

Defying Memory? Tracing the Power of Hegemonic Memory in Everyday Discourse Using the Example of National Socialism in Germany

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Even though history is commonly referred to as the battlefield of the present, certain narratives of memory usually dominate public commemoration (*hegemonic memory*), which are normatively binding and visible to all. How is the power of hegemonic memory determined? How is it reflected in those segments of the population who do not want to remember according to hegemonic readings (*aversive memory*)? Against the background of these questions, we conducted qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with 265 participants in Germany, to analyze how the population today integrates hegemonic memory about National Socialism into everyday discourse and what impact hegemonic memory has on those who do not want to be reminded of the nation's past. The results show that all theoretical manifestations of everyday memory reflect hegemonic memory, even among respondents who reject the hegemonic memory paradigm. While the latter develop narratives of resistance, they are also aware of the consequences of defying hegemonic truths.

Keywords: National Socialism, Holocaust, Third Reich, hegemonic memory, everyday memory, aversive memory, Germany

This article investigates the power of *hegemonic memory* (Molden, 2016), using the example of the National Socialist past in Germany. Since the German unification in 1990, the imperative of remembering the Nazi past has become a German reason of state, a "state-sponsored, public task"² (Knigge, 2010, para. 7; see also Olick, 2003). In this sense, remembrance means *not* only not forgetting but also *actively* working against mnemonic repression and taking responsibility for the past—ultimately with the goal of positively influencing the present and the future through what is referred to as a *negative memory*.

In recent decades, remembrance of National Socialism has, thus, become an institutionalized political practice in the Federal Republic (Gößwald, 2017): Federal funding supports memorial sites that

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commemorate the victims of exclusion, violence, and terror under National Socialism. The history of the "Third Reich" is an obligatory subject of instruction. As a rule, all pupils come into contact with the topic of National Socialism during their school years. There is often talk of a "ritualization" (Assmann, 2016, p. 76) of memory practices, which is expressed in the "signage of the republic with plaques commemorating the atrocities of the National Socialist regime" (Giesecke & Welzer, 2012, p. 20), as well as in regularly recurring commemoration events, such as the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination and concentration camp on January 27, 1945, in the German parliament. Such commemorative rituals are flanked by the media, particularly the German public service broadcasting (e.g., Classen, 2014), but also by various special interest channels, which not only remind their audiences of anniversaries and report on commemorative ceremonies but also take on a central role as remembrance workers themselves with contemporary history series or feature film productions, often keeping the imperative to remember high (e.g., Wegner, 2019).

What presents itself today as a hegemonic consensus in public memory is far more complex when one considers its counterpart, *private memory*, referred to in this article as *everyday memory*. The memory of the lost war, the destruction of German cities and towns, the loss of the Eastern territories, and the expulsions and atrocities committed by the Nazis have always polarized the German population—not only in the postwar years (Rothland, 2008) but also today. Seventy-five years after the end of WWII, half of Germans (53%) are in favor of moving beyond the Nazi past (*Schlussstrich ziehen*), as a representative survey commissioned by the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* revealed in January 2020. According to this survey, 58% believe that Germans bear no more responsibility for National Socialism, dictatorship, wars, and crimes than other countries. More than half of the respondents (56%) agree with the statement that the constant memory of National Socialism prevents Germans from developing a healthy national consciousness, as citizens of other countries have toward their national pasts. Paradoxically, as many as 77% also see it as the Germans' duty to ensure that the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust are not forgotten ("Die Haltung der Deutschen," 2020). Similar results come from other opinion surveys (e.g., Hagemann & Nathanson, 2015; Zick, Rees, Papendick, & Wäschle, 2020).

Against the background of these figures and with reference to the concept of *mnemonic hegemony* (Molden, 2016), this article assumes that no one can "escape" the hegemonic memory that sets the normative standards and is visible to all. However, how does one assess the power of hegemonic memory? Most importantly, what effect does it have on those segments of the population who do not want to be reminded of the nation's war crimes and crimes against humanity, here referred to as *aversive memory* in the sociopsychological sense of an unpleasant stimulus, or at least have ambivalent feelings toward memory?

These questions are important for several reasons. With the rise of the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), there is now an actor in Germany that critically questions and challenges the public memory of WWII (Siebeck, 2017) and can use the momentum of polls such as that of *Die Zeit* for political instrumentalization, even on other issues that touch on but go beyond remembering (e.g., anti-Semitism, migration). The memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust and the way Germans have dealt with this past has also served as a kind of blueprint for the European continent (e.g., Calligaro, 2015). But how effectively can aversive memory serve as a blueprint? In other words, how powerful is memory when the majority of the public does not support it? This question is also relevant for other nations and cultures with a history of crimes against humanity that are looking for an effective commemorative approach to this past.

