

# Populism, History, and Identity in German Politics and Foreign Policy

*By Anna Sauerbrey, Bosch Public Policy Fellow*

**In Brief:** Germany's dominant historical narrative is undergoing rapid change, driven by several factors. First, as the last contemporary witnesses of the Holocaust pass, the narrative of German guilt is losing its emotional power. Second, in a rapidly changing world order, the imperatives of German foreign policy which are derived from the country's history are increasingly under attack. Both the imperatives of nonviolence and humility stand challenged as Germany is pushed toward a more active, more self-confident, and more engaged position in the world. The country needs a new national narrative — and ironically, the rise of populists both within and outside Germany could prove as a catalyst in redefining German identity. As a country that has once been liberated and once has liberated itself from authoritarianism in the 20th century, Germany could define its new role as a defender of the ideas of the liberal West.

“We need a 180 degree turn in the memorial culture of this country,” Björn Höcke, a leading member of the German far-right political party Alternative for Germany (AfD), told a group of supporters in Dresden on January 17. Referring to the bombing of Dresden and the allied re-education program in postwar Germany, he said Germany had been “robbed” of its “collective identity.” The politician claimed that Germany today had the “state of mind of a totally defeated people.” Höcke further said that the Germans were “the only people in the world that have planted a memorial of shame at the heart of its capital,” referring to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. He called for an end of “dead” commemorative rituals and for a “new patriotism.”<sup>1</sup>

Is there room for this type of blunt revisionism in Germany in 2017? The easy answer is no. The AfD has far from enough influence to alter Germany's history politics. However, the new far right in Germany and the rise of populism in many of Germany's allied countries does have the potential to alter Germany's self-perception and dominant historical narrative. For most of Germany's postwar history, the commemoration of the Holocaust has shaped German identity and politics. Germany's guilt for the Nazi regime's crimes led to an imperative for nonviolence and humility in international politics. However, Germany's dominant historical narrative has changed, and keeps changing at a rapid pace under the impression of recent world events.

1 Activists have transcribed Höcke's speech from a video published by the right-wing blog “Compact” and have published the transcript on Pastebin, see [https://pastebin.com/embed\\_iframe/jQujwe89](https://pastebin.com/embed_iframe/jQujwe89).



In this paper, I explore how and why Germany's historical narrative has changed. I begin by first assessing the factors within Germany, and then take a look at its changing impact on Germany's foreign policy. This is a decisive moment in redefining Germany's national identity, and Germany's new far right and U.S. President Donald Trump might prove to be catalysts for German self-reinvention.

## Germany's Commemoration of the Holocaust is Losing Its Emotional Power

Ten days after Höcke's speech in Dresden, on January 27 — Holocaust Memorial Day — Minister of the Interior Thomas de Maizière, a member of Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Party, wrote on Twitter, "Never again — that is not a sober didactic formula derived from the crimes of the National Socialists. It's the basis of our political community — it has been and it is now an important pillar of the democratic self-perception of this country. Our memorial culture is important for our future."<sup>2</sup>

De Maizière's was only one of many testimonies to Germany's dominant historical narrative that day. And it is true. In many ways, "never again" still defines us. It is the essence of our constitution ("The dignity of man is inviolable").<sup>3</sup> It is our "pledge of allegiance" to the victims of our fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers. For German foreign policy, it meant the stern rejection of violence as a means of politics and a clear preference for post-national multilateralism and international cooperation. As a national lesson from the Holocaust, postwar Germany has created a political culture of humility. In our minds, it is dangerous to get too big.

And yet, Höcke's assumption that the memory of Auschwitz dominates Germany's self-perception today no longer holds true. In recent years, the importance of Germany's dominant historical narrative and its meaning

for German foreign policy have been harder and harder to convey — both to Germans and to Germany's international partners.

At the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in 2015, the Bertelsmann Stiftung published a study showing that a majority of all Germans, 55 percent, agree to the statement that "today, almost 70 years after the end of World War II, we should not be talking so much about the persecution of the Jews, but should eventually close this chapter of our history."<sup>4</sup> Other recent studies found similar results. There is a broadening mood to "leave it all behind."

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There are many reasons for this fatigue. A certain nationalist grandiosity à la Höcke is one, but not the most important factor. More importantly, I believe, is that the historical narrative is losing its emotional power.

