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The duty to remember "it": How Germans with and without a migration history discuss the role of the Holocaust

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Abstract

Contributing to research on how the Holocaust is interpreted in contemporary Germany, an increasingly pluralistic immigrant society with an official memory culture that has been criticized as hegemonic and univocal, this exploratory study investigates how Germans with and without a migration history talk about the Holocaust. It asks whether the emotions and attitudes of people with a migration history differ from those of Germans without a migration history. Drawing on six focus group interviews conducted with 36 participants (16 Germans without a migration history and 20 with backgrounds in the former Soviet Union, Poland, and Turkey), the study finds that interviewees embrace the idea of a "duty to remember" and that interviewees with a migration history in particular engage in relieving "the Germans," often by making comparisons with atrocities committed in other contexts. For some (non-white) interviewees, the Holocaust had broader emotional significance, and they linked it to right-wing movements in the present.

Keywords

discourse, emotions, Germany, Holocaust, interviews, memory culture, immigrants

Introduction

Germany's official memory culture regarding the Nazi past and the Holocaust has been described as dominant and as "rest[ing] on an absolutist understanding of the Holocaust's uniqueness" (Rothberg, 2022: 1318; see also Özyürek, 2023). Moreover, it has been argued that German official memory culture encompasses ideas about the spectrum of "right" emotions in relation to the Holocaust and about the special responsibility of Germans (see, for example, Özyürek, 2023: 103–129). One of the arguments put forward by critics is that such a memory culture has reached its limits in a Germany that is an immigrant society, with immigrants and their descendants drawing

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on different experiences (whether of refuge, colonialism or racism) and thus alternative practices of memory, as well as different emotions (see, for example, Moses, 2021; Özyürek, 2023; Rothberg, 2022). Significantly, it is not solely immigrants and their descendants who may deviate from what has been described as official memory discourse. Recent public opinion polls reveal that substantial segments of the German populace hold differing views, with 43% considering Holocaust remembrance important but not absolutely necessary and 40% not entirely convinced of the Holocaust's singularity (American Jewish Committee Berlin Lawrence Lee Ramer Institute (AJC), 2022: 16; see also Fiedler, 2021).

Against this backdrop, our study, which adopts an exploratory research design (see Swedberg, 2020), analyzes focus group interviews conducted with Germans without a migration history and individuals with a migration history to investigate their perceptions of the Holocaust's role in Germany. This research contributes to a growing but still limited body of empirical literature on the topic (e.g. Oeser, 2019; Özyürek, 2023). Our approach is innovative in two key ways. First, it adopts a comparative lens, interviewing Germans with and without a migration history, reflecting the evolving composition of German society. Second, the study not only compares attitudes but also examines the emotions expressed by the interviewees, thereby reflecting the significance of emotions in intellectual discourse about the "right" emotions in response to the Holocaust (Schirrmacher, 1999; see also Frevert, 2020: 289–305). In addition, recent arguments underscore the crucial yet understudied role of emotions in determining whether individuals engage with historical events and their legacies (Teeger, 2023). Our research questions are, "How do Germans with and without a migration history talk about the role of the Holocaust and the Nazi past in German politics and society, and about the role these events should play?" and "What kinds of emotions do interviewees express and find appropriate with regard to the Holocaust and the Nazi past?"

Overall, the study shows that interviewees do not seem to presuppose the singularity of the Holocaust. However, interviewees' talk also parallels elements of official discourse with regard to its rejection of notions of individual guilt and the salience of the idea of "a duty to remember." As for differences between the two groups studied, we find that interviewees with a migration history engage in "absolving" contemporary Germans from negative feelings about the Holocaust and often do so by making comparisons with atrocities committed in other contexts. Moreover, among interviewees with a migration history, non-white participants in particular expressed fear in relation to contemporary rightist movements and the Holocaust.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: The next section introduces the role of the Holocaust in the German public debate and subsequently reviews the literature that examines the opinions of Germans with a migration history. The methods section is followed by a presentation of the findings in three parts. The conclusion outlines avenues for future research.