This article understands memory as discourse (Foucault, 1982a) that is negotiated on different levels (Jäger & Jäger, 2007), including the everyday level (Waldschmidt, Klein, Korte, & Dalman-Eken, 2008). The first part of this article introduces the theoretical concepts (hegemonic and everyday memory), then it explains the methodological approach. In the framework of the present study, we conducted focus group discussions and semistructured guideline-based interviews with 265 participants in Germany between December 2018 and May 2020, to analyze what role National Socialism plays in the everyday discourse of the German population today and, in turn, to evaluate how the public deals with this past, the *hegemonic memory*. The results, presented in thesis form, show that all theoretical manifestations of everyday memory reflect hegemonic memory—even among respondents who reject hegemonic memory about National Socialism. While the latter develop certain resistance narratives, they are also aware of the consequences of defying hegemonic truths.

The Hegemonic “Truth:” National Socialism and the German Nation

Following Michel Foucault (1982a), we assume that everything we know is constructed through discourse. That is, history is not a neutral reality, nor is it “past,” but a battlefield of the present for the discursive construction and interpretation of the past. While in every society, different memories coexist, there are nevertheless certain memory narratives that dominate a discourse, here referred to following Molden (2016) as *hegemonic memory*: “Hegemony is the ability of a dominant group or class to impose their interpretations of reality—or the interpretations that support their interests—as the only thinkable way to view the world” (p. 126). With reference to Foucault, we term this only thinkable way a *regime of truth*. According to the French philosopher, every society has “its own order of truth,” which means that “it accepts certain discourses which it allows to operate as true discourses” (Foucault, 1978, p. 51). Society thereby produces truth under the “predominant control of a few large political and economic apparatuses”; Foucault (1978) explains this production with the “need for truth by both economic production and political power” (p. 52). As a hegemonic instance of reproduction, Molden (2016) adds civil society, “the non-state part of the superstructure that reproduces hegemony through culture and comprises schools and academic institutions, media, artistic production, and so on” (p. 133). All of them “contribute to the consolidation and stabilization of hegemony insofar as they reproduce and actualize conceptions framed in terms of common sense and seemingly unquestionable assumptions dressed up as universal truths” (Molden, 2016, p. 133). Thus, if we want to understand what hegemonic National Socialist memory is, we must examine the discursive practice of these memory (re-)producers.

The significance of the “Third Reich” in the memory of the Germans has been the subject of long and heated debate (e.g., Langenbacher, 2010). The controversy has also repeatedly touched on the question of the German nation (e.g., Piwoni, 2013). In the years after reunification, the republic was able to reach a “basic consensus” that “during the ‘Third Reich’ crimes of unprecedented dimensions were committed on behalf of the state and ‘in the name of the German people’”: Therefore, “it is a matter of course that one should not remember this epoch positively” (Frevert, 2003, p. 6). If one follows the historian Ute Frevert (2003) in this assessment, then *negative memory* is one of the accepted truths in the discourse of memory. Closely linked to the public recognition of historical guilt and responsibility is the *ethical and moral imperative of remembering* National Socialism. Since the 1980s at the latest, forgetting has become synonymous with denial or repression (Assmann, 2016, p. 190; see also Olick, 2003). Above all, *identification with the victims of National Socialism* has become a “remembrance policy norm” (Jureit & Schneider, 2010, p. 10). Among

the truths, however, is also the fact that this "German industrial norm of remembrance" (Timothy Garton Ash, as cited in Assmann, 2016, p. 59) has given rise to the *positive myth* that a comprehensive and exemplary reappraisal has been carried out and that "consequences have been drawn for the political constitution of the present and future" (Rohde, 2019, p. 232). The collective act of recognizing and coming to terms with the past has not only restored normality for Germans but also the "national purification narrative" (Siebeck, 2017, p. 27) itself has become the object of a new *national pride* (Piwoni, 2013). When actors, such as the right-wing party AfD, try to break through these hegemonic truths, they receive instead an "ostentatious exclusion from the German community of memory" (Siebeck, 2017, p. 25).

The hegemonic norms—negative memory, imperative of remembering, positive myth—are engraved in the public discourse of remembrance that schools, media, or cultural organizations teach (e.g., Piwoni, 2013; Wegner, 2019): "Hegemonic memory can be defined as experiences and memories transformed into a knowledge system, as a filtered and normalized canon" (Molden, 2016, p. 136). How are these hegemonic norms reflected in the so-called *non-discursive practices*, among which Foucault includes people's (communicative) actions and self-understanding (see Foucault, 1978, pp. 119–120)? This study of everyday memory discourse must examine these practices more closely.

Everyday Memory Discourse

The discourse of memory consists of various *discursive layers* (Jäger & Jäger, 2007), such as the discursive layer of media, politics, or culture. In each of the layers, memory is negotiated differently, but the hegemonic paradigm penetrates all of them. However, despite the ubiquity of hegemonic memory truths, everyday framing produces qualitatively different knowledge than expert discourse; that is, how people understand Nazi memory does not necessarily correspond to what more effective and powerful producers of "truth" assert. The memory of the broader population includes greater heterogeneity and plurality, conformity but also counter-memories and silent majorities (Molden, 2016).