As the last *Zeitzeugen* — contemporary witnesses of the National Socialist era and the Holocaust — are passing away, historic knowledge is replacing more personal emotional knowledge. In 2016 alone, the world lost the three great witnesses and public storytellers Max Mannheimer, Imre Kertesz, and Elie Wiesel, who brought intensity and personalization to the history of the Holocaust. Hildegard Hamm-Brücher and Hans-Dietrich Genscher also died last year, two German policymakers who were not Holocaust survivors, but whose careers were inspired by "never again." My son's generation will be the first who will not have a grandfather he must ask: Where were you? What did you know? What did you do?

<sup>2</sup> This statement was published on the official Twitter account of the Ministry of the Interior, [https://twitter.com/BMI\\_Bund/status/824892227319009281](https://twitter.com/BMI_Bund/status/824892227319009281).

<sup>3</sup> See Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Art. 1, e.g. via [https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/aufgaben/rechtsgrundlagen/grundgesetz/gg\\_01/245122](https://www.bundestag.de/parlament/aufgaben/rechtsgrundlagen/grundgesetz/gg_01/245122).

<sup>4</sup> S. Hagemann and R. Nathanson, "Deutschland und Israel heute: Verbindende Vergangenheit, trennende Gegenwart?" Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2015, [http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/Studie\\_LW\\_Deutschland\\_und\\_Israel\\_heute\\_2015.pdf](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/Studie_LW_Deutschland_und_Israel_heute_2015.pdf).

There is a debate among historians whether and how the perception of the German past will change as time is pushing the National Socialist era from the shelf of contemporary history. The memory of the *Zeitzeugen* is documented, the historian Wolfgang Benz recently wrote, it is thus immortal and their deaths won't change history.<sup>5</sup> But when it comes to German memorial culture, it is fueled just as much by emotion as it is by fact. "Encountering contemporary witnesses, speaking to them, exploring their fate, all of this leads to empathy and thoughtfulness. And thoughtfulness is one of the scarcest resources of our times," Charlotte Knobloch, the former vice president of the Jewish World Congress and President of the Jewish Community of Munich, stated recently.<sup>6</sup>

Thoughtfulness really is something the younger generation of Germans — my generation — sometimes lacks. Born to the stable German democracy in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, we know nothing but freedom and peace. For most of our adult lives, there was only one, free Germany. To us, the return of National Socialism or Communist authoritarianism seemed about as likely as an extraterrestrial invasion.

In Berlin, at the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, the Internet generation's hedonism clashes with the heavy burden of history. A few weeks ago, the young Israeli writer Shahak Shapira, who immigrated to eastern Germany with his mother and brother at age 14, documented this clash of present and past in a controversial online art project. On the website "Yolocaust," he juxtaposed 12 "selfies" retrieved from Instagram and Facebook — showing young people happily posing, juggling, and kissing between the concrete steles — with photographs from the concentration camps.<sup>7</sup> Shapira, like Knobloch, denounces a lack of thoughtfulness, he accuses the younger generation of being too busy documenting its happiness to commemorate the past.

<sup>5</sup> W. Benz, "Die Erinnerung ist unsterblich," *Der Tagesspiegel*, October 27, 2016, <https://causa.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/geschichte-ohne-zeitzeugen/die-erinnerung-ist-unsterblich.html>.

<sup>6</sup> C. Knobloch, "Der Holocaust wird von Zeitgeschichte zu Geschichte," *Der Tagesspiegel*, November 21, 2016, <https://causa.tagesspiegel.de/gesellschaft/geschichte-ohne-zeitzeugen/nbspder-holocaust-wird-von-zeitgeschichte-zu-geschichte.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Shapira took the photos down after a week; the site now shows reactions to the project: <https://yolocaust.de/>.

In the older generation, this happy-go-lucky attitude is matched by a more saturated, crankier discontent with democracy. Just like in the United States, Great Britain, and France, there is a certain fatigue with the political elites and a political culture that was "imposed" on

them, as many like to see it. The imperatives derived of the commemoration of the Holocaust, the constitutional imperatives of tolerance, protection of minorities, and a global responsibility toward the vulnerable, has been fiercely questioned during the backlash following the initial euphoria of welcoming 890,000 immigrants and refugees to the country in 2015. The German asylum system is fiercely contested — not just by the new far right — and has seen the introduction of many restrictions as a consequence of the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016. Furthermore, there clearly is a gap between the official memorial culture, the rituals performed every year on Holocaust Memorial Day, and the attitude of the German citizens as reflected in the surveys cited above.

