

Report on the ifa themed trip "Germany's approach to the history of the 20th century" in October 2023 (Berlin / Potsdam)

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Culture of remembrance – that may sound a bit abstract at first. However, on closer inspection it becomes clear that remembrance culture plays a role in many conflicts, just as debates on the politics of memory often intensify in times of crises.

Under pressure

The state of debates on the politics of remembrance in Germany

In the context of 20th century history in particular, German society provides ample reason to reflect on the culture and policy of remembrance. At first glance, this may appear to be an academic, even abstract endeavour. However, the topical relevance of this subject area is revealed on closer inspection. A country's constitution, self-image and level of development in civil society are reflected more directly and vividly in the political sounding board of remembrance than almost anywhere else. From monuments to school curricula and foreign policy: our own past and the question of how and whether we are even willing to face up to it shape our present. After all, a culture of remembrance is just that: a living culture. And politics of remembrance is, well, politics. Debates about the politics of remembrance are explosive in domestic politics. They also have an impact on foreign policy decisions. Sadly, this can currently be seen in the recent outbreak of war in Israel and the Gaza Strip.

How Germany deals with its 20th century history was once again the subject of a delegation trip organised by ifa (*Institute for Foreign Relations*) on behalf of the Federal Foreign Office in 2023. During an intensive one-week programme, journalists, education experts, historians, memorial site staff and museum experts from several countries (India, Belarus, Hungary, the USA, Colombia, Japan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece, Estonia, Romania, Brazil, Poland and Namibia) came into contact with stakeholders from civil society and politics. They were guests at the Federal Foreign Office and Bundestag, met historians, sociologists and cultural scientists, spoke

to people in charge of organisations such as the Federal Agency for Civic Education, the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ Foundation) and the Berlin Humboldt Forum, met activists and education experts, and visited museums and memorial sites. A complex endeavour which, in addition to remembrance of the National Socialist dictatorship, also included remembrance of the colonial era and the division of Germany in order to provide as broad an impression as possible of the current state of debates on the politics of remembrance in Germany.

What is the current status? It's hard to say in one sentence – but interestingly enough, it seemed a bit more possible about two decades ago. Compared to today, there was greater social consensus and the foreign policy situation was clearer. There were fewer conflicts of a domestic political nature. At that time, Germany had, to a certain extent, brought a process of coming to terms with National Socialism to visible fruition, which had taken several decades. To put it simply, and without going into the forty-year division of the country into two different remembrance cultures in more detail, the country had gone through the following stages, as Prof. Jakob Eder from the Barenboim-Said Akademie explained in his introductory lecture: silence and taboo (1950s), coming to terms with the past on a personal level (1960s), abstraction (1970s), finally confrontation and critical examination (1980s to 1990s) and the subsequent institutionalisation of remembrance (1990s to 2000s). With it having taken generations for Germany to face up to its history head-on, the country had become an internationally recognised role model in many respects. The culture of remembrance in Germany was supported by the broadest possible social consensus and there were attempts by German politicians to “Europeanise” the domestic German consensus and its anti-totalitarian culture of remembrance beyond national borders.

Rejuvenation and pluralisation

Given this aforementioned consensus on the politics of remembrance, many inside and outside Germany long believed the country to be immune to right-wing populist movements. An illusion, as we know today. A lot has happened in terms of the politics of remembrance. A generational shift is taking place among mediators and addressees, and among contemporary witnesses in any case. The rejuvenation and pluralisation of the German culture of remembrance is particularly evident in the increased critical examination of German colonial history.

This is logical and good. After all, as Prof. Dr Uffa Jensen from the Centre for Research on Antisemitism at TU Berlin emphasised, German society has changed considerably and continues to do so. More than 20 million Germans either have a migrant background themselves or a migrant family history. This brings with it major challenges in terms of politics of remembrance. These Germans find themselves expected to honour the memory of something that has, at best, only an indirect connection with their own family history. They are understandably free of guilt. Instead of being part of a nation of perpetrators, many of them were themselves part of groups of victims at the time.

That is why new approaches are needed, says Uffa Jensen. There is still a need for discussion on the question of whether and how the Holocaust can be related to colonialism. Would this downplay the Holocaust? Or could this contextualisation possibly be used to build understanding and to address a previously unreachable target group? During the discussion with the members of the Bundestag Committee on Cultural and Media Affairs (responsible for the topic of remembrance culture at the national level), it was also clearly emphasised that the integration of refugees and various communities into cultures of remembrance in Germany is currently the key task in this area.

Culture of remembrance in times of crisis

However, the culture of remembrance is not just changing, it also often comes under pressure. It can easily become a bone of contention in ideological trench warfare. The current debates are increasingly controversial. It is no coincidence that this development coincides with the current political crises coming at us at ever shorter intervals. At the Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ Foundation), Dr Ralf Possekel, Head of the Foundation's "Funding and Activities" department, explicitly pointed out that the active engagement of societies with their past is not an everyday occurrence, nor is it the rule, but rather the exception. However, their relevance becomes particularly apparent in times of crisis. On the one hand, debates on the politics of remembrance can easily be emotionalised and instrumentalised in times of crisis. On the other hand, crises often bring hidden conflicts back to the fore.