A few previous studies have noted this discrepancy between public and everyday Nazi memory. For example, although the public discourse of remembrance predominantly commemorates the murdered European Jews, many Germans—even in the younger generations—tend to see themselves as victims of the war or play down Nazi crimes (Zick et al., 2020; Zülsdorf-Kersting, 2007). Welzer, Moller, and Tschuggnall (2002) have demonstrated, in their study of the intergenerational transmission of historical memories, how memories of the Nazi era are passed on in family memory—and how specific acts of the grandparent generation, which are deviant according to today's understanding, are reinterpreted in the stories of the children and grandchildren's generations in such a manner that they stand up to today's norms.

Gerhards, Breuer, and Delius (2017) identified two different patterns of historical interpretation among the population in their study, based on focus group discussions. In what they call the *burden paradigm*, people perceive the public commemoration of National Socialism as "too present" and "an obstacle to positive and unencumbered identification with the German nation," while people who adopt the *learning paradigm* share "the premises of public remembrance of National Socialism" and understand remembrance "as a task for shaping a better present and future" (Gerhards et al., 2017, p. 56).

The public/private memory gap raises the specific concept of *everyday discourse*, which Waldschmidt and colleagues (2008) defined as the “crucial social institution for the structural coupling of subject, knowledge and power” (p. 328). This conception merges Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann’s (1991) sociology of knowledge on the one hand with Foucault’s discourse theory on the other.

With reference to Berger and Luckmann (1991), Waldschmidt and associates (2008) elaborated three characteristics of everyday knowledge: first, its *recipe character* (“recipe knowledge, that is, knowledge limited to pragmatic competence in routine performances”; Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 56); second, its *typification tendency* (the routine formation of taxonomies “to classify the flood of everyday events”); and third, its *individual relevance structures* (which “help to distinguish important from unimportant, to set priorities and preferences, to arrive at value judgements”; Waldschmidt et al., 2008, p. 325). This last aspect is of primary importance to this study. How relevant is the National Socialist past for Germans today? While expert knowledge has a “de-subjectifying effect,” Waldschmidt and cohorts (2008) insist that “everyday knowledge as subjective experiential knowledge has its own legitimizing power” (p. 329). Specifically, “if, for example, the offered foils of subjectification contradict the experiences of everyday life, this can provoke different reactions,” as they go on to explain, including “rejection or aversion, resistance, adaptation or—as a fourth possibility—a creative potential” (Waldschmidt et al., 2008, p. 330).

Again, referring to Berger and Luckmann (1991), they emphasize the importance of contexts of justification, according to which the existence of social institutions and overarching patterns of social order must appear legitimate in everyday life. Put differently, the hegemonic knowledge that objectifies itself in the real world must “prove itself in some way, be recognized as meaningful and useful or prove authority”; in short, it needs “legitimacy” (Waldschmidt et al., 2008, p. 326). For this study, the question of legitimacy concerns above all the objectification of hegemonic Nazi memory in the canonized culture of remembrance, which includes recurring commemorative events, monuments, memorials, media coverage, history lessons in schools, and the like.

Waldschmidt and colleagues (2008) share with Foucault the concept of power and understand *identity* as the process of human *subjectivation*. According to Foucault (1982b), there is no genuine self, but the essence of an individual is made historical. Humans’ becoming *subjects* means that who people are is determined from the outside—by the “relations of production and of signification” (Foucault, 1982b, p. 778) in which humans are placed. For Foucault, human identity is shaped by “disciplinary regimes” (Weir, 2009, p. 535) that penetrate and contain a person’s being and take possession of a person’s soul: “The subject gets absorbed into knowledge and power” (Strozier, 2002, p. 57). Hence, when we ask ourselves who we are, we only seemingly answer this question as “free” individuals because we reproduce the internalized power relations in talking and thinking about ourselves (Foucault, 2019, p. 145). The powerful hegemonic knowledge of discourse is thus reflected in the “immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him” (Foucault, 1982b, p. 781). This means that even if an individual rejects a hegemonic truth about the National Socialist past, one cannot completely close oneself off from it: “Everyday life is pre-structured by the effects of power; the practices of subject constitution are directed along certain lines” (Waldschmidt et al., 2008, p. 328).

Having said that, we have shown above that hegemonic memory narratives always coexist with other narratives in society. "The symmetry between objective and subjective reality cannot be complete," as Berger and Luckmann (1991) pointed out: "There is always more objective reality 'available' than is actually internalized in any individual consciousness, simply because the contents of socialization are determined by the social distribution of knowledge" (pp. 153–154). Foucault was also looking for histories of struggle and opposition (Waldschmidt et al., 2008, p. 328) and thus for pasts that were resistant in two ways: "On the one hand, they are histories of resistance against hegemonic domination; on the other, they contain historical perceptions that resist their incorporation into the grand narratives of the ruling classes" (Molden, 2016, p. 136).