The Holocaust in German public and intellectual debate

The role that the Holocaust has played and continues to play in discourse on German national identity cannot be overestimated. Over many decades, intellectuals, politicians and other public figures have assumed various and often highly contradictory positions on the questions of how to make sense of the Holocaust and what should follow from it in terms of foreign policy, notions of nationhood, Germans' attitudes toward their nation (e.g. pride or patriotism), and the kinds of emotions that are appropriate for Germans today in the face of the atrocities committed under the Nazi regime (e.g. guilt or shame) (for analyses of these positions and German national identity discourse, see, for example, Moses, 2007; Piwoni, 2012; Piwoni, 2013; Port, 2023 for German

memory politics more generally, see, for example, Olick, 2019; Assmann, 2011; for a comparison of memory politics in East and West Germany, see Herf, 1997). Often these positions have culminated in public controversies, such as the Historians' Debate of 1986 and 1987 (see Maier, 1988); the Reunification Debate of 1989/1990 (see Schäfer, 2002); and the debates on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, for example around the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin (Cullen, 1999), Daniel Goldhagen's (1996) book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, which raised concerns about German collective guilt (Schoeps, 1996). Another example is the controversy between the writer Martin Walser and the then President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Ignatz Bubis (Schirrmacher, 1999), sparked by Walser's (1998: 2) provocative claim that Holocaust remembrance was being used for an "instrumentalization of our disgrace [*Schande*]" (Walser, 1998: 12).

In retrospect, these debates are often interpreted as having contributed to an official culture of remembrance based on the idea that the Holocaust is unique in its break with civilization, and that contemporary Germans should take responsibility for the fact that the Holocaust was committed in the name of Germany without having to feel personally guilty or ashamed (for interpretations identifying such a hegemonic memory culture, see, for example, Biess, 2023; Fiedler, 2021; Özyürek, 2023; Rothberg, 2022; Wildt, 2025). Another component of this perceived hegemonic memory culture is the notion that it is the duty of the German state to maintain a culture of Holocaust remembrance, which includes the responsibility to combat antisemitism and to support the state of Israel. To be sure, even if many voices have praised Germany for this culture of remembrance (see, for example, Neiman, 2019), there have always been critical voices, such as that of Eike Geisel (2015). From the perspective of these critics, Germany's coming to terms with its past has been at best half-hearted, and thus a highly superficial and self-satisfied achievement, and has actually resulted in remembrance as the highest form of forgetting.

More recently, in the context of what has come to be known as *Historikerstreit 2.0*—a series of controversies in 2020 and 2021 over Germany's culture of remembrance and the legitimacy of comparing the Holocaust with other genocides (see, for example, Biess, 2023; Rothberg, 2022)—claims that such a "a powerfully univocal memory culture" (Rothberg, 2022: 1318) exists have been particularly strongly and, at times, polemically, articulated, often in conjunction with criticisms of this culture. More specifically, *Historikerstreit 2.0* included, among other incidents, a controversy around historian Jürgen Zimmerer, an expert on Germany's colonial history, who had been understood as criticizing Germany's Holocaust-centered memory and the notion of the singularity of the Holocaust. Zimmerer argued that there has been a continuity between Germans' genocide of the Nama and Herero in Southwest Africa in 1904—1908 and the genocide of the European Jews (Zimmerer, 2011). In another phase of the debate, Michael Rothberg's (2009) *Multidirectional Memory* became central and was critically discussed in conjunction with questions around acceptable forms of critique of the state of Israel and its politics (see also Rothberg, 2022). *Historikerstreit 2.0* also saw a heated controversy around a blog article by Dirk Moses (2021), in which he claimed the existence of an official and hegemonic memory culture regarding the Holocaust encompassing, in his view, the idea of the uniqueness of the Holocaust and Germany's special responsibility to Jews in Germany and loyalty to Israel. Moses called that culture, arguably sarcastically, a "catechism" and the elites enforcing it "self-appointed high priests." Perhaps ironically, the very occurrence of *Historikerstreit 2.0* casts doubt on whether such a hegemonic and, as Rothberg (2022: 1316) claims, "absolutist" understanding of the Holocaust and its interpretation actually exists or has ever existed in German public discourse (see also Friedländer, 2022; Grigat, 2023; Walser Smith, 2021).

