied societies. At the same time, in the *Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand* (the German Resistance Memorial Centre in the Bendlerblock in Berlin), the permanent exhibition ‘Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus’ lists by name almost all the individuals involved in the resistance movement – much as textbooks do. This illustrates the coherence of German state action within the framework of historical policy: the link between textbook narratives, education, and exhibition-making. Museums themselves are very often visited precisely by school pupils.

to the role played by trials in the 1960s, including the so-called Auschwitz trial (1963–1965), in the formation of the historical awareness of the younger generation and for confronting their parents with the National Socialist past. In doing so, it also reveals that many perpetrators remained unpunished and continued to function within the society of the Federal Republic of Germany.

The account of post-war Poland is limited to a laconic reference to the strikes of 1988 and the subsequent agreement with the communist authorities. The text briefly mentions Lech Wałęsa, albeit without noting that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and completely omits his involvement in the Solidarity social movement in 1980. Nor is there reference to the imposition of martial law or to the role of Pope John Paul II. Moreover, the potential offered by the historical narratives behind symbolic moments in Polish–German relations remains unexploited, including, for example, Chancellor Willy Brandt’s *Kniefall von Warschau* (kneeling in Warsaw, p. 114), which is not discussed in the context of a broader analysis of relations between the two countries.⁵⁷

By contrast, the narrative concerning relations with France and Russia is considerably more extensive. In the case of the latter, the textbook provides a fairly detailed account of both Mikhail Gorbachev’s policies and the causes of the collapse of the USSR, as well as of the hopes that Germans placed in the Soviet leader. It also emphasises that “half of the USSR’s 270 million citizens were not Russians”. As many as two pages are devoted to the withdrawal of more than 500,000 Russian soldiers from Germany by 1994. The authors draw attention to the complexity of this process, including its military, social and economic aspects (for example, abandoned sites, ammunition, and unresolved housing issues). In addition, it is noted that under the ‘Two Plus Four’ Agreement, Germany committed itself to preserving and maintaining Soviet memorial sites and war cemeteries.

In the description of the ‘Two Plus Four’ Agreement, it is further emphasised that, in exchange for the restoration of full sovereignty, Germany was required to recognise the Oder–Neisse line as an international legal border and to reduce the size of the Bundeswehr.

Particular attention should be paid to the presentation, in the final section of the textbook (published in 2018), of Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2014. This passage constitutes an example of the relativisation of agency and responsibility. Rather than explicitly identifying Russia as the aggressor, the authors employ the term “Ukrainian crisis” (*Ukraine-Krise*), and in the opening sentence define the situation in vague terms as a “problem for global politics”, rather than as

⁵⁷ For more on symbolic meaning of this gesture see for example M. Latkowska, C. Felsch, *List biskupów & Willy Brandt w Warszawie. Przedwcześni bohaterowie?* [in:] R. Traba, H. Henning Hahn (eds.), *Polsko-niemieckie miejsca pamięci*, vol. 3: *Paralele*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2012.

a clear act of aggression (no wording that names the act directly is used). The forcible annexation of Crimea is depicted through a sequence of events resembling a “political process”: demonstrations, a referendum, and a decision to join the Russian Federation – without any mention of the presence of Russian troops, the falsification of the vote, or the coercion involved in its organisation under the threat of military intervention. The use of the expression “armed groups” in describing the conflict *de facto* obscures Russian responsibility.⁵⁸

A narrative constructed in this manner leads to a dangerous blurring of the distinction between victims and perpetrators in the description of events both in Crimea and in the Donbas, where Russia’s actions are presented as a response to an internal conflict. There is no mention of the basic fact that it was the Russian Federation that initiated the war. This misleads pupils and distorts their understanding of the situation. Consequently, they may encounter difficulties in assessing the full-scale Russian aggression which has been ongoing since 2022 and become more susceptible to Russian propaganda.

The textbook also has shortcomings in its presentation of key twentieth-century issues. It defines the role of the Soviet Union as an aggressor in the Second World War, but the discussion is limited to a brief reference in the context of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, which the text consistently refers to as the “German–Soviet non-aggression pact”. The glossary does not explain the significance of the secret protocol, which in practice made Germany and the Soviet Union allies and prevented the states of Central and Eastern Europe from mounting an effective defence. The broader portrayal of the USSR is likewise simplified: the discussion of the regime’s pervasive internal policies of repression, collectivisation, and mass terror is almost entirely absent. Instead, the Soviet Union is depicted primarily as a distant empire – poor and not fully comprehensible, yet possessing considerable destructive potential.

