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Memory-driven Foreign Policy

How German memories shaped views on Russia and the decision to supply weapons to Ukraine

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Memory can be a form of liability in international relations. When enmities between two states are treated as inherited legacies, a coalition becomes unthinkable, weakening both states in the global system of powers. The history of Franco-German relations is a good example of this. The ideal actor in international relations is sovereign – sovereign even in relation to its own memory. Only a sovereign actor can realize its interests in forming the most promising alliances with other states. This Machiavellian ideal however has little to do with reality: foreign policy is always embedded in memories. Sometimes, foreign policy actors may instrumentalize the public memory. In most cases, they consciously or unconsciously follow the assumptions underlying a particular memory.

In my contribution, I will focus on one question: Why did it take so long for the German government to decide to supply weapons to Ukraine? I argue that memory—particularly the legacy of the First and Second World Wars—played a central role. I will first examine some of the positions on foreign policy issues driven by memory of the First or Second World War since the 1980s then look at the broader German discourse on memory and its consequences for current foreign policy decisions.

Zooming in: Striking politicians' statements since the 1980s

In 1983, as Germany debated whether to respond to the Soviet deployment of SS-20 medium-range missiles by rearming with American Pershing missiles, former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, despite having lost the chancellorship over this issue, made a surprising statement. He emphasized the fundamental peacefulness of the Soviet leadership, claiming that Brezhnev had aimed for peace, as did the current Politburo. Schmidt drew this conclusion from his memory of the Second World War: People in the Soviet Union did not love Stalin, but "they loved their country, and they defended it with a tremendous capacity for suffering. They learnt to hate the war." But who were "they"? Schmidt referred to "the peoples of the Soviet Union", "first and foremost the Russian tribes" – a term that, paradoxically, appeared to include Ukrainians and Belarusians in addition to the Russians, reflecting an imperialist worldview rather than a peaceful one. This view, rooted in colonial Russian traditions, was adopted even as Germany had renounced its own imperial ambitions in Eastern Europe.

In June 2016, two years after Russia's annexation of Crimea, another former German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, gave an interview to the newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung in which he called on Germany to take a positive stance towards Russia. The reason for this was also rooted in memory: Russia, Schröder said, Russia had endured immense sacrifices during the Second World War. Four years later, he had framed this memory into a political obligation for Germany, asserting in Der Tagesspiegel that Nazi Germany's campaign of annihilation had aimed to erase Russia from the global political stage. "We must never forget this – and German policy towards Russia must take greater account of this than it is currently the case." This position reveals a paradox as well: In the Russian-Ukrainian war, Schröder took sides with the aggressor because the aggressor had been attacked by Germany eighty years earlier. However, his argument overlooked a critical distinction – Nazi Germany had not attacked Russia, but the Soviet Union as a whole, and Ukraine

and Belarus had suffered more than Russia under German occupation.

After Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, it wasn't until August 2024 that Chancellor Olaf Scholz finally articulated a simple truth: that the sacrifices made by Ukraine during the Second World War give Germany a special responsibility for Ukraine in the present. "In view of our responsibility to our own history, there can only be one place for Germany in this situation: at Ukraine's side", Scholz said in a speech to mark the 80th anniversary of the failed assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler on 20 July 1944 at the German Resistance Memorial Centre in Berlin. "In 2024, we cannot commemorate this 20th July without thinking of the brave citizens of Ukraine who have resisted the criminal Russian war of aggression for more than two years." (Der Spiegel).

Zooming out: Foreign policy discourse shaped by war memories

In Germany, there is a close link between remembrance and foreign policy issues, which the Kremlin is well aware of. Current wars and the threat of war are reflected upon and discussed in Germany with reference to the First and the Second World War. The memory framework used to interpret the present has a decisive influence on German foreign policy. The political debate of the 1950s was largely determined by the theory of totalitarianism, which implied an equation of the National Socialist past in Germany with the Communist present in the Soviet Union. This resulted in the classic opposition of freedom in the West versus dictatorship in the East. The totalitarian opponent was assumed to be ready to attack in principle, reminiscent of the aggressiveness of National Socialist Germany. This memory gave rise to the policy of vigilance towards the opponent, defence and containment.