Further contestation of allegedly hegemonic ideas about the Holocaust and its meaning in public and intellectual debate could be observed in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October and the subsequent war in Gaza, when Germany's official stance on this war and Israel's

role in it was severely criticized by several intellectuals. In this respect, some critics, again including Dirk Moses, argued that the official German interpretation of the Holocaust would make Germany "immune" to the suffering of other groups, such as in this case the Palestinians (see Port, 2024).

Finally, the rise of the far-right AfD (Alternative for Germany), which not only propagates a *völkisch* notion of nationhood but also openly downplays the Nazi era and the Holocaust (the party's parliamentary group leader Alexander Gauland referred to National Socialism as nothing more than "bird shit" in comparison to Germany's long history; see, for example, Hoffmann, 2019), casts further doubt on the existence of a comprehensive and stable official memory culture on how to interpret the Holocaust that is shared by politicians, intellectuals, and other elites.

Attitudes and emotions toward the Holocaust and the Nazi past in German immigrant society

With 28.7% of the German population having a migration background as of 2022 (Destatis, 2023), nearly a third of Germans have at least one parent who was born outside of the country. However, few representative surveys that focus on respondents' perceptions of the Holocaust and the Nazi past have differentiated between people with or without a migration history and/or a Muslim religious affiliation (see AJC, 2022; Die Zeit, 2020). These studies point to certain differences between the general population and Muslims (AJC, 2022) but not so much between respondents with and without a migration history. For instance, a study commissioned by Die Zeit (2020) used, among other differentiators, whether respondents had a migrant background or not. In this study, there were no major differences between respondents with and without a migrant background in their agreement with the statements "It is our duty as Germans to ensure that the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust is not forgotten" (79% of respondents with a migrant background agreed strongly or somewhat vs 77% of respondents without a migrant background).

Similarly, qualitative studies have started to analyze the details of the perception of the Holocaust and the Nazi past, especially among individuals who either themselves migrated from Muslim-majority countries or who are the descendants of immigrants from these countries (see, for example, Bodemann and Yurdakul, 2005, 2006; Mandel, 2008; Özyürek, 2023; Partridge, 2010; Rothberg, 2022 for a focus beyond individuals of Muslim-majority countries see Oeser, 2019 and Georgi, 2003).

An important finding of these studies is that Muslims and/or immigrants with a Turkish background may often identify or associate themselves with the Jewish victims under National Socialism. As Özyürek (2023) outlines in her ethnographic study, they experience emotions such as fear (mainly first-generation immigrants) and a sense of unfairness (mainly second- and third-generation) because discrimination against them goes, in comparison to Holocaust memory, unrecognized (but see Georgi, 2003, who outlines that such fear was common among her second generation interviewees, too). Such emotions are, however, not well received by Germans without a migrant background and so-called Holocaust educators, who claim that these young people "do not engage with the Holocaust in the 'right' way" (Özyürek, 2023: 103). Moreover, being confronted with the Holocaust, for instance at a memorial, may spark in them memories of their own trauma or that of their family members (see Partridge, 2010; Rothberg, 2022). Likewise, Oeser's (2019) study on youth and teachers in German schools, which revealed that social factors such as socioeconomic status and cultural capital have an important influence on how pupils interpret the Nazi past, also found that among youth with a migrant background, anti-racism was a primary lesson learned from the Nazi past and was often directly applied to their own experiences.

However, it has also been pointed out that, in certain cases, individuals with a migrant background may opt to appropriate German memory culture (and perform "the memory script of the repenting perpetrator in the way it was meant to be for white Germans," Özyürek, 2023: 207). In Oeser's (2019) study, for instance, some students with a migrant background appropriated German memory culture to affirm their "Germanness" and facilitate social advancement within German society (Oeser, 2019: 103–113; see also Georgi, 2003: 127–174).

Our study adds to this emerging body of literature by explicitly studying attitudes and emotions outside of the educational context. In addition, it explores how the "lived multidirectionality experienced by migrant communities" (Rothberg, 2022) is reflected in the exchange of attitudes, associations and emotions concerning the role of the Holocaust in a group discussions setting.