In its treatment of the Middle East conflict, the textbook adopts an ostensibly balanced approach between the difficult situation of the State of Israel and the suffering of the Palestinians; yet, strikingly, it omits crucial historical context. In outlining the developments in the region from the period of the British Mandate for Palestine to the United Nations resolution of 1947, there is no mention of the Holocaust, of Germany’s role in it or of the reasons why the

58 “In Crimea, tens of thousands of demonstrators called for the peninsula to be reunited with Russia, and armed groups seized the regional parliament. With Russian support, the Crimean government scheduled a referendum for 16 March; its result – 96.6% in favour of joining the Russian Federation – was presented as the will of the population. However, neither Ukraine nor the EU and the United States recognised the outcome of the vote or Crimea’s secession. In Ukraine’s eastern, traditionally pro-Russian oblasts, bloody fighting broke out between the forces of the central government in Kyiv and local pro-Russian militants. The Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts declared themselves independent people’s republics, but they were not recognised either by Kyiv or by the international community”, after: *Horizonte. Geschichte für Berlin und Brandenburg. Gymnasium. Band 10*, von Westermann, Braunschweig 2018, p. 157.

Jews required a state of their own. Fundamental information that would enable pupils to understand both the causes and the consequences of the processes under discussion is thus absent.

The glossary is equally problematic: the definition of anti-Semitism suggests that the phenomenon emerged only in 1933, thereby distorting its centuries-long history and deep roots in European culture. The selection of entries in the index placed at the end of the volume also raises concerns: Poland and Ukraine are absent despite their key importance for the processes discussed, whereas countries such as Hungary are included.

Prospects for changing the image of Poland in German textbooks

The image of Poland, France and Israel that emerges from German school textbooks is diverse. Each of these states occupies a different position within Germany's historical policy and memory policy, which is also reflected in history textbooks. In the case of Israel, the narrative axis centres on Jews (and the Holocaust), who are perceived as the principal victims of the Second World War, alongside Germans themselves. France, by contrast, occupies the most prominent position, which is partly attributable to its size and its historical trajectory. In many of the situations described, it is presented as a model, although it is at times also depicted as an adversary – an object of both fascination and hostility (for example, Napoleon). This overarching image of France is further overlaid by the differing perspectives of individual federal states.

With regard to Poland, the most striking feature is the lack of deeper interest – apart from those episodes in which it cannot be omitted (such as the outbreak of the Second World War). This situation recalls the state of intra-German relations described by Dirk Oschmann, a literary scholar at the University of Leipzig, who in 2023 published an essay analysing the humiliation and marginalisation of East Germans by Western elites and the failure of the reunification process. Oschmann argues that the differing perceptions held by West German politicians and academics regarding the eastern and western parts of the country stem from the adoption of a perspective in which “the East appears merely as loud, dark, primitive and alien, while the West is portrayed as harmonious, enlightened, well-formed, and coherent”.⁵⁹

The consequences of deficits in historical knowledge and the dissemination of a frequently distorted image of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe

⁵⁹ D. Oschmann, *Der Osten: eine westdeutsche Erfindung* [The East: A West German Invention], Berlin 2023, p. 20. In-house translation.

are visible in very practical terms. The historians Franziska Davies and Katja Makhotina emphasise in their 2022 book *Offene Wunden Osteuropas: Reisen zu Erinnerungsorten des Zweiten Weltkriegs* [*Open Wounds of Eastern Europe: Journeys to Memorial Sites of the Second World War*] that it was precisely the insufficient knowledge of their neighbours' past – and, in effect, a lack of interest in this part of Europe – that contributed to Germany's post-2014 refusal to supply weapons to Ukraine (among other things). As argued at the time in Berlin, the lessons Germans believed they had drawn from the Second World War made it impossible for them to oppose Russia. Only the direct attack on Kyiv in February 2022 led to a change in this position, and even then only after several months. In this context, however, the authors pose a pertinent question: have the correct lessons really been drawn from the catastrophe of the Second World War, and how is it possible that more than eighty-five years after its outbreak Germans know little or almost nothing, for example, about the Warsaw Uprising?⁶⁰ The reasons behind this situation include how history is taught. It is precisely the manner in which the past and its principal actors are presented in textbooks that shapes the historical consciousness of successive generations.