How do ordinary people resist the hegemonic Nazi memory? What narratives can be found in the population that are negated in the hegemonic discourse? Generally speaking, how do the people position themselves vis-à-vis the normative remembrance mandate inscribed in the public discourse of established knowledge (re-)producers, such as the media, cultural, and educational systems? How are the subjective and objective realities of memory legitimized?

Research Design

Based on the theoretical considerations of hegemonic and everyday memory, this study developed a category system (Table 1) that served as the basis for designing the semistructured guidelines for the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Between December 2018 and May 2020, we conducted 36 group discussions with 193 participants and 78 guideline-based interviews with individual respondents for a total of 271 people who took part in this study.³ In recruiting the participants and respondents, we followed the principle of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 2017): The variables *gender*, *generational affiliation*, *origin* (city/country, federal state, East/West Germany, ethnicity), and *formal education* (school leaving certificate/university degree) were varied several times until we gained a certain picture of the discourse communities. Because we assumed that the view of the public discourse of memory would be strongly related to basic political attitudes, we also sought study participants from left-wing and right-wing political milieus. In addition to these sociodemographic data, we asked for the participants' family and professional background.

Memory can be reconstructed from the perspective of eyewitnesses, who have primary experiences, or from the perspective of subsequent generations (descendants), who have handed-down knowledge, which is fed by eyewitness accounts (such as those of grandparents), but also by other sources (school, media, culture). Although there are a few eyewitnesses of the Nazi era in the sample of this study, the speaker position—that is, the position from which someone judges about the past (as an eyewitness or descendant)—is neglected in the interpretation of the data. The focus of this study is on the majority of the German population, who do not have an active experience of the National Socialist era, whose horizon of experience and judgment, therefore, does not include the period of National Socialism itself, and who have primarily experienced the public handling of the historical legacy.

³ The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly to protect the privacy of the participants. Anonymized data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Table 1. Theory-Based Category System.

Category	Everyday memory discourse	Linguistic constructions	Subject
Knowledge form	What typical forms of knowledge (recipe knowledge/typification) are manifested in the discussion of the past?	On what basis are statements made (such as biographical accounts, "everyday wisdom," advice, justification, etc.)?	Subjectification/self-positioning: How does memory shape the subject? How does the subject shape memory
Relevance structure	What (individual/social) relevance does the memory of the National Socialist past have in everyday life?	What concepts are used?	(resistance/opposition)? Where can the effects of hegemonic memory be found?

Source: Own illustration (based on Waldschmidt et al., 2008, p. 334).

The most important criterion for participation was socialization. "Being German" in this study means having attended at least secondary school in Germany and being familiar with the national discourse of remembrance. Of 271 participants, this standard applied to 265 people who were included in the analysis and evaluation (Table 2). Generally, four to six respondents, who did not know each other (with a few exceptions), took part in each group discussion. For test purposes, we conducted a few group discussions with students who are also included in this analysis and account for the relatively high number of young participants from the academic milieu.

Table 2. Study Participants in the Focus Group Discussions and Interviews (n = 265).

	Age				Total
	18–30 years	31–50 years	51–70 years	>70 years	
Women	81	16	45	13	155
Men	36	25	37	12	110
school education only*	6	17	43	14	80
academic education**	111	24	39	11	185
West Germany***	79	25	47	15	166
East Germany***	28	13	34	10	85
Migratory background****	10	3	1	–	14
Total	117	41	82	25	265

Notes. * Attendance at secondary school, apprenticeship, or vocational training (with or without a degree)

** Attendance at a university (with or without a degree)

*** Origin by place of birth (if outside Germany, the parental home counts); pre-1945 births: residence after 1945 (East/West) is decisive

**** Parents with migration background/place of birth outside Germany

All discussions were recorded and fully transcribed. The study participants were informed in advance about data security, the nature and objectives of the study, and the confidential treatment of their personal data. For the data evaluation and interpretation, we used the technique of *close reading* (i.e., "the

mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings"; Brummett, 2018, p. 28), using both a top-down, theory-driven approach (deductive) and a bottom-up approach (inductive). After reading the transcripts several times, we assigned the participants' statements to the theoretical categories (Figure 1) in list form. We then condensed and concretized the results into several core theses. Next, we looked for commonalities and differences among the study participants to identify discourse communities and to find explanatory factors for why respondents were similar or different in their memory views.

Results: The National Socialist Past in Everyday Discourse—Six Theses

Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research cannot provide information about relative frequency distributions in the population because the research participants were not selected according to criteria of representativeness. Nevertheless, theoretical sampling allows for the identification and description of trends and patterns in everyday discourse. The results section uses anchor quotations from the interview transcripts, for which the principle of *pars pro toto* applies (i.e., the one quotation exemplifies the perspective of a particular discourse community). We *pseudonymized* all names to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees. The first three theses condense, along the theoretical categories (see Figure 1), the structure of everyday discourse in Germany (How does the subject shape memory?). The latter three theses are concerned with the impact of the hegemonic memory of the National Socialist past on the participants (How does memory shape the subject?).