Data and methods

In 2023, we conducted six focus group interviews via Zoom with 36 participants recruited by a specialized agency (see also Mußotter and Piwoni, 2025a, 2025b, which are based on the same set of interviews, but analyze different parts of them and from different theoretical standpoints). Of the participants, 16 were born in Germany to German parents (with one of them having a Polish grandfather), while 20 were first- or second-generation immigrants, primarily from the former Soviet Union, Turkey, and Poland, which are the three most common origins of immigrants and their descendants in Germany (see Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF) 2023: 149). Dual citizenship was held by six respondents; one was solely a Turkish citizen, and the remaining 14 held only German citizenship. Two focus groups were conducted exclusively with Germans without a migration history (one with participants from eastern Germany). Three focus groups included only first- or second-generation migrants, while the rest were mixed. To account for the exploratory nature of our research, we sought diversity in party preferences, age, gender, marital status, place of residence, education level, and occupation. However, there was an over-representation of Berlin residents because of the recruiting agency's location (for further information on the interviewees, including their age and political orientation and the composition of the focus groups, see supplementary file).

Each interview lasted approximately 120 minutes. The interviews were framed as discussions of German society and national identity. They included questions about societal cohesion, German national identity, criteria for German-ness, and the significance of the Holocaust. Specifically, participants were asked the following questions: Would you say that the memory of the Nazi era and the Holocaust plays an important role in Germany? And how do you recognize this? Do you think that's right? Does the awareness that the Holocaust took place in Germany affect your feelings toward Germany? Prior to the interviews, participants provided written informed consent and were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. As for the status of the obtained data, we first wish to point out that we are not claiming representativeness. Rather, as is typical of exploratory research, our focus has been on "developing new and interesting hypotheses" (Swedberg, 2020: 27) regarding possible differences and similarities in emotions and attitudes toward the Holocaust among Germans with and without a migration history.

Second, it is important to bear in mind that social desirability and self-presentation pressures undoubtedly and always play a part in group discussions. However, these pressures also influence everyday interaction. As Hollander (2004: 632) points out, focus groups are primarily "a site for analyzing the collaborative construction of meaning" rather than places where "the truth" is extracted from participants. They should therefore be understood as contexts with complex interactional dynamics that impact how "truths" are negotiated and shared.

We analyzed excerpts containing discussions of the Holocaust from the transcribed focus group interviews in two separate analytical procedures. In the first procedure, we started by using "in vivo" codes to capture interviewees' opinions about the Holocaust and its significance as expressed in their own words. Subsequently, we used the constant comparative method to identify similarities and differences between the meanings expressed by the interviewees (see Boeije, 2002). We then looked specifically at patterns of consensus and disagreement for each of the focus groups and also analyzed interactional dynamics. Finally, we compared the meaning-making of Germans with and without a migration history. As has been shown, focus groups generate data on "three units of analysis, namely the individual, the group and the interaction" (Cyr, 2016: 231). In the present study, we are primarily interested in patterns of consensus and disagreement across all interviewees, but also in whether there are differences between Germans with and without a history of migration (data on the group level). In addition, we use individual-level data to illustrate such patterns and point to interactional dynamics to outline how consensus or dissensus emerged.