The perceptions of the Germany's most important partners and neighbours, as shaped in school textbooks, are likely to evolve. An increasing proportion of German youth are now people with migrant backgrounds⁶¹ or foreigners. According to the 2023 microcensus, 41.6% of adolescents attending general and vocational schools in Germany had a migrant background. In the 2024/2025 school year, 1.9 million out of approximately 11.4 million pupils – approximately 16% – held foreign citizenship. Moreover, the proportion of people with immigrant backgrounds in the Germany is expected to continue to grow. This already high share is, in fact, shaping debates about how history is taught in schools.

Pupils whose parents come from non-European cultural backgrounds – most commonly from Syria, Turkey, Afghanistan and Iraq – often display different sensitivities and forms of historical memory, particularly with regard to the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust. This divergence has given rise to some of the most acute tensions within educational institutions, both among pupils themselves and between teaching staff and parents. These tensions became especially visible following Hamas's attack on Israel in October 2023 and the subsequent retaliatory actions. At that time, the situation led to numerous anti-Semitic incidents in schools (as well as on the streets of

60 F. Davies, K. Makhotina, *Offene Wunden Osteuropas. Reisen zu Erinnerungsorten des Zweiten Weltkriegs* [*Open Wounds of Eastern Europe: Journeys to Memorial Sites of the Second World War*], Darmstadt 2022, p. 11.

61 Germany defines people with a migrant background as those who themselves or at least one parent did not acquire German citizenship by birth. See 'Migrationshintergrund', Statistisches Bundesamt (Destatis), [destatis.de](https://www.destatis.de).

German cities) and confronted educators with a fundamental dilemma: how to address the history of the Arab–Israeli conflict in the classroom.⁶²

Teachers face similar difficulties when addressing the Holocaust in the classroom or when proposing school trips, for example to the Jewish Museum in Berlin.⁶³ Resistance on the part of some parents means these class trips do not take place. Similar tensions, albeit on a smaller scale, also emerged in connection with the war in Ukraine following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. In some classes – particularly in regions with a long-standing high proportion of pupils whose parents originate from Russia – disputes persisted over the causes and significance of the war.⁶⁴

There are significant political shifts which overlay the ethnic changes within German society. The growing influence of the AfD is an increasingly serious challenge for the teaching of history in Germany. Should the party take power in some of the eastern federal states, this would enable the implementation of a revisionist vision of historical policy. Its foundations have been articulated most explicitly by Björn Höcke, the party's leader in Thuringia. In a speech delivered in Dresden in early 2017, he called for a “U-turn in the culture of remembrance”, arguing that the prevailing practice of “overcoming the past” paralyses the “nation” and its national consciousness. He advocated the “construction of a positive relationship with the past”, presenting this as the “moral duty” of the Germans. Höcke also referred to the bombing of Dresden, which he portrayed as an event almost equivalent in significance to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One of his central accusations against Germany's politics of memory is the alleged “misinterpretation” of the past, as he claimed that Germans after 1945 were subjected to “systematic re-education”. According to this narrative, the outcome of that process was the construction in the capital of a “monument of shame” (*Denkmal der Schande*), his term for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe unveiled in May 2005.⁶⁵

If the AfD were to assume power, this could lead to attempts to alter the foundations of historical policy in the federal states it governs. Any such efforts would likely include cuts to funding for memorials, initiatives to revise the curriculum, and pressure on the publishing houses responsible for developing school textbooks. For the AfD, education, history, and culture – alongside

62 K. Müller-Lancé, ‘„Die aktuelle Lage ist alarmierend”’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 19 October 2023, sueddeutsche.de.

