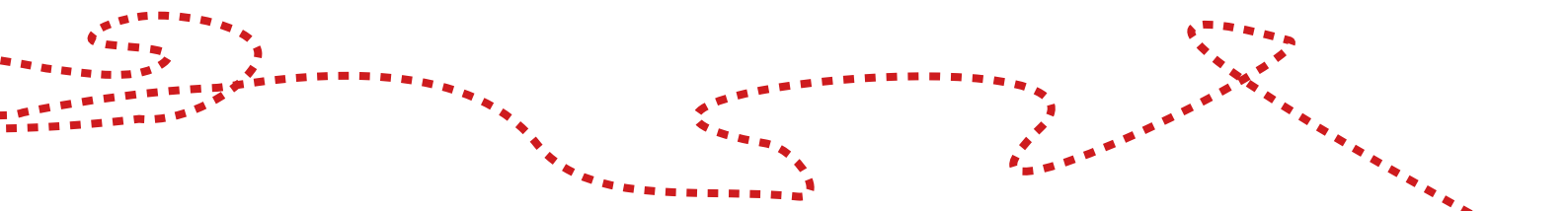




Four months after the racially motivated Hanau shooting this mural was unveiled at Frankfurt's Friedensbrücke to commemorate the victims. | Photo: Lea Deborah Scheu, Frankfurt, 19.02.2022.

Three Years Since Hanau: How Inclusive is Germany's Contemporary Remembrance Culture?

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Three Years Since Hanau

How Inclusive is Germany's Contemporary Remembrance Culture?

The murder of nine people with migrant biographies¹ in an attack in Hanau on 19 February 2020 was yet another act of racist violence perpetrated by right-wing extremists in Germany. What role does contemporary racist violence play in the collective memory? Debates on making Germany's remembrance culture more inclusive have so far mostly focused on the way it confronts the country's Nazi past and historical responsibility in today's postmigrant society. As we remember the victims of the Hanau attack, it becomes all the more evident that an inclusive remembrance culture is needed to address the continuities of far-right violence.

by Sabine Mannitz, Lea Deborah Scheu & Isabelle Stephanblome

Germany's Remembrance Culture – Aims and Challenges

Germany's public culture of remembrance is focused first and foremost on remembering the victims of National Socialism.² International observers tend to regard this as an example of dealing with the past in a way that prevents nationalist political violence from resurfacing.³ In the same vein, cultural scientist Aleida Assmann points out that in light of the country's history, the most important thing is for Germans to remember as a collective and that this includes confronting the transgressions and crimes that are part of their own history.⁴ This aim of a distinctive historical and moral education⁵ is at the core of the German remembrance culture and it takes many forms. Monuments or memorial events, for example, are dedicated to specific events or groups of victims and serve a variety of purposes, including reconciliation or reparation. It is this very focus that writer Max Czollek is critical of. He bemoans that, to date, Germany's culture of remembrance has been marked by a desire to "become good again" instead of furthering genuine atonement. He stresses that spaces of inconsolability are needed, where it should be self-evident that nothing will ever be alright again.⁶

Cultures of remembrance

Cultures of remembrance comprise public manifestations of a society's collective memory of its past. They include stories, symbols, memorial sites and practices, and place historical narratives into a context that fosters a sense of community and identity.

The collective responsibility to "never again" allow dehumanizing violence is rooted in Germany's past yet directed at the present and the future, and must therefore reflect social realities. To ensure that commemorative practices are not just confined to memorial sites and reduced to rituals, there needs to be a continuous process of re-evaluation and consciousness-raising. Given the repeated calls for an end to the practice of keeping memories of Nazi crimes alive – for this chapter to be closed and to move

on – during the *Historikerstreit* (a dispute between historians in the 1980s) or, more recently, by members of the far-right AFD party, this necessity seems all the more pertinent. Not least in light of these attempts at historical revisionism, remembering is even more crucial.

Germany's transformation into a society shaped by immigration has given rise to debates on various aspects of the existing culture of remembrance, for example how school lessons, which are also aimed at pupils with a migration history who have no connection to the Holocaust, can make the latter a plausible anchor point of German democracy after 1945. Also, in public debates, antisemitism among Muslims has repeatedly been raised as a particular challenge for historical political education in the context of a postmigrant society. Regardless of the (empirically contested) question of whether antisemitism is stronger or takes different forms among Muslims, it undoubtedly remains a problem in German society as a whole, and some resistance to the existing remembrance culture stems from antisemitic positions. The rising influence of right-wing populist and extremist groups and narratives in recent decades⁷ underlines the need to remember the victims of far-right violence. The racist attacks we have seen over the last 30 years must also become a more integral part of Germany's collective memory, enabling us to acknowledge the fact that far-right violence is not a historical phenomenon but rather a continuity. Important examples of racist attacks seen in Germany throughout the 1990s are the xenophobic riots in Hoyerswerda and Rostock-Lichtenhagen, arson attacks in Mölln and Solingen, and a series of murders committed by the far-right National Socialist Underground (NSU) terrorist group, as well as fatal attacks in Munich, Kassel, Halle and Hanau. In all these cases the relatives of the victims have been engaging in remembrance work along with civic associations. What is still lacking, however, is the longer lasting integration of these histories of violence into German remembrance culture.