Individual Relevance Structures

Thesis 1: After finishing school, the topic of National Socialism largely disappears from the consciousness of Germans. Even those who are committed to maintaining memory or show a special interest in the topic hardly ever talk about it in everyday life.

"Well, we don't really talk about it that much anymore, I'd say." Volker, who is 61 years old and a toolmaker living in Thuringia, is representative of the majority of research participants. It is simply "no longer present, the war." If one is not a history teacher, historian, or involved in commemoration and remembrance work, there is little reason to talk about the topic. This finding is consistent with the results of earlier studies: "The immediate generational connection to this historical context of events is disappearing," Giesecke and Welzer (2012, p. 73) observed nearly a decade ago. The older generations are witnesses to this change in discourse. "In our childhood, this was a real ritual in winter. That's when the old photo albums were gone through," reported Richard, for example, a 70-year-old pensioner from the same village as Volker. "The children sat on the right and left, and mother and father then told us about the war." Often, the memory did not have to be refreshed with photographs. The urban public sphere spoke for itself: "In West Berlin, where I grew up, the consequences of the war were everywhere," said Nick, a 50-year-old librarian. "I used to call them bread-slice houses when I was a child. Cut off like such a slice of bread." According to Simone, a 54-year-old teacher also from West Berlin who still knew "old men" in wooden wheelchairs, at some point, "even that reference was gone." Particularly for young people, National Socialism is literally *far* away: "My aunt once entered a small bakery in France and was kicked out when the owners heard that they were German," reported Paula, a 26-year-old journalism student from Leipzig, who

did not want to show understanding for such behavior: "I think it's such a pity that we are reduced to this because we have nothing to do with it, and it clearly annoys you because you have no connection to it."

The Legitimacy of Public Nazi Memory

Thesis 2: Even 75 years after the end of the war, hardly any question polarizes as much as that of whether to move beyond the Nazi past (Schlusstrich ziehen). Broadly speaking, three groups can be distinguished: The first sees hegemonic memory as meaningful and legitimate for both the subjective and objective realities; the second group rejects memory for oneself, but considers the meaning of hegemonic memory for others to be legitimate; a third group rejects the hegemonic memory paradigm both for oneself and for what one considers to be the objective reality.

In almost all discussions, there were complaints about the abundance of public remembrance of the Nazi regime. "Memorial here and memorial there" is how Gerti, a 41-year-old media designer from Bremen, described it. She thought National Socialism "receives too much attention and space." At school, the topic is "omnipresent," said Björn, a 34-year-old business intelligence manager from Berlin, who speaks here on behalf of the generation of *millennials*: "One gets it with the mother's milk—and does not get rid of it during one's studies." Although there was often agreement among the young interviewees about the necessity of remembering the Nazi era, they moaned and complained about a topic "that feels as if it has been dealt with for a thousand years in history lessons," according to Charlotte, a 30-year-old insurance employee from Berlin. Participants criticized many times not only school lessons but also the media. "On every television channel, there is always a documentary about Hitler or WWII," complained Michaela, a 60-year-old casual laborer from Berlin; "Every day." Ben, a 39-year-old member of the Saarland state parliament, had "the impression, particularly with the public broadcasters, that this is a way of holding up a guilty conscience somewhere."

The group of those who advocate negative memory included such people as Elisabeth, a 60-year-old theater publisher from a village in Upper Bavaria, for whom the Holocaust is "something so central," which is why "it has to be dealt with." In her view, there is no such thing as "too much" Nazi memory. "I am against forgetting," she said. "It's a pretty big identity, a point of identity for me, that I'm German and somehow accept this past," Vivien, a 24-year-old art history student from Berlin, also said. She felt "personally, as a German, totally attacked when someone somehow plays down the Holocaust."

The second group also endorses hegemonic memory in principle and considers it legitimate in the objective lifeworld, but less so for subjective reality. Mona serves as an ideal example. Her feelings of guilt as a German make her uncomfortable: "As if we were a bit ashamed of coming from this country. Although we had nothing, really nothing at all to do with National Socialism," said the 21-year-old literature student from Swabia. She finds the Nazi culture of remembrance "so crassly omnipresent." Still, a "complete break with the past," in her opinion, would be neither "helpful nor possible." "At least putting an end to this feeling of guilt" and not "having to apologize permanently to other countries and these groups that have been treated anti-semitically [*sic*]" would, in her opinion, be "a real step toward unity." According to the student, the other countries should "praise a little less that we handle it [the past] so well, but perhaps take an example from it." Here, she sees the Germans as having a duty "to spread the word and make other countries aware of what can happen." The belief that others (such as other nations, but also right-wing extremists) need the present

culture of memory as a kind of (re-)education program thus legitimizes hegemonic memory (True to the motto: "NS memory? Yes please. But for the others, not for me"). The contrast between objective and subjective reality may help to explain the ambivalent results of opinion polls on the topic of moving beyond the Nazi past (see Fiedler & Traunspurger, 2022).

