

Contact:

EVZ Foundation
Head of Public Relations
Kathrin Wiermer

Friedrichstraße 200
10117 Berlin
Tel. +49 (0)30 25 92 97-24
Fax +49 (0)30 25 92 97-11
wiermer@stiftung-evz.de
www.stiftung-evz.de
[@evzfoundation](https://www.instagram.com/evzfoundation)

PRESS RELEASE

EMBARGO: Tuesday, 13/02/2018, 12:00 noon

Deceptive memories – How Germany remembers the period of National Socialism

A study of the EVZ Foundation and the University of Bielefeld examines the status quo of Germany's culture of remembrance

Berlin, February 13, 2018 – Memories of World War II, as before, are strongly shaped by family stories. According to the results of a representative study from the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at the University of Bielefeld, the number of helpers in the narratives is just as high as the number of perpetrators. The study with the title "MEMO Deutschland – Multidimensionaler Erinnerungsmonitor" was funded by the Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future" (EVZ).

Family narratives: As many perpetrator as helper stories

In their telephone interviews the researchers asked over 1,000 people about their opinion on perpetrators, victims and helpers during World War II. Only 17.6 % of those surveyed stated that there were perpetrators active during World War II amongst their forefathers. Around the same number of people (18 %) stated that their forefathers helped potential victims during this time. Just over half of the interviewees (54.4 %) reported that they had victims of World War II amongst their relatives.

"Above all we were interested in what, why, and how people in Germany remember history. There was a special focus on memories of the holocaust, as in light of anti-Semitism and attempts to abuse themes such as war guilt for propaganda purposes, the culture of remembrance is being called into question" stated Professor Dr Andreas Zick, Director of the IKG and head of the study.

Great interest in German history

Well over half of the respondents either had a strong interest (32.5 %) or a very strong interest in German history (27.7 %). The fact that history is taught in the schools is also very important to a clear majority (79.2 %). Two of the most important reasons for history lessons named by respondents was learning about the damage that can be caused by racism (very important: 78.9 %), and preventing the return of National Socialism (very important: 84.3 %). There is a fear amongst respondents that something like the holocaust could be repeated. Just under half of interviewees tended to share this fear (25.6 %) or felt it strongly (21.6 %).

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Claimed “cult of guilt” not empirically substantiated

Zick explains that: “The idea that there is an active ‘cult of guilt’ in Germany does not correspond with the views of the population at all. The respondents remember things in a far more differentiated fashion.” The percentage of people who feel guilty for the holocaust is low: The statement: “Even if I haven’t done anything bad myself, I still feel guilty for the holocaust” is only agreed with by approximately every tenth respondent (tend to agree: 5.9 %; agree with it strongly: 4.5 %).

Visits to historical sites leave the strongest impression

Nearly all of the interviewees learn about National Socialism in school (98.4 %). Amongst the younger respondents, the Internet plays an increasingly important role as a source of information: 94.3 % of the under 30 year olds engage with the theme in this context. However, at the same time, this source of information is not considered to leave a strong impression. The majority of respondents stated that they visited sites of remembrance such as historical sites or memorials. According to the interviewees, it is the visits to sites which remember the annihilation of people under National Socialism which leave the strongest lasting impression.

Dr. Andreas Eberhardt, Chief Executive Officer of the EVZ Foundation: “As a survey ‘MEMO Germany’ offers us the opportunity to identify the narratives and needs of different groups of people in order to respond to social developments. The goal of the EVZ Foundation is to create a vigorous culture of remembrance with innovative forms and fresh approaches. We are on the way to a memorial 4.0.”

About the EVZ Foundation:

The EVZ Foundation was established in 2000, in order to provide compensation for victims of forced labour under National Socialism. Since 2001 the EVZ Foundation has also provided humanitarian assistance for survivors, promoted an engagement with the past and strengthened civil society commitment in Eastern and Central Europe.

More details on the EVZ Foundation’s fields of work as well as background information on the results of the survey, photos, and infographics can be found under www.stiftung-evz.de/presse.

Source: MEMO Germany – a representative survey of 1,000 people between the ages of 16 and 92, the Institute for interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence at the University of Bielefeld and the Foundation “Remembrance, Responsibility and Future”, February 2018.