There has been no shortage of crises in the recent past: after the financial crisis hit the global economy in 2008, it was followed by the ongoing “refugee crisis”, initially as a result of the Syrian civil war, then the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and, most recently, the war in Israel and the Gaza Strip. As if this were not enough, climate change hangs over all these crises like a sword of Damocles. During this period, political discourse became more irreconcilable and the division in society intensified. Individual milieus are increasingly isolating themselves in social media bubbles. Ideal conditions for the rise of new, mostly populist parties such as the AfD, which has quickly become a highly visible player in the German political party landscape and showed itself as having a penchant for a particular kind of historical revisionism.

Civil society in distress

The result (not only in Germany) is a fundamental change in self-perception. According to Prof. Jakob Eder from the Barenboim-Said Akademie, for a long time, the German culture of remembrance was interpreted as an expression of a successful transformation from its National Socialist and Communist past into a nation of dyed in the wool democrats. However, concerns about the rise of populists and autocratic ideas are causing this self-assurance to become fragile. And so we can conclude that a self-reflective, critical remembrance culture crisis inevitably goes hand in hand with a crisis of democracy.

This connection is logical and the themed tour’s diverse programme was in some ways the best proof of this. In Germany, the culture of remembrance is actively and positively shaped by civil society, a large number of associations, different actors and organisations. However, a functioning civil society needs functioning democratic structures. If democracy, and with it civil society, falls into hard times, then the politics of remembrance will also find themselves in sorry state. Because a culture of remembrance can then, conversely, no longer develop in an up-to-date, pluralistic and integrative way.

Instrumentalisation of historical narratives

The consequences of such erosion in democracy for the politics of memory can be observed in many countries. In dictatorships and autocracies, the views of history are virtually owned by the state anyway and are instrumentalised in line with the respective political agenda. But historical

narratives are also contested subjects in democratic states and can be reinterpreted and misused for ideological reasons. In the USA, for example, school curricula are being cleansed of critical statements on slavery or racism, and in the EU member state of Poland, a law even came into force that criminalised statements on the involvement of Poles in the Holocaust – a muzzle that was placed even on renowned historians.

Something like this may still be inconceivable in Germany right now, but here, too, a shift can be seen towards more contentious times. The expansion of the breadth of discourse by actors from the far-right of the political spectrum to include things previously unimaginable, funding cuts for educational institutions, theatres that have to fear budget cuts as punishment for undesired productions – all these are omens of a concerning change that will persist if political countermeasures are not taken. Janusz Reiter, former Polish Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany and Chairman of the Board of the Warsaw *Centre for International Relations*, put it this way: *“You have to take care of history, in order to prevent it from being instrumentalised.”*

Remembering – a task for the future

This leads to some final thoughts which the programme participants returned to their home countries with. Each of these countries faces its own challenges in terms of their politics of remembrance. They could therefore all benefit directly from the experience that Germany has gained in this area. “I realised that dealing with history in this way can only take place in a democracy – and how fragile our democracy is,” said Asim Mujkić, professor at the University of Sarajevo, for example. “Approaching history from the perspective of the perpetrator nation is completely different to working with survivors – that’s what I do in the USA and I’ve learnt a lot for this work,” said Amanda Friedeman from the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, summing up her experience in the programme. Despite, or perhaps because of, political uncertainties in many parts of the world, many countries currently seem to be looking to Germany when it comes to issues of the politics of remembrance, said Greek journalist Aikaterini Oikonomakou. And just as Fumiko Ishioka, Director of the Tokyo Holocaust Education Research Center said, this trip made all participants understand “that remembrance culture is a never-ending process”.

This insight was perhaps the important quintessence of a thematically tightly knit programme. Achieving a great deal is of little use if dealing with the topic is paralysed or if the culture of remembrance petrifies into ritualised commemoration. Germany has a remarkable number of memorial sites, places of remembrance and educational centres, in short: a remarkable culture of remembrance, stated Prof. Uffa Jensen during a round table discussion at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History Potsdam. But it is *'under attack'* and must actively be kept alive. Dr Robert Klinke, Special Representative of the Federal Foreign Office for Relations with Jewish Organisations, Issues Relating to Antisemitism, International Sinti and Roma Affairs, and Holocaust Remembrance, gave an indication of how this could best be achieved: "Remembrance culture does not focus on the past, but on what it means for the individual *today*." Facing up to the past is the *only* way to come to terms with it, says Klinke.

But a living, pluralistic and democratic culture of remembrance is much more than that: it is the only way to create a decent future that is worth living.

The author and journalist Sebastian Blottner, born in Berlin in 1976, grew up in the Prenzlauer Berg district. He studied history and musicology at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and cultural journalism at the Berlin University of the Arts. As part of the ifa CrossCulture programme, he spent several months in Cairo/Egypt in 2007. He also works as a city guide for Berlin and Potsdam.

The themed trip takes place as part of the Visitors Programme of the Federal Republic of Germany at the invitation of the Federal Foreign Office.