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# Critical Memory at Stake

Dr. Ralf Possekel, December 2025

# Overview

1. Two German memories of World War II
2. Critical memory vs. traditional memory
3. Critical memory in Europe ...
4. ... at a turning point?
5. Survey indicators
6. Defending – Fostering Critical Memory!

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# 1. Two Memories of World War II and the Holocaust in Germany

## I. prevailing in Germany until 1990s

### German victimhood

- 5,2 Mio killed German soldiers
- 1,1 Mio killed civilians
- Lost territories in the East of the German Reich
- 12 Mio displaced Germans

### German „honorable“ behavior

- Political Resistance
- „Honorable“ Wehrmacht

## II. accepted in Germany since 1990s

### German mass atrocities

- 6 Mio murdered Jews,
- 220.000 murdered Roma;
- 3 Mio starved to death POWs
- 26 Mio forced laborers

### German perpetratorhood

- Nuremberg War Criminal Trials
- unknown numbers of perpetrators for the Holocaust: approx. 250.000
- only 30.000 convictions

### German failure

- Guilt of the vast majority through looking away

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## 2. Critical Memory a relatively new achievement

### Traditional Memory

- identifying positive traditions in history
  - praising national heroes – in politics, culture, science, ...
  - celebrating victories and progress
  - relieving the own group of potential responsibility for committed crimes
  - cultivating certain taboos in national history – Wehrmacht crimes
- Instrumental for today's politics

### Critical Memory

- remembering state crimes & atrocities
  - giving victims a voice to tell their truth
  - asking bystanders how they behaved facing unlawful policies
  - celebrating local, often unknown heroes who helped or resisted
  - enabling reparations
- Critical for today's politics

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### 3. Critical Memory – a global trend - in Europe since 1990s

Different entry points for critical memory:

- The role of European powers in **colonizing** the global South
- **The collaboration with the Germans in implementing the Holocaust during World War II**
- Dealing with the **Communist** past in Germany and Eastern Europe, ...
- Dealing with the **authoritarian** past in Spain, Portugal, Greece
- Dealing with legacies of **minority discrimination** (Roma minority, LGBTIQ)
- The Balkan wars in the 1990s and genocide in **Srebrenica 1995**
- ...

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## 4. 2025: Traditional vs. Critical Memory at a turning point?

### Memory of World War II - 80 years later:

- No eye **witnesses** to testify the truth – no family memories for World War II
- Rapidly decreasing factual **knowledge** – increasing role of media, museums
- Declining **authority** of school curricula, official historical sites, national newspapers, TV, radio
- **Social Media** mechanisms & spread of myths and conspirational thinking; echo chambers
- Political **polarization** – explicit attacks of the far right party **AfD**
- **AI** and new ways of falsification of photographs, texts, documentaries

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## 5. Critical Memory at stake – indicators of a representative survey

### Demand for historical „closure“ – to stop critical memory of WWII

	Somewhat/ strongly disagree	Somewhat/ strongly agree
2025	<b>37 %</b>	<b>38 %</b>
2022	55 %	26 %
2020	52 %	27 %
2018	53 %	25 %

### I'm annoyed that Germans are still being reproached for the crimes committed against the Jews.

	Somewhat/ strongly disagree	Somewhat/ strongly agree
2025	28%	<b>45%</b>
2018	38%	36 %

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# MEMO

Multidimensionaler  
Erinnerungsmonitor

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## 6. Defending - Fostering Critical Memory!

State funded memorial sites

Official national memorial days – 27.1. / 8.5./9.11

State funded programs for civil society to critically examine history

- Local and family history: to stick to the facts  
example: MemoRails, stumbling stones
- Online archives – to research the membership of your ancestors in certain political parties/army units
- online edition of ego documents:  
letters, testimonies of former victims



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## 6. Defending - Fostering Critical Memory!

### Popular young influencers telling critical memory

- investigating their family history & their local history
- identifying legacies of racism, antisemitism, ...  
and critically commenting actual policies

**Susanne Siegert on TikTok: 228.4k follower**

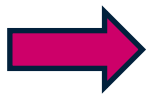
**Serious games** to meet challenges of the past:

How I would have behaved?

**Historical movies** as entry points for dealing with the past

Film festivals

**Online campaigns** „Facts instead of Myths“



**Global alliance** for critical Memory:  
Europe, US, global South, Taiwan, ...



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Thank you very much