Selected incidents of racist violence since the 1990s

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| 1991 Hoyerswerda: Riots against asylum seekers and contract laborers (30 injured) |
| 1991 Hünxe: Arson attack against asylum seekers (1 injured) |
| 1992 Rostock-Lichtenhagen: Riots against asylum seekers and contract laborers (173 injured police officers) |
| 1992 Mölln: Arson attack against Turkish families (3 dead, 9 injured) |
| 1993 Solingen: Arson attack against Turkish families (5 dead, 17 injured) |
| 1994 Magdeburg: Riots against BIPoCs (6 injured) |
| 1999 Guben: Riots against asylum seekers (1 dead, 1 injured) |
| 2000–2008: Serial murders by the National Socialist Underground (NSU) , revealed in 2011 by the right-wing terrorist group itself as investigations on the perpetrators remained absent (9 dead, at least 26 injured) |
| 2009 Dresden: Stabbing of pregnant Muslim woman during an appeals hearing |
| 2016 Munich: Shooting in the Olympia shopping centre targeting people with migrant biographies (9 dead, 16 injured) |
| 2018–2019: Death threats signed “ NSU 2.0 ” sent to various activists, lawyers, journalists, politicians and artists |
| 2019 Kassel: Murder of politician Walter Lübcke who had advocated admission of refugees |
| 2019 Halle: Attack on a kebab restaurant, originally targeting a synagogue (2 dead) |
| 2020 Hanau: Shooting on the street and in a shisha bar, among other places (10 dead, including 9 with migrant biographies, 5 injured) |

Commemorating Racist Violence – Approaches to Creating an Inclusive Remembrance Culture

Far-right political violence and racism are particularly prominent sources of fear and distress among people with a migrant history, who, since German reunification, have seen themselves marginalised even more. And without glorifying social relations prior to 1989/90, Germany has in fact seen an alarming level of hate crime since the 1990s. Even the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA), which has a relatively narrow definition of hate crime, places the number of deaths attributed to far-right violence since 1990 at 109.⁸ That said, the attacks have also pushed the fight against right-wing extremism and racism up the political agenda. As a result, funds have been allocated for research on racism in Germany, making it possible to systematically document continuities of racist violence. One example is the Afrozensus study,⁹ which seeks to capture discrimination experienced by Germans of African origin. Another example is the CLAIM¹⁰ project, a survey of Muslims in Germany on the discrimination they face. Moreover, the manifest far-right violence in Germany has prompted civil society actors and scholars alike to reflect more on blind spots in the culture of remembrance.

The key question is how the experiences of marginalised groups can be included in Germany’s collective memory. The specific focus here might be, for instance, on increasing awareness about Germany’s colonial past and its vic-

tims, about practices and modes of remembering East German identity, or about the contribution former labour immigrants have made to boosting Germany’s economy since the 1960s. Above all, however, an inclusive culture of remembrance would provide an opportunity to identify continuities in right-wing extremist and racist violence. One should not mistake this for the creation of a new, parallel culture of remembrance – this is something that already exists. Instead, the connections between the different strands of violence must be made visible and generally understood. After all, to use Carolin Emcke’s words: “Who we want to be as a society will also be reflected in whether and how a pluralistic narrative may be established that is adaptable over time.”¹¹

Foundations for an inclusive multi-perspectival remembrance culture¹² already exist in Germany. Social media debates and podcast series which relate experiences of belonging and migrant identities to the culture of remembrance provide important forums.¹³ A conference organised by the Anne Frank Educational Centre in collaboration with Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences (UAS) last year discussed how inclusive colonial and Holocaust remembrance can be created against the backdrop of Germany’s history and the current realities of a postmigrant society. At the Young Islam Conference, in turn, participants in the 2022 JIK Talks¹⁴ debated how remembrance culture may better incorporate the diverse experiences of people with



Winning architect design for a memorial for the victims of the racist attack in Hanau on February 19, 2020: “Einschnitt” by Heiko Hünnerkopf (Wertheim). | Photo: Stadt Hanau via presse-service.de

a migrant biography. From an educational perspective, a recently published anthology on “Geschichten im Wandel” (histories in transition)¹⁵ addresses questions of how educational formats can foster postmigrant perspectives as part of the German remembrance culture. Such endeavours by civil society and academia can initiate processes of rethinking. That said, the tendency to “other” victims of racist violence is often discernible in public discourse. Right-wing populism is a persistent challenge in Germany and attempts to remember the victims of racist attacks as “our” victims will undoubtedly raise resistance.