The third group denies the utility of any Nazi memory, at least in its present form. "Of course," Ben said, the Holocaust was "a unique event." But still, "killing, even organized killing, was carried out by almost every nation." Note the French, for example, and "what they have done in their colonies." As for anti-Semitism, "In all of Europe, at that time, it was commonplace." He also pointed out that in France "after the war, everyone was in the *Résistance*." Likewise in Poland and Austria: "No one was ever part of it [National Socialism]." Ben's grandfather was a soldier. As a young man, he "experienced the Wehrmacht differently," in "comradeship." "They were brought up with this ideology. Well, I can't condemn them." In addition to being "annoyed by the media," Ben was critical of the education he received about National Socialism: "At some point, I didn't want to hear anything more about the Nazi era because we felt it in every school subject . . . always in a moralizing manner." According to him, one should "not always talk the current generation into having this bad conscience," "not always come up with the Nazis to kill an argument right away." After all, "there is no one in this room who was involved in it."

Knowledge Forms of the National Socialist Past

Thesis 3: The perceived legitimacy of hegemonic memory truths is reflected in the forms of knowledge presented.

Textbook knowledge was not a topic in the interviews and discussions. There were no questions about the number of people who died in the Nazi death camps (on this topic see, e.g., the study by Silbermann & Stoffers, 2000), nor about the course of the war, nor which countries fought on which side. However, interviewers asked participants about their mental associations with National Socialism and what events and people they would portray in a museum of German history. Those leaning toward the hegemonic paradigm were more likely to speak of the extermination of Jews, Hitler, Nazi propaganda, the bomb war, and German guilt. Those who argued for a renewal of the culture of remembrance, on the other hand, wanted to see discussions of the achievements of the Wehrmacht, the recognition of German victims, or the traditions in the Hitler Youth—or they argued for devoting only a small chapter of German history to National Socialism and instead placing greater emphasis on other historical eras, such as the *Kaiserreich* (German Empire) or the era of Charlemagne, or other overt expressions of German heritage, such as poets and thinkers or the German spirit of invention (beer, cars).

Subjectivation and Self-Positioning in the Light of Hegemonic Memory

Thesis 4: Whoever opposes the hegemonic memory discourse (especially with a demand for positive memory, relativization, pride in the nation) is aware of possible consequences, including being delegitimized in everyday discourse, being assigned to the right-wing fringe, or being labeled an anti-Semite. Criticism of hegemonic remembering must therefore either be embedded in an appropriate argumentation, or one must not shy away from the risk of social ostracism, exclusion, and self-delegitimation.

Probably nowhere is the power of the hegemonic memory of National Socialism clearer than in the question of negative memory. All interview partners were aware of the normative premises of Nazi memory (i.e., following a communicative strategy, criticism always was subordinated argumentatively to an acknowledgment of the relevance of the memory and the crimes). "I think you have to deal with this time respectfully and also really look back and really abstract this time," explained Leonie, a 24-year-old biological-technical assistant from Cologne. She then said, however, "But I think you shouldn't get stuck on it. German history is not just Hitler, it's not just these few years, there's also a lot before and a lot after."

It follows that an oppositional, resistant self-positioning vis-à-vis forms of knowledge and legitimation can, at least in the case of historical revisionism (i.e., a positive reinterpretation of the Nazi period or a retrospective relativization of the crimes of the Germans), only be pursued apologetically, under the full consciousness of self-delegitimation. Hans, a 54-year-old from near Magdeburg who worked for many years in forestry and agriculture and is now a student, doubted the murder of millions of Jews ("That can't work") in the focus group discussion, and his fellow discussants verbally attacked him for it. That he provoked others by expressing such a view did not come as a surprise to him. One should "not even ask questions in this direction," he justified himself. "First, Holocaust denial must disappear from the penal code. Only then one can talk about it." The fact that he used the term *Holocaust denial* shows not only that Hans is aware of the popular knowledge forms of hegemonic memory (How can one deny something that does not exist in one's own world of meaning?) but also that he needs hegemonic terminology to distance himself from it.

While the penal code translates hegemonic memory into a legally binding framework in the case of Holocaust denial, in other, less extreme cases, the power of hegemonic memory comes to bear primarily through moral pressure. Anna, for example, feels this pressure because she believed that a museum of German history should illuminate the visions of Adolf Hitler ("what he imagined for the German *Reich*") as well as cultural traditions from the Nazi era ("customs and songs from the Hitler Youth"). In her view, there is "always only negativity, the many good things under Adolf Hitler are suppressed or deliberately not told," argued the 28-year-old mechanical engineering student in Aachen. "But you can't ask the wrong questions. People are being silenced in public and put in a corner."

