

REMEMBERING IN

ALLIANCES

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The 'German culture of remembrance' has roots in many places, including several not located in Germany. One of them is Amsterdam, where in 1933 the publicist Alfred Wiener conducted interviews with people who, like him, had fled Germany during the Second World War. In London, where Wiener escaped after the outbreak of the war, he founded the Wiener Library in 1939, which has collected documents, objects, interviews, and much more to document the crimes of the Nazis. Another place where German memory culture began is Warsaw, where, imprisoned by the Nazis in the largest wartime ghetto, historian Emanuel Ringelblum and seventy activists joined together to form the group Oneg Shabbat (Friends of the Shabbat), which secretly met every Saturday, at the risk of their lives, to collect

everything that embodied the history of Polish Judaism. They also compiled statistics on life in the ghetto, covering the high death rate, hunger, illnesses, and deportations to concentration camps. Before the complete destruction of the quarter as the ghetto uprising was being crushed, they buried the archive in milk churns and metal boxes under a Jewish school. Nearly every member of Oneg Shabbat was murdered, and only some of the archive was found after the war. Today, these 30,000 documents form the basis of our knowledge about the Warsaw ghetto and the Holocaust in Poland.

The roots of the German culture of remembrance are also found in Potsdam, where the Allied forces met in 1945 and made a far-reaching decision: all National Socialist symbols on and in public buildings as well as monuments and statues were to be destroyed or removed. Today, statues and buildings from the Nazi period still populate the public space, and all swastikas and busts of Hitler, with few exceptions, have been removed.

After the war, survivors in displaced persons camps formed historical commissions in the camps. They conducted interviews and collected documents and statements from other survivors. Their work was designed to form the basis for the upcoming war criminal trials of Nazi officials. Other survivors founded international committees which, each year, brought back survivors from throughout Europe to the sites of the former concentration and extermination camps to commemorate the dead and ensure the atrocities would not be forgotten. Other survivors wrote poems, novels, and memoirs about their experiences and published them, often independently, in Paris, Buenos Aires, Madrid, or Jerusalem—some texts were never translated into German, some were translated decades later. Across these

places lie the roots of the German culture of remembrance, as well as in the many local initiatives that, for eighty years, have demanded recognition of the murder of Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, as well as chronically ill and disabled persons during the Holocaust, acknowledgement of these crimes, the payment of compensation, and the establishment of documentary centres, museums, and monuments.

The foundations of the German memory culture also lie in the huge imaginary library of books on National Socialism and its crimes, which includes books in many languages throughout the world. Today, the obstacles that numerous authors had to overcome have largely been forgotten. One of these authors was Raul Hilberg, who fled Austria for the United States to escape the Nazis, and later helped liberate the Dachau concentration camp as an American GI. Hilberg brought back countless files documenting the crimes to the United States. In 1954, he completed work on his extensive study *The Destruction of the European Jews*, which to this day is considered a standard work of Holocaust research. However, Hilberg couldn't find a publisher, and it was only with the help of a private donor that he was able to afford a small print run. Yad Vashem, Israel's official memorial institution, declined the manuscript, on the grounds of the controversial subject of the Jewish councils and their forced collaboration with the

oppressors, and even the German publisher that originally bought the rights decided against publication. Other German publishing companies refused to release the book after experts from the Munich Institute for Contemporary History repeatedly spoke out against it, first in the 1960s and again in the early 1980s. It was only in 1982 that the German translation, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden*, was released by a small publisher in Berlin, for the stiff price of 128 Marks.

These numerous heterogeneous and transnational projects formed the structure of what is known today as the special German form of Holocaust memory. During the 1980s and 1990s, books and films about the Holocaust, as well as conversations with survivors, reached a large public for the first time. Furthermore, in 1999, with the official concept for the sites of remembrance by the federal government, the basis was laid for the state sponsorship of memory institutions. At the time, British historian Timothy Garton Ash declared the German approach to its Nazi past—half ironically, half in admiration—as ‘deutsche DIN-Norm des Gedenkens’ (German DIN standard for remembrance) to be the standard for remembrance.<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, German institutions were repeatedly described as exemplary models of remembrance by historians and curators across the globe, both in terms of content and architecture—for example, as reflected in the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, located in the southern United States, a private institution dedicated to remembering the lynchings that continued into the 1950s. Over the past decade, US journalists and authors have travelled to Germany to observe the different forms of remembrance first-hand. Despite the general approval, visitors also expressed criticism of gaps in German remembrance, particularly regarding its colonial history, as well as the failure to pass on the memory of National Socialism within the families of the perpetrators and followers.

This transatlantic exchange came at an important moment for the United States. The gaps in

1 See: Timothy Garton Ash, ‘Vier Wege zur Wahrheit: Eine Zwischenbilanz’, *Die Zeit*, 3 October 1997, 44, [www.zeit.de/1997/41/Vier\\_Wege\\_zur\\_Wahrheit](https://www.zeit.de/1997/41/Vier_Wege_zur_Wahrheit).