Postmigrant Society

The term postmigrant society describes Germany’s status quo as a de facto country of immigration. Demographic change has led to an increase in people with migrant (family) biographies. However, this change has not become part of the collective imaginary of majority society, and processes of negotiation over representation and recognition can be observed. In migration studies, the term is used as a perspective to analyse hegemonic power relations.

Shared Spaces of Remembrance? – Commemorating the Hanau Shootings

An inclusive culture of remembrance can only be established with the long-term engagement of different societal actors. The right-wing terrorist attack in Hanau can provide further impetus here. It has been three years since the shooting cost nine people with migrant biographies

their lives. The victims’ families founded the *Initiative 19. Februar*,¹⁶ which is dedicated to remembering and re-appraising the attack. A further example of such grassroots engagement is the online remembrance platform *Hanau steht zusammen* (Hanau stands together).¹⁷

Soon after the attack, city mayor Claus Kaminsky announced the erection of a memorial to the victims. Owing to various disputes, however, whether and where such a memorial might be built has yet to be decided.¹⁸ Despite the bid process closing last year, the question of where the memorial might be located is still causing controversy. So far, only small building blocks of remembrance have been laid,¹⁹ with memorial plaques being installed at Hanau’s main cemetery, where three of the nine victims are buried, as well as at two sites of the 2020 attack. In 2022, to mark the occasion of the second anniversary of the murders, the families of the victims (yet again) expressed their wish for a memorial to be erected on the *Marktplatz* (the central city square). The city council, however, favoured *Freiheitsplatz* or *Kanalторplatz* as the site for a planned Centre for Democracy and Diversity where dialogue on how to address the events of 19 February could be continued. The relatives’ reaction to this suggestion was unambiguous: it would be better not to erect a memorial at all if there was no majority for the *Marktplatz*. The fact that all other sites mentioned were rejected speaks volumes, showing that the location is crucial for the symbolic value of a memorial: Both *Freiheitsplatz* and *Kanalторplatz* are located in the centre of Hanau, but they are not the city’s “showroom”, where famous figures are proudly displayed.²⁰

How the Hanau attack becomes represented will be significant for the creation of an inclusive remembrance culture beyond the city itself. In light of the public commitment made by Hanau's mayor, the effort put into the bid process for a memorial and the attention this attracted across Germany, it would be extremely damaging if this initiative failed. Further steps will be needed to facilitate a public dialogue to ensure that the potential memorial does not ultimately reinforce "us-and-them" lines of perception. Internationally, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern exemplified such an inclusive approach when she stressed in her speech on the second anniversary of the Christchurch attack that "[t]hey are us. And because they are us, we, as a nation, mourn them."²¹ Ardern initiated the international Christchurch Call²² to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online, and founded a research centre for preventing and countering violent extremism and to support public dialogue on radicalisation (DPMC).²³ Similarly, in the German case, the opportunity to develop an inclusive memory practice must be seized. Indeed, there are a number of civil society initiatives that are already doing this. In Stuttgart, for instance, memorial plaques for the victims of the Hanau attack are regularly (albeit illegally) installed at the city hall to draw attention to victims of far-right violence.²⁴ Campaigns launched under hashtags such as #SayTheirNames or #HanaulstUeberall aim to raise public awareness about the broader significance. Elsewhere, in places like Rostock-Lichtenhagen, Solingen or Mölln,²⁵ efforts are made to more publicly remember the victims of far-right violence in the 1980s/1990s. A national day of remembrance for victims of racist violence could be instrumental here, as would interweaving this process with the existing culture of remembrance.

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DOI: [10.48809/PRIFTraCePB2301](https://doi.org/10.48809/PRIFTraCePB2301)



About TraCe

What effects do global developments such as technologization and climate change have on political violence? How can political violence be limited or legitimized by international institutions? How is it interpreted and conceptualized? Since April 2022, these questions are addressed by the BMBF-funded regional research center "Transformations of Political Violence" (TraCe), in which five Hessian research institutions work together with a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

More information: <https://www.trace-center.de/en> // https://twitter.com/TraCe_Violence

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This policy brief was written as part of the research project 'Regional Research Center Transformations of Political Violence' [01UG2203A], funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF).

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