Finally, it is hard to convey the notion of Germany's historic guilt and the responsibility arising from it to the growing immigrant population. For many high school teachers, teaching the history of the Holocaust and Germany's alliance with Israel to the sons and daughters of Palestinian refugees, and first, second, and third generation immigrants from many other Arab countries is far more complicated. Studies show that on average, these students from immigrant backgrounds are more likely to hold anti-Semitic views than their classmates and tend to have a much more negative view of Israel,<sup>8</sup> the security of which has been defined as part of the German national interest.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. Mansel and V. Spaier, "Social Relations and Conflict Potentials in the Context of Experiences of Denied Participation and Appreciation of Youth With and Without A Migrant Background," Universität Bielefeld Institut für interdisziplinäre Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung, December 2010, [http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/\(en\)/ikg/projekte/Soziale\\_Beziehungen.html](http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/(en)/ikg/projekte/Soziale_Beziehungen.html).

<sup>9</sup> M. Kaim, "Israels Sicherheit als deutsche Staatsräson: Was bedeutet das konkret?" Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, January 30, 2015, <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/199894/israels-sicherheit-als-deutsche-staatsraeson?p=all>.

## The Narrative of German Guilt as a Foreign Policy Guideline is Challenged

At the same time, the narrative of guilt as a guideline to Germany's foreign policy has been challenged. With the reunification, the Two Plus Four Agreement, and the birth of Germany as a truly independent nation, Germany's dominant historical narrative started to ring phony in many people's ears. The international community, but also a growing number of voices within Germany, came to see references to Auschwitz as Germany's eternal excuse to opt-out of international responsibility. The country's abstention from the 2011 vote on UN Security Council resolution 1973 to implement a no-fly-zone over Libyan territory was widely seen as opting-out of *Weltbürgertum* (global citizenship), to use a term popularized by the historian and public intellectual Heinrich August Winkler.

In a much noted speech at the Munich Security Conference on January 31, 2014, German President Joachim Gauck said, "It is delusional to imagine Germany as protected from the distortions of our times... I suppose I have to see that there are some among us — besides the true pacifists — who use Germany's guilt to their convenience or to hide an aversion to the world."<sup>10</sup>

About a year later, in a speech delivered at the Bundestag on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe, Winkler hit the same key and warned against an "instrumentalization" of the Holocaust, "motivated by the current political agenda."<sup>11</sup> The Holocaust, Winkler said, could neither be used as a reason to intervene (as it had been when Germany joined the interventions in the Balkans in the 1990s) — nor could it be used to opt out of missions where Germany and others would have a joint responsibility to protect.

<sup>10</sup> J. Gauck, "Eröffnung der 50. Münchner Sicherheitskonferenz," Der Bundespräsident, January 31, 2014, <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Joachim-Gauck/Reden/2014/01/140131-Muenchner-Sicherheitskonferenz.html>.

<sup>11</sup> H.A. Winkler, "Rede von Prof. Dr. Heinrich August Winkler zum 70. Jahrestag Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges 8. Mai 2015," Deutscher Bundestag, May 8, 2015, [https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2015/kw19\\_gedenkstunde\\_wkii\\_rede\\_winkler/373858](https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2015/kw19_gedenkstunde_wkii_rede_winkler/373858).

Winkler earned much applause for his speech and there is some truth to that: Part of Germany's reluctance to act as a *Weltbürger* was not only due to its historic guilt, but also to convenience. Surrounded by friends, blessed with powerful allies, there was no necessity to fight, neither militarily nor economically.

The imperative of German humility derived from German guilt has been out of tune with the economic and political realities in Europe and the world for decades. In recent years, this became increasingly visible. In this respect, too, Höcke is wrong. It is not like Germany was lacking national pride. It just has always lived it in a different dimension.