In the second analytical procedure we employed the technique of emotion coding (Saldana, 2013: 105–110) to capture interviewees' expressions of their own emotions and feelings, as well as those attributed to others or discussed in a broader context. We also identified denials of emotional involvement. In so doing, we relied primarily on the interviewees' verbal expressions which are "imperfect" in "conveying the embodied and relational aspects of emotions" but "must be taken as telling us something," as Holmes (2015: 63) points out. In addition, we analyzed the recordings of the focus groups to better understand the context and atmosphere surrounding emotional expressions, such as excitement. We also observed interaction dynamics, noting shifts in intensity. Afterwards, we compared emotion codes across all participants, focusing on differences and similarities between the two groups. Moreover, we explored whether interviewees adhered to specific "feeling rules," understood as "social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel" (Hochschild, 1979: 563). Such feeling rules come to the fore when either one's own or others' emotions are assessed in relation to specific topics or situations, as either fitting and appropriate or misfitting and inappropriate. To understand them, it is important to study how (specific) emotions are talked about and to assess whether they are framed as an appropriate reaction or criticized. Overall, feeling rules can be expressed explicitly and directly (e.g. demands to control an emotion), implicitly and directly (e.g. statements about "misfeelings"), or indirectly (e.g. describing an emotion as uncontrollable to the person experiencing it; for details on how to operationalize "feeling rules," see Piwoni, 2020; supplementary file). In the findings section, we highlight selected interview excerpts that exemplify key patterns, differences, and commonalities, with translations provided and occasional edits made for clarity. Interviewees are referred to using pseudonyms, and their age is given when they are first quoted. Interviewee pauses (". . .") and omissions in quotations ("[. . .]") are indicated where necessary.

Findings

"It," the inevitability of boredom and the duty to remember "it"

We used the question "Would you say that the memory of the Nazi era and the Holocaust plays an important role in Germany?" as an opener for discussion. Interestingly, in all six groups, regardless of whether interviewees had a migration history or not, participants shied away from using the term "Holocaust" or other precise descriptions (such as "the extermination of the European Jews") in their responses to the question and ensuing discussions. Instead, they resorted to pronouns or signifiers such as "this" (*das*), "it" (*es*), "this story" (*diese Geschichte*), "this topic" (*dieses Thema*), or

"something like this" (*so was*). Similarly, in five out of the six groups, interviewees' talk about "it" did not even once refer to the Jews as the main victims in Nazi Germany. Only in one group did one interviewee say, in response to a comment about how Germans had suffered in World War II: "Yes, but it [Germans' suffering] is out of proportion to what we did to the Jews. Sorry." (Edi, 21) This interviewee highlighted that what the Jews suffered at the hands of the Nazis by far exceeded German suffering.

In the literature, such marginalization of the Jewish experience in relation to the memory of the Holocaust has been described as "de-Judaisation" (Gerstenfeld, 2009: 79). "De-Judaisation" also describes the expansion of the term to include people who were murdered or died in World War II. This phenomenon of linking the Holocaust to different and diverse events was visible in the interviews we conducted, too.

For example, 32-year-old Emani, whose parents were from Lebanon, replied to the question of how she felt about the fact that the Holocaust occurred in Germany by saying that she had heard stories from people "who were there." She would feel sorry for them, but she would not associate Germany with, as she said, "the First or Second World War." She continued: "But I can understand that people who were there or who lost their grandfather or their father there, that they can't forget it. I can totally understand that." Emani's statement lacks clarity regarding whom she was pitying, but it is plausible that she was referring to those who lost family members in the Second World War, possibly as soldiers. Nevertheless, her mention of the First and Second World Wars in response to a question about the Holocaust is noteworthy.

In her examination of how German adolescents engage with the Nazi past, Oeser (2019: 71–73) observed that students often referred to the Holocaust as "it," symbolizing "absolute evil" (Oeser, 2019: 213). In our study, however, as evidenced by Emani's statement, the reference to "it" was even more vague and undefined. Significantly, only a minority of respondents emphasized the horrific nature and/or uniqueness of the Holocaust. Instead, as detailed in the following section, many interviewees drew comparisons to other genocides, wars, and atrocities when discussing the implications of the Nazi period and the Holocaust for contemporary Germany and its people.

Despite the imprecision and lack of specificity in how interviewees discussed the Nazi era and the Holocaust, the issue of saturation and boredom regarding the perceived overwhelming presence of institutionalized memory was raised in all six focus groups. This sentiment was expressed by participants from both groups, as exemplified by the following statement from Sandra, a 26-year-old German of Polish descent:

> I don't know, I keep asking myself that: when should you put it behind you? I agree that you shouldn't forget things, and terrible things have happened. But when is the right moment? When do you put it behind you? When do we stop talking about the war all the time in history lessons? I don't know. These are always open questions. And I also wonder whether my children or my grandchildren will still be dealing with it at some point in the future or how it will all develop.