the country's own history needed to be filled, namely in regards to the Indigenous population, African Americans, and Latino immigrants. Initiatives such as the *New York Times's* '1619 Project', which began in 2019, aimed to broaden American history with new narratives and shared national myths. The research initiative set the date of the beginning of the country's settlement at 1619, the year the first ship carrying enslaved Africans reached the American coast, one year before the arrival of the Mayflower carrying pilgrims from England. The project generated a great deal of enthusiasm in the US but was subject to an almost immediate backlash, as a white-nationalist and racist counter-narrative was promoted by Donald Trump and his constituents. Since then, right-wing revisionist views of history have been strengthened while books that explore uncomfortable, less heroic aspects of the American past have been questioned and banned in droves. Although the MAGA movement cannot deny the history of slavery and structural racism, it nevertheless attempts to absolve today's generations of any responsibility. This attitude is especially apparent in short videos directed at children made by the Prager University Foundation—PragerU for short—an NGO, not a university, as the name would suggest. These animations on American history are extremely popular in conservative circles. Themes such as the genocide of Native Americans, the history of slavery, or structural racism are addressed as two white children time-travel through history. On one of their journeys, the children meet Black educator Booker T. Washington, who founded a school and university at the end of the nineteenth century. Washington speaks to the children about the racism and the restrictions he experienced, to which the children express regret and apologize. The educator responds, almost outraged, that they are not to blame. He says, 'Future

generations are never responsible for the sins of the past’—which is historically false, since there is no record of him uttering this phrase. In this image of history, the crimes against the Native populations, African Americans, and other minorities—along with ongoing racism—are merely a sad circumstance for which no one is responsible.

The extent of America’s struggles over the interpretation of their own history is reflected in the bans introduced during Trump’s second administration, which views the historical narratives of minorities, women, and queer people with suspicion while withdrawing public funding from institutions that are considered ‘woke’ or too liberal. This revisionist political history, and its influence on the world’s most important university system, will also affect Europe, and Germany in particular. In January 2025, in a conversation with AfD politician Alice Weidel, Elon Musk declared that there was too much focus on past guilt in Germany, and that one finally had to look forward. One month later, American vice president J. D. Vance employed a similar argument at the Munich Security Conference. Enough of the firewalls, he declared, Germany should finally cooperate with the far right—a statement he made a day after visiting the Dachau concentration camp. Vance follows the strategies of the far right in the US, who repeatedly turn the concept of freedom on its head. He declared that Europeans are suppressing freedom of speech when they criminalize hate speech and smear campaigns on social media. In 2015, Vance’s predecessor Mike Pence, when he was still governor of Indiana, passed a law called the ‘Religious Freedom Bill’, which allows state residents to discriminate on religious grounds if it corresponds with their religious convictions—for example, not serve a gay customer because homosexuality offends one’s own (evangelical) convictions. Freedom of speech in the United States has been reinterpreted by the right through a massive cultural struggle. More recently, Hitler salutes, coats imitating SS uniforms, and other forms of appreciation for the aesthetics and policies Nazi Germany have repeatedly become a marker of this shift. American interventions in the 2025 German election campaign, as well as

in the local culture of remembrance, have caused considerable irritation in Germany. The goal of the authoritarian MAGA movement is the end of American democracy and all forms of equality, including acknowledging the historical responsibility of the perpetrators of past crimes and atrocities. Many aspects of German remembrance culture are a thorn in their side. Holocaust survivor Max Mannheimer repeatedly stated the following in his continuous appeal to young people in Germany: ‘You are not to blame for what happened, but you have the responsibility to ensure that it never happens again’—a sentence that many schools have adopted as their motto. This form of historical responsibility corresponds to what Musk disparagingly terms ‘past guilt’.

The deterioration of transatlantic relations is a sign that learning from the experiences of the twentieth century is no longer a priority. Also in Europe, the central gains following the catastrophe of the Second World War—such as the general right to asylum or human dignity as formulated in Germany’s *Grundgesetz*, or Constitution—are increasingly being questioned. In a 2023 report by the German federal government on asylum and migration policy, human dignity appears only once—namely, in the title: ‘Humanität und Ordnung’ (Humanity and Order). A common European asylum policy now calls for camps to be constructed at Europe’s external borders to prevent people in need, including children and adolescents, from coming to us for help. Insecure third countries, such as Rwanda or Uganda, are repeatedly discussed as sites for receiving refugees. For Vienna-based migration researcher Judith Kohlenberger, this is no surprise. She writes that a belt of violence already

surrounds Europe—a violence and harshness directed against those seeking protection, slowly advancing, step by step, from the borders into the heart of European societies, where it spreads.<sup>2</sup>

Today, more and more people live in Germany whose families experienced the Second World War in another part of Europe or the world. There are people in Germany who have survived other wars or have fled them, who bring memories from other countries, and people whose families have experienced German crimes in other places, such as Namibia or Tanzania. And not least, there are people living in Germany whose relatives or friends are victims of right-wing extremist or anti-Semitic terror—a direct continuation of National Socialism. In recent years, this complex collective of remembrance has experienced many splits and breaks. The federal government's 'Framework Concept on Remembrance Culture' (2024) has once again highlighted these gaps—particularly in the histories of migration, colonialism, and democracy. However, its shortcomings have led to a loss of trust in many communities. Nevertheless, it is precisely the experiences of transnational and transcultural commemorative work that can help Holocaust remembrance build the necessary alliances. At a time when only individual survivors speak out publicly, their texts and testimonies should be given greater weight. Lessons in humanity and universalism—as well as in optimism and clarity—are urgently needed.

*Translated from German by Colin Shepherd*

2 'Die Gewalt an den Grenzen', *Der Pragmaticus* (27 March 2024), [www.derpragmaticus.com/r/asyl-demokratie](https://www.derpragmaticus.com/r/asyl-demokratie).