In the 1960s, during the economic miracle when "made in Germany" became an international trademark, the striving economy allowed the country to rebuild its self-confidence in a field less suspected of inciting chauvinism than the political realm. Economically, postwar Germany was an enormous success story — and knew it. Later, after reunification, when Germany became a thriving player in globalization, Germany's economic self-confidence turned into "export nationalism," to quote Hans Kundnani.<sup>12</sup>

During the financial crisis and the ensuing and ongoing euro crisis, Germany's economic hegemony in Europe became evident. Many read Chancellor Angela Merkel's tough response to the demands of the deficit countries Greece and Italy, but also to France, as the return of the German strongman to the continent. In this context, Kundnani has dubbed the country a "geo-economic" power. As Germany tried to impose more fiscal discipline and economic reforms on the Southern European countries and France, it left its historically defined role

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<sup>12</sup> H. Kundnani, *The Paradox of German Power* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 90.

of *pars inter pares*. German Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble became Europe's chief whip — and was met with angry neighbors resorting to historical comparisons to throw at him. Greek protesters took to the streets with cardboard depicting Merkel with either a Wilhelmian helmet or Hitler's moustache.

For a brief moment in history, at the height of the Greek euro-gamble, it seemed like Germany's history was catching up with it, limiting the redefinition of its identity in Europe. But then came the refugees. And Trump.

## The Battle Against Populism: An Alternative German National Narrative?

With Donald Trump becoming president of the United States and populist parties threatening to take over power in many of Germany's closest neighbors — and already in power in Poland and Hungary — a new era begins. For the first time in decades, the future is wide open. The comforting belief in the teleology of the history of the West — expansion until it spans the globe — has been proven a delusion. Two days after Trump's Inauguration Day, then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier wrote in an op-ed for the German newspaper *Bild am Sonntag*: "It is totally unclear... which world order will prevail in the 21st century and what the world of tomorrow will look like."<sup>13</sup>

Against this backdrop, the roles are suddenly reversed. For decades after World War II, the United States and Germany's European neighbors looked anxiously to their former enemy for signs of an authoritarian restoration. The National Socialist demon, the assumption was, could be lingering in the minds of Germans and start taking over again at the first occasion.

Now it is the other way round: Germans are anxiously following the ups and downs of the Front National in France, the Party for Freedom (PVV) in the Netherlands, and the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). It is now the democratic systems of our allies that are challenged by

anti-democratic demons from within, while German democracy has remained relatively stable, even throughout the turmoil of 2015. The AfD has gained strength, but as of early 2017, it seems like there is a cap on its ability to grow. Furthermore, it is strictly quarantined by all other parties.

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Germany is generally ascribed a leadership role. "As Obama Exits World Stage, Angela Merkel May Be the Liberal West's Last Defender," read a much discussed headline in *The New York Times* on November 12, 2016, days after Trump's election as president.<sup>14</sup>

For Germany, this moment in time is a unique chance to embrace its new role as "last woman standing" and adopt the defense of liberal democracy as an alternative dominant narrative.

President Gauck has already tried to frame German identity that way. An excellent speaker, Gauck knew how to relate German history in an encouraging and compelling way. He has transformed the historic German imperative of humility into an imperative of democratic self-confidence. Instead of stressing the historic guilt stemming from the atrocities of the Nazi era, he underlined the international and humanitarian responsibility arising from the murders. He preferred to emphasize the self-liberation of East Germans in 1989. In this alternative German founding narrative, liberal democracy is not something given to Germany by the allied forces, but something East Germans obtained.

In his first speech in front of the German parliament in March 2012, Gauck said he wanted to use memory as a "force and a source of force," not just the memory of the murderous Nazi Regime, but the memory of all the

<sup>13</sup> F. Steinmeier, "Wir müssen uns auf unruhige Zeiten einstellen," *Bild am Sonntag*, January 22, 2017, <http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/dr-frank-walter-steinmeier/die-alte-weltordnung-ist-vorueber-49896494.bild.html>.

<sup>14</sup> A. Smale and S. Erlanger, "As Obama Exits World Stage, Angela Merkel May Be the Liberal West's Last Defender," *The New York Times*, November 13, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/13/world/europe/germany-merkel-trump-election.html>.



good things that Germany has achieved after the war, the memory of the “democratic miracle.”<sup>15</sup> There’s potential there. Germany could reinvent itself as a country that has overcome despotism and authoritarianism with the help of its allies, a freedom fighter now striving to defend the liberal West. Martin Schulz, the former president of the European Parliament and now candidate of the Social Democratic Party for the 2017 national election campaign, has already included this narrative in his speeches. “Europe is in danger,” he repeatedly said. “And Germany, being the largest country in the European Union, must defend Europe.” In this tale, Trump serves Schulz as the villain. The American president, Schulz said, was clearly trying to divide Europe — and it was Germany’s responsibility to defend the Union as the country that benefits most from it.<sup>16</sup>