Since the 1960s, the memory of the First World War, into which the European powers had slipped, has played a much greater role than before – at least that was the common interpretation of the prehistory of the First World War, long before the publication of Christopher Clark's "Sleepwalkers". From the point of view of the left and liberals in particular, the aim was now to defuse conflict dynamics and ensure détente. The problem was no longer the enemy, but the enmity itself. There was a fear that prestige thinking and grandstanding could lead to war, as seen in the First World War, or that a nuclear war could simply be triggered unintentionally. The lesson taught by the First World War was not to be vigilant and ready for war (kriegstüchtig), but to be cautious.

The First World War also played a major role as a memory in the 1980s during the discussion about NATO rearmament. With certain left-wing politicians such as Oskar

Lafontaine or Rolf Mützenich, a line can be drawn from them to the present. Today, it is in part the "Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht" which takes up the positions of the SPD in the 1980s. It is characterised by a tendency to judge the warring parties from a position of equidistance, seeing the war as the fault of both sides (Russians and Ukrainians or Russians and Americans). The lesson of the First World War is prudence, and it is the virtue of prudence (Bedächtigkeit) that Olaf Scholz claims for himself today with regard to the Russian-Ukrainian war (for more details see my essay in FAZ).

The memory of the First World War obscures the fact that Russia alone started the war and is thus pursuing a long-term strategy that goes far beyond the domination of Ukraine. Putin is striving to establish hegemony over Eastern Europe and, in the long run, to create a new world order together with China. Those who perceive this danger are guided by another historical parallel: The parallel of the destruction of the Versailles peace order by Nazi Germany, starting with the remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936, followed by the Munich Agreement, the annexation of Austria in 1938, and culminating in the attack on Poland in 1939. The historical comparison is drawn repeatedly by historians such as Timothy Snyder, Heinrich August Winkler and myself, and has been embraced by some conservative and green politicians. As in the 1950s, the contrast between freedom and dictatorship is once again emphasized today.

Although the parallels between Nazi Germany's aggressive foreign policy in the 1930s and Putin's

foreign and military policy today are difficult to deny, there are considerable reservations in German about projecting the memory of the Second World War onto the present. This has to do with the German memory of the Holocaust. During the Historikerstreit in the 1980s, a consensus emerged in German historiography and the culture of remembrance that the Holocaust was a singular crime. This consensus is well-founded, but it is nevertheless creating challenges for public discourse when it comes to comparing National Socialist rule with other regimes. This led to a divergence between the German historical discourse and the historical discourses of many East-Central and North-East European nations where the comparison between the totalitarian powers Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union plays a major role.

The specific character of German memory also influenced the discussion about the Russian-Ukrainian war in Germany. In Baltic and Polish discourse – and of course in Ukrainian discourse – it is widespread to describe the Russian war against Ukraine as genocidal. This characterization seems justified, given that the Russian army systematically targets the civilian population and civilian infrastructure, commits crimes against Ukrainian children and has declared its intention to destroy Ukraine as an independent nation. Nevertheless, German contemporary historians – especially Ulrich Herbert – have opposed the use of the term genocide to refer to the Russian-Ukrainian war. They also don't want to apply the term "war of extermination" to Russia, because the term was to be used exclusively for the German war in Eastern Europe. These historians argue that framing Putin's war in such terms risks relativising German war crimes and thus breaking the taboo of the German culture of remembrance (see Ulrich Herbert in TAZ and my reply to him).

Conclusion

The German debate on whether and to what extent Germany should support Ukraine in its war against Russia with arms supplies is closely linked to Germany's collective memory. For a long time, Germany's guilt for the crimes of occupation during the Second World War was largely associated with Russia – and not with Ukraine and Belarus. It is only since the Russian invasion in 2022 that the highest levels of the German government have begun to recognize the special responsibility Germany has towards Ukraine, a responsibility that also stems from the memory of the Second World War. Along with this change, it can be observed that the imperative of 'never again', closely tied to the German memory of the Second World War and especially of the Holocaust, is gradually being formulated in more abstract terms in historical-political debates, despite some resistance. 'Never again' not only means never again waging a war of aggression or commit genocide again but also supporting a nation like Ukraine that is being attacked in a brutal war in violation of international law – even if the aggressor itself (like the victim of its aggression) was invaded by Germany in the Second World War.

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