

PRESS RELEASE

Study on the culture of remembrance: conspiracy myths fuel historical revisionism

- MEMO remembrance monitor examines what German citizens remember about the country's National Socialist past
- MEMO analyzes continuities of the time of National Socialism, conspiracy beliefs, the coronavirus pandemic, and events with links to National Socialism in recent German history
- Scale of forced labor in the time of National Socialism still underestimated

Berlin, Wednesday, May 5, 2021. A differentiated understanding of Germany's National Socialist past can help to oppose tendencies to instrumentalize and relativize history. This is one of the conclusions reached by the "Multidimensional Remembrance Monitor – MEMO Deutschland IV/2021" published by the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at Bielefeld University. MEMO is an annual survey funded by the EVZ Foundation (Remembrance, Responsibility and Future). Because of the revisionist incidents in the context of the so-called "corona demonstrations," the study looked at how the participants responded to comparisons between current events and National Socialism. The results show that, when asked directly, around 90 percent of the respondents disagree that the suffering of the German population during the Covid-19 pandemic can be compared with that of people during the time of National Socialism.

At the same time, the results show that those respondents who have a stronger belief in conspiracy myths are less well-informed about history and are more likely to view the time of National Socialism through the lens of revisionist perspectives. In doing so, they fuel distorted perceptions of history, particularly when it comes to questions of perpetration and victimhood during National Socialism. While many respondents regard the culture of remembering the victims of National Socialism as important and believe that they themselves are well informed, the results highlight gaps in their actual knowledge of history and awareness of the continuities of hostile attitudes in today's society.

Prof. Dr. Andreas Zick, Head of the Institute for Interdisciplinary Research on Conflict and Violence (IKG) at Bielefeld University: "The conspiracy myths that are currently being circulated by those who deny coronavirus and other groups present a new challenge for the culture of remembrance and commemoration. MEMO shows that people who believe in conspiracies are more likely to absolve the population during the time of National Socialism of responsibility, equate the suffering of the victims of National Socialism with that of the perpetrators, and question the persecution of Jews."

Germany's National Socialist history – a closed chapter?

Among other aspects, MEMO 2021 examined events since 1945 that the respondents saw as having a link to the history of National Socialism. One in five (20 percent) responded to this question by citing acts of terror committed by right-wing extremists, such as the attacks carried out by the National Socialist Underground (NSU) or the attack in Hanau last year. However, the largest share of the respondents (46 percent) did not respond to the question about events with a link to National Socialism and did not believe there were any such connections.

“Our studies continually paint a picture of a society that is ‘historically aware,’ but this picture does not always hold up when we ask detailed questions. This applies both to the respondents’ specific knowledge regarding the time of National Socialism as well as their awareness of continuities of National Socialist attitudes. Our ‘historical awareness’ should not stop at 1945 but must rather extend to our recent past and the present if we want to learn from history,” says **Michael Papendick, Project Coordinator, Bielefeld University**.

The scale of forced labor in the time of National Socialism still underestimated

The respondents’ estimate of the number of forced laborers in National Socialist Germany – around four million – was considerably less than the figure provided by historical estimates, which conclude that there were over 13 million forced laborers at the time. Over 80 percent of respondents said their ancestors did not have forced laborers working at their companies, in their households, or on their farms.

Dr. Andrea Despot, Chief Executive Officer of the EVZ Foundation, says: “Forced labor was essentially pervasive and ubiquitous. Work represented a methodical means of exploitation and extermination – in factory halls as well as on farms or in private households. Remembering the forced laborers, keeping the memory of these injustices and their suffering alive, and fostering social participation among the survivors, who are now of advanced age – this is what the EVZ Foundation stands for.”

New ways of critically examining National Socialist injustices

Knowledge of National Socialist injustices is not an end in itself; this knowledge fosters cohesion within society today and helps to combat historical revisionism. Besides established methods of conveying this history – such as non-fiction books, films, and memorial sites – new digital means of access and learning methods are also being developed. To this end, MEMO 2021 also looked at how open the respondents were to using digital offers that share knowledge on the topic of National Socialism. Younger participants expressed greater interest in new forms of critically examining this history. The respondents were open to participating in a conversation with “digital contemporary witnesses” (40 percent), critically examining the time of National Socialism by listening to podcasts (27 percent), or making virtual visits to concentration camp memorial sites (26 percent). A comparatively high percentage of the participants said they would not use new approaches; this finding was consistent across all the methods included in the survey. “Digital, yes – but when it comes to remembering in a way that evokes understanding and empathy, there is no perfect solution. The results also make it clear to us that we have a duty to use our funding as a means of gauging how innovation, education methods, and mediating these approaches can be combined – across different learning methods, age groups, and countries,” **says Dr. Andrea Despot, summarizing the results.** “In light of the MEMO results, it is all the more important that we have a living culture of remembrance that sparks curiosity, creates links, and prompts as many people in our society as possible to take active steps to critically examine historical knowledge.”

About MEMO

In MEMO 2021, 1,000 randomly selected individuals were surveyed by phone from December 2020 to January 2021. The respondents were aged 16 to 87 years old. MEMO Germany provides empirical documentation of the culture of remembrance in the German

population and has been conducted in the form of an annual representative survey since 2017 as a means of reflecting how our remembrance is changing.

About the EVZ Foundation

The Foundation Remembrance, Responsibility and Future (EVZ) is an expression of political and moral responsibility for Nazi injustices on the part of the state, the private sector, and society. As a foundation under public law, the EVZ Foundation is currently active in the following program categories: critical examination of history, working for human rights, and commitment to the victims of National Socialism. The Foundation provides funding to some 300 projects in 20 countries every year.

About the IKG

Founded in 1996 with the mandate to address a gap in interdisciplinary conflict and violence research, today, the Institute for Interdisciplinary Conflict and Violence Research (IKG) constitutes one of the leading German academic institutes in this field. Located in Bielefeld, IKG provides an overarching structure for interdisciplinary theory development and empirical research on politically and socially relevant phenomena of conflict and violence and their implications for social cohesion, participation, democracy, and peace.

Further information

High-resolution press graphics Extended version of the study in German and English
Short version of the study (Focus Report) in German, English, and Russian
www.stiftung-evz.de/memo

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