Adopting the tale of the new battle of worlds, of liberal democracy versus populism, is not without risk to Germany. In a 2016 book on populism, Jan-Werner Müller writes that “the tendency of liberals to simply exclude opposition populist groups is problematic.” This mimics the very techniques of the populists: “It means exclusion in the name of morality, just as the populists morally exclude some citizens from the true, homogenous people.”<sup>17</sup>

Merkel, unlike Schulz, seems to be determined to avoid playing the role of last hero standing up to evil. Only a week after Trump’s election and the famous *New York Times* headline, Merkel addressed the Bundestag. But though she clearly committed to globalization and to Germany’s responsibility in the world (“We have to go for collective efforts, for multilateralism. We have to try to shape globalization along with others. That’s what

I’m advocating”),<sup>18</sup> the Chancellor managed to hide this commitment in the midst of an annoyingly comprehensive bullet point list of things the country needs to address — from education to budget consolidation.

Schulz is seeking polarization for the sake of sharpening his profile. He is aiming at becoming the iconic leader of a shaken-up and defensive left, an anti-pole to Trump and far-right populism. Merkel, on the

contrary, goes for the reconciliation of German society. Being the icon of the welcome movement has not done her any good. She would rather have people forget the turmoil of 2015, forget how deeply divided German society still is over her course in the refugee crisis, and call off the great battle.

“ Good narratives must be felt as they are told.”

Good narratives must be felt as they are told. In his last speech at the Schloss Bellevue on January 18, Gauck said, “my own constitutional patriotism doesn’t result from intellectual insight, but from being deeply touched emotionally.”<sup>19</sup> That is what made him so convincing. That is what Germany currently lacks, though Schulz might change things.

Does this mean Germany could jump to a new identity as a *Weltbürger*, as a global citizen? In recent years, there are signs that Germany is willing to adopt its new identity and transform it into a more assertive and responsible foreign policy approach. Angela Merkel has adopted a leading role in the Minsk talks; she has taken a more firm stand on sanction against Russia. The country is expanding its defense budget, has deployed soldiers to Mali, has delivered weapons to the Peshmerga in Northern Iraq after a fierce political debate, and has taken a more cynical approach to refugee politics in order to ward off

15 J. Gauck, “Rede nach der Vereidigung zum Bundespräsidenten,” Der Bundespräsident, March 23, 2012, <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Joachim-Gauck/Reden/2012/03/120323-Vereidigung-des-Bundespraesidenten.html>.

16 See, for example, his interview, in *Der Spiegel*: K. Brinkbäumer, M. Feldenkirchen, and H. Knaup, “Trump spielt mit der Sicherheit der westlichen Welt,” *Der Spiegel*, February 3, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/martin-schulz-donald-trump-spielt-mit-der-sicherheit-der-westlichen-welt-a-1133009.html>.

17 J. Müller, *Was ist Populismus? Ein Essay* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016), p. 130.

18 A. Merkel, “Regierungserklärung von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel,” Die Bundesregierung, November 23, 2016, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Regierungserklaerung/2016/2016-11-24-regierungserklaerung.html;jsessionid=0D2340B2D4CDC8E46FDF9190207C4370.s6t2>.

19 J. Gauck, “Rede zum Ende der Amtszeit zu der Frage ‘Wie soll es aussehen, unser Land?’ aus der Antrittsrede vom 23. März 2012,” Der Bundespräsident, January 18, 2017, <http://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Joachim-Gauck/Reden/2017/01/170118-Amtszeitende-Rede.html>.

the rising new right. This year, at the Munich Security Conference, German representatives such as Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen, were particularly eager to assure their allies that they will step up (though not immediately).

Merkel's preference will always be a common European foreign policy as well as a common European security policy. And a deeply rooted rejection of military interventions in German society will remain a key obstacle for years to come. But my guess is that the country will continue its path towards *Weltbürgertum*, very slowly, in a pondering way, but still, it will. From the point of view of *Geschichtspolitik*, the politics of memory, old restraints are gone and even more — a new narrative is taking shape, and it is pushing Germany toward leadership.

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## About the Author

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