Sandra used a series of rhetorical questions to express her dissatisfaction with the continuing memory of "it," "things," and "terrible things" in history lessons and German society more generally (and society's inability to "put it behind"). In contrast, 49-year-old Markus (no migration history), in response to an introductory question about the memory of the National Socialist era and the Holocaust, stated:

> But it's a bit like that, I have the feeling that people of my generation and even younger people can no longer hear that. Which I can partly understand, because they can't help what happened 60 years ago. [. . .]

> I don't think it's any use constantly telling people: "Remember what happened 70 years ago and don't let it happen again." I think it has to be a good mix. It certainly needs to be remembered.

Like Sandra, Markus did not express personal boredom but rather referred to "people of my generation and even younger people," suggesting an external observer's viewpoint. This pattern is typical among participants discussing saturation: they do not say that they are personally bored but instead present boredom as an inevitable consequence, something beyond individual control and therefore "normal."

As outlined by Teeger (2023: 3), "boredom supports [. . .] historical distancing, allowing the past—and its legacies—to be dismissed." Teeger (2023: 30) further highlights that when emotions such as boredom dominate, "the past can be remembered but not engaged." This is because the past does not resonate emotionally. Interestingly, and across all interviewees and focus groups, the one statement that seemed to never trigger disagreement was that "it" should be remembered so that "something like it" could not happen again. Notably, this is consistent with the findings of the aforementioned study commissioned by Die Zeit (2020), which found that the majority of respondents, both with and without a migrant background, agreed with statements on Germans having a duty to ensure that the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust is not forgotten. Even Markus, who is quoted above stating that there is not "any use constantly telling people 'Remember what happened 70 years ago and don't let it happen again,'" states: "It certainly needs to be remembered," which appears contradictory. Another statement that is typical in this respect, also with regard to the relativizations used, comes from 22-year-old Tim: "And that we keep it permanently in the back of our minds that it happened, that we take care, more or less, that it never happens again." However, and importantly, what exactly should be remembered remained undefined.

Emotions "they" should (not) have

In contrast to the "abstractness" and lack of precision with which the Holocaust was referred to, interviewees' discussions on the consequences that it should (or: should not) have for contemporary Germany and its people were concrete, focusing in particular on two key issues: the instrumentalization of past atrocities and the emotions that Germans should feel about the Holocaust.

Both interviewees with and without a migration history said that, in their eyes, references to the Nazi past and the Holocaust were often used to push specific (often monetary) interests. As this opinion may appear antisemitic, it is important to point out that none of the interviewees referenced Jews or Israel when providing examples to support this view. Herman, 46, who had a background in the Soviet Union and came to Germany as a teenager, stated:

> I also think that there are other countries that, for example, always misuse history as a cudgel. I'm saying now—I really don't want to offend anyone or anything like that—but when Poland, for example, says, "We demand reparations." Does anyone ask the French what happened 300 years ago? And these reparation payments or other stories? Of course, it was terrible, but always, always coming around the corner with it, I assume that the governments just want to make a good deal out of it.

Other interviewees pointed out how German politicians were called "Nazis" or compared to Hitler when they called for unpopular policies in the European Union (such as former Chancellor Angela Merkel in relation to the implementation of austerity measures in Greece). Often, and in contrast to conversations about "it," interviewees became quite energetic when pointing out such mechanisms, as shown in the following example:

Dagmar (26):	Let's assume we now have a person who has done something bad. From a German perspective, would anyone dare to say that this person has done something bad if this person has a migrant background? Because as soon as you say something, from a German point of view, it's always labelled, "Okay, you're a Nazi now." Instead of just seeing what the situation is about. [. . .]
Jens (age unknown):	I'd like to intervene directly, because I think what you're saying is really great. That's true–in my experience too. That's why I said at the beginning, I'm a security man [the interviewee works in the security service]. That's why, when it comes to interaction with non-Germans, with foreigners, I'm always on the front lines. [Because] with me, of course, it's very difficult to say I'm a Nazi, given that I am half-Greek. [. . .]
Sergei (40):	I find that interesting. Exactly what you just said, Jens. As soon as you don't like something, you're immediately reminded of this German past.