Anna is a supporter of the AfD party—a party that openly stands for a revision of German memory politics and thus has become part of the memory discourse itself. In the conversations, the topic of National Socialism triggered memories for most of the interviewees not only of one's own grandmother but also of the right-wing party. Carsten, a 33-year-old customs officer from Hesse, immediately thought of the Nazis, "who also managed to rise through elections," when he saw the election results that the AfD gained in Brandenburg. Jennifer, a 60-year-old West Berliner who works in organic farming, even spoke of a "glow of the Weimar Republic." The linguist Elisabeth Wehling (2016) has called the (un)conscious, cognitive-neuronal networking of concepts *political framing* or "mental frames of interpretation" (p. 17), which always have an "ideologically selective character" (p. 191) and are activated by specific terms in one's brain. The discursive nexus between the AfD and the Nazi party NSDAP has established itself in media and science (see, e.g., Friedrichs & Polke-Majewski, 2019). Thus, AfD party members know that National Socialism is discursively intertwined with the AfD in public discourse. "Many people say: AfD means Hitler," said Nathalie, a 42-year-old secretary from North Rhine-Westphalia, who earned substantial support with this statement from her codiscussants, all voters for the AfD.

The subjective feeling of being subject to a taboo came to the fore among respondents who were from critical to dismissive of the memory paradigm, especially on the topic of national pride. Anna said: "If you say: I am proud to be German, then you are immediately considered National Socialist, anti-European," she said. "I think that it is the most normal thing in the world and totally healthy." People seem to tacitly presuppose the moral imperative of national humility in everyday knowledge, for Anna did not explain *who* forbids Germans to take pride in their country. How the hegemonic norm works in the direction of the proponents of the current Nazi memory also manifests itself in the example of national pride, which triggered discomfort among the majority of the study participants. "For a long time, I was simply ashamed of being German," said David, a 65-year-old actor from Lower Franconia, which is why he "also liked to pretend to be Swedish abroad." Silke, a 58-year-old native of Halle who works as a primary school teacher, said: "I always stutter when it comes to this nationality, this Germany. So yes, somehow, it always gets stuck in my throat." According to Piwoni (2013), the abandonment of a cultural-national understanding of German citizenship can be understood as a lesson from the Nazi era. When asked what is *typically German*, participants mentioned not only punctuality, precision, or lack of humor in the discussions, but also antinationalism, which they viewed as the socially legitimate norm. According to 19-year-old Marie, a history student from a small town in Hesse, this attitude is "something typically German that you can't be proud of Germany and of our German origins." According to such a reading, Germans take national pride in the fact that they have no national pride. "The most German thing is that Germans see themselves negatively," was how Christine, a 24-year-old journalism student from Schleswig-Holstein, summed it up.

One resistance strategy to circumvent the perceived imperative for "national self-loathing" is the development of a pronounced pride in German regions among many respondents. Malte, a 25-year-old communication scholar from Aachen, finds it "easier and, to a certain extent, less problematic to harbor a certain local patriotism." He identifies in the broadest sense "with the Aachen area or the Rhineland, because people there are somehow quite relaxed." Similarly, Reinhard: "When you see that your parents didn't come out of the Nazi period and the war quite in one piece, then you don't have the same feeling of necessarily being proud of Germany," said the 65-year-old engineer who comes from a small town in Westphalia, which fills him, at least a little, with pride: "That's why Münsterland, that's what I can accept."

Thesis 5: While the hegemonic paradigm demonstrates its power in negative memory in everyday discourse, it remains surprisingly weak in relation to the memory imperative. In everyday discourse, the debate over whether to remember or not is therefore much less morally charged (keyword: relevance).

This finding may not be because the question of whether to move beyond the past (*Schlussstrich ziehen*) is a recurring one in opinion polls (suggesting that forgetting may be a legitimate option). Thesis 2 has shown that the desire to forget, "not to hang the issue so high anymore," as Rudolf, a 71-year-old pensioner from Lower Saxony, put it, runs right through all strata of the population. The fact that there is less pressure for self-legitimation is related to the finding from Thesis 1: what is irrelevant (or hardly relevant) on the individual level in everyday life is not constantly remembered and discussed. Put differently: Forgetting is already a reality in everyday discourse. In a way, this habit of forgetting makes it easy for the opponents of hegemonic memory. Because others do not find the topic relevant either, one can avoid the discussion and showing one's colors about hegemonic memory for the time being.

National Socialism as a Legitimate Framework of Memory

Thesis 6: Because of its hegemonic stance and moral-normative charge, the National Socialist past has its own legitimizing power for subjective reality. Whether supporters, critics, or opponents, everyone can access this past to legitimize their own narrative. This recourse also works because everyone has something to say about the topic and everyone has an (at least vague) idea of what life was like under National Socialism.