63 K. Frymark, ‘The shades of German anti-Semitism’, *OSW Commentary*, no. 301, 16 May 2019, osw.waw.pl.

64 See R. Uhle, I. Arnhold, *Geflüchtete Kinder und Jugendliche aus der Ukraine. Eine Orientierung für Schulen*, Unfallkasse Sachsen, 1. Auflage 2022, uksachsen.de; ‘VBE: Zwischen ukrainischen und russlanddeutschen Schülern kochen Konflikte hoch’, *News4Teachers*, 21 December 2022, news4teachers.de; E. Bruhn, ‘Der Krieg auf dem Schulhof’, *taz – Die Tageszeitung*, 23 March 2022, taz.de.

65 For a more comprehensive discussion of the AfD's vision of historical policy see B. Rudawski, ‘Alternatywa dla Niemiec a niemiecka historia. Nowy początek w polityce historycznej?’, *Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego*, no. 349, 22 June 2018, iz.poznan.pl.

migration – are key issues for mobilising voters. Moreover, reforms in these areas can be implemented more easily and rapidly than, for example, fundamentally improving economic performance or streamlining bureaucratic procedures.

Despite the difficulties outlined above, it does appear to be possible to change the image of Poland in German history textbooks. It will, however, undoubtedly be a long-term process requiring a systemic approach and the involvement of many actors. It is necessary to strengthen institutions that are already functioning well – including those operating in Germany – but also to initiate new projects. These efforts should not focus solely on correcting and supplementing textbook content or curricula, but above all on stimulating interest in Poland's history and society among Germans – both pupils and teachers. A change in Poland's image in German textbooks would also benefit the Germans themselves, as it would strengthen their resilience to deliberate Russian disinformation within the framework of the hybrid warfare being conducted by Moscow, including against Germany. The steps that should be taken in order to achieve the objectives outlined above are as follows:

- Dialogue with and pressure on the federal state authorities responsible for education. This applies in principle to all aspects of education – from formal changes to curricular guidelines, through the updating of the textbooks themselves and other elements of the infrastructure of memory, including museum exhibitions, to the organisation of seminars for teachers and workshops for educators and pupils. From the Polish perspective, Berlin and Brandenburg are of key importance. Owing both to their geographical proximity and to the role of Berlin as the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany, as well as Brandenburg's status as the state with the greatest experience in conducting textbook policy with Poland, they may be the most valuable partners in cooperation geared towards introducing change. Also significant – especially in the case of Brandenburg – is the large proportion of the local population with Polish roots, who generally send their children to German schools.
- The search for additional partners – Saxony could be a potential federal state interested in cooperation. As the analysis of selected teaching materials indicates, the image of Poland in some textbooks used in this federal state is already more nuanced and often more comprehensive than in those employed in Brandenburg. Moreover, Saxony is another region bordering Poland which, due to its historical ties, may be particularly interested in gaining a deeper understanding of its neighbour. In addition, since German reunification in 1990, Saxony has consistently

ranked among the leading states in educational performance within the Federal Republic of Germany, and educational policy there has been one of the key political priorities. Educational projects devoted to the history of Poland – especially if embedded within the local system of curricular requirements, above all those relating to the *Abitur* – could therefore be of interest to the regional authorities.

- Support for initiatives targeted at professional groups responsible for the transmission of knowledge. The teacher represents the most crucial element within the education system. It is their interest in the history of Poland that will determine whether, and in what manner, this subject is addressed in the classroom. Even the most far-reaching reform of textbooks will not overcome the problem of the marginalisation of Central and Eastern Europe if the need to convey knowledge about the states of this region is not first firmly established among the teachers themselves.
- Highlighting those elements of Poland's recent history that have reshaped its image since the period of transformation. This could make it possible to promote an image of Poland as a modern state, including by emphasising its economic success of the past 35 years – a success which most Germans remain largely unaware of, despite Poland being one of Germany's largest trading partners. To some extent, this approach could draw on Germany's comparable historical experiences, for example those of young people in the eastern federal states whose parents also lived through a period of systemic transformation. Discussion of this experience remains part of an ongoing and intense debate within Germany's politics and culture. Promoting this kind of positive, rapprochement-orientated narrative about Poland could also contribute to a fundamental shift in how the country is portrayed in German textbooks – that is, it would be a move away from an objectified perspective towards one that recognises Poland's agency and emphasises the agency of the Polish state and of Polish society.

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