In this conversation among Germans with a migration history, the participants strongly agreed with one another. Jens, a German with a Greek mother, contributed an example from his professional life, which resonates strongly with Sergei's view that "this German past" is immediately brought up "as soon as you don't like something." The intense resonance of the argument among Germans with a migration history is remarkable because the interviewees themselves do not seem to have personally experienced it. At no point do they say "I" or "we"; instead they speak of "a German perspective" and "everyone" (Dagmar), and Sergei uses pronouns such as "you." Importantly, their perspective is congruent with similar views shared by some of the German interviewees without a migration history.

We also found striking parallels between interviewees with and without a migration history in responses to the question of what should follow from the Nazi past and the Holocaust for contemporary Germany and Germans. Emani, for instance, expressed her conviction that

> Germany should be forgiven for what happened there. [. . .] The people are all gone. Most of those who were involved are dead. And it's a label that Germans bear, even though the current generation or people [my] age or younger Germans have nothing to do with it. And they are often labelled as racists by foreigners. That's also mean. We don't want to be labelled as terrorists either.

Emani is absolutely sure that Germany and Germans "should be forgiven." However, and although she holds German citizenship and was born in Germany, Emani does not include herself in the group of Germans–she contrasts "Germans" with a "we." Moreover, she uses her group's experience (most probably using "we" to refer to Muslims) of being "labelled as terrorists" to generate empathy for Germans who are "often labelled as racists by foreigners." Other participants strongly agreed and offered yet other arguments:

Herman (46):	And then there are other countries that have. . . . So when I think of Stalin, for example, has Russia apologized for that? Well, I don't know of any apology.
Can (52):	Did the Americans apologize for killing the Indians?
Emani:	What they did in Iraq?
Can:	That was also against international law at the time.

Anka, a 43-year-old German of Polish descent, went one step further when exculpating contemporary Germany by highlighting: "So now back to the question of the Holocaust. As I said, I think it

took place almost 80 years ago. It could have taken place anywhere else." In particular, her belief that the Holocaust "could have taken place anywhere else" serves as an argument to "free" contemporary Germans from feelings of guilt and responsibility.

Overall, Germans with a migration history drew on the examples of other nations and the atrocities committed by them in an attempt to explain why they thought that Germany as a state did not have a specific responsibility and that Germans did not need to feel guilty or ashamed of the Nazi past and the Holocaust. Moreover, in contrast to intellectual discourse and its fine-grained differentiations between "guilt," "shame," "disgrace," and "responsibility" (Schirrmacher, 1999), interviewees with a migration history did not make such differentiations, in particular using the terms "guilt" and "responsibility" interchangeably.

The opinion of 39-year-old Alina is especially noteworthy in this regard. Having migrated from Russia to Germany as a child, she pointed to how Russians handle the Stalin era in everyday life as a positive example in relation to Germany:

> So, Stalin also killed a lot of people, but somehow the way this is viewed is different in Russia. Yes, well, that's just, it's all taken with a bit of humor. People make jokes about it and take it with a bit of humor. And sure, you should know what happened, but you shouldn't have this heavy responsibility all the time, so to speak. This feeling of guilt, of carrying yourself like that, I don't think that's good for the people either. Somehow, yes, they always feel like that, whether they always have to apologize like that, every time, that sometimes they're German or I don't know. That's my feeling now. When I compare the two countries, how it's dealt with in Russia and here in Germany.

Here, Alina does not differentiate between responsibility, notions of guilt and feeling the need to apologize. Instead, she suggests an alternative "feeling rule" for grappling with difficult historical legacies: non-attachment and humor. Arguably, Alina's positive portrayal of how Russians today cope with the Stalin era by joking and not having a "heavy responsibility" could be seen as supporting Rothberg's (2011) observation that not all forms of comparative memory serve ethical purposes.

In contrast, Germans without a migration history seemed to be much more emotionally involved in debates around guilt and responsibility as the following exchange illustrates:

Kathrin (60):	So, you shouldn't forget that under any circumstances. There is a responsibility. But I think you should perhaps stop feeling guilty; you don't have to