The results of this study suggest that the Nazi past is an essential, if not the most important, alterity for the construction of a national self-image, always running unconsciously in the background. Its omnipresence means that when Germans discuss national pride, *Heimat* (homeland), history, or *German-ness*, the “Nazi past” is always present in their minds, even among Germans who reject the culture of Nazi remembrance. The importance of this past results, on the one hand, from the (subjectively felt) permanence of the topic in the public sphere—in education, the media, culture, or science—but also and above all from the normativity that continues to shape the discourse of remembrance. Put simply, Germans must not be indifferent to this past.

“Of course, it is not possible to erase the past from ourselves. That is part of our history. Almost part of our genes. Our personality,” said Hendrik, who guides tourist groups through Berlin. That perspective probably explains why the Nazi past is “part of the German DNA” for the 54-year-old Schleswig-Holstein native. Hendrik sees who the Germans are through the eyes of others, yet one does not have to be a tourist guide by profession to make this change of perspective. Gerhards and colleagues (2017) have referred to National Socialism as a negative “demarcation foil” (*negative alterity*), which serves to distance people “fundamentally” from National Socialism and, at the same time, to portray it as a country that is “tolerant, cosmopolitan, multicultural and not racist, anti-Semitic, nationalist, etc.” (p. 75). There were similar argumentation patterns in the discussions in this study. Even for people such as Anna, the mechanical engineering student who rejects hegemonic National Socialist memory as a “cult of guilt,” the period of National Socialism becomes a constitutive outside—a historical space that is fitted into her own canon of values in keeping with Halbwachs’ (1992) *framework of memory*. “I see that exactly the same mechanisms are used today, i.e., not letting the other person have his or her say,” Anna said. All of this experience, she commented, “reminds her of such systematics as they had under National Socialism.” The same goes for Michaela, the casual laborer from Berlin, who noted that the memory of National Socialism “has to end sometime,” but in the same breath pointed out that “now Jews are being attacked again,” “but not by Germans. We have basically let people into our country who explicitly have something against Jews.” Migration, anti-Semitism, and National Socialism form a discursive triad here: Michaela justifies her reservations by resorting to the argument of history—a history she pretends not to want to remember.

Conclusion

This article has explored the effects of the power of hegemonic memory (negative memory, memory imperative, positive myth) about National Socialism on contemporary Germans. It focuses on questions of what the population does with the hegemonic norm of remembering (How does the subject shape memory?) and how memory shapes the subject (How do we remember, even if we do not want to remember at all?).

The findings confirm that those who find the hegemonic discourse of memory to be uncomfortable or reject it develop their own narratives, which can extend to calls for historical revisionism. Still, the answer to these research questions always stands and falls within the hegemonic discourse that tells us *what* to do—what is right and what is wrong, what is the norm, and what is deviant (Foucault, 1982b). It is within the framework of hegemonic memory that people have to locate themselves, the past, and their memory of it. They may not want to remember, but still, they cannot escape the past—or, more precisely, the past as it is shaped by hegemonic memory. German sociologist Harald Welzer (2002) once asked, “whether the Holocaust has any lessons to teach.” People would “remember anyway as they want” (p. 357). The results of the group discussions and interviews demonstrate that this observation is true to a certain extent. The everyday discourse of remembering is multilayered, plural, and heterogeneous, and includes positions of forgetting, denial, or relativization. However, the results also show that one cannot simply shed the past, like a coat that no longer fits. Even if one rejects hegemonic remembering in its current form, one must always construct oneself in demarcation from this norm. Defying memory therefore always implies knowing the norm, reflecting about it, and distancing oneself from it. Furthermore, there is also a need to differentiate between the (widening) gap between the individual desire to forget and the collective duty to remember and admonish.

The findings of this study are important for all those who attest that aversive memory does not have a lasting existence in social life, whether in Germany, in Europe, or in other countries and cultures. Those who accuse the German memory culture of failure, such as Samuel Salzborn (2020), Anti-Semitism Commissioner of the State of Berlin, presumably measure this failure more in terms of aspects concerning forms of knowledge and the legitimacy of memory in everyday discourse, than in terms of subjectification by hegemonic discourse, which also include identity formation and nondiscursive practices, such as the “compulsion” to justify oneself in the face of a position that deviates from the “hegemonic mainstream.” The desire for an end to negative remembering is always opposed by the imperative of remembering, which forms a stable core of public remembering that is visible to all, not least through the mass media. The demand for forgetting can therefore only ever be made in demarcation *from* remembering, which in a way takes this demand ad absurdum. Even if forgetting is a real option in everyday discourse, this study has shown that this burdened past remains a part of the German people, even if it is no longer discussed in everyday life. What is more, the hegemonic memory paradigm has transcended into other areas of social life (including the question of national pride or voting for the AfD). Seen in this light, from the normative point of view directed at Nazi memory, the German memory culture could also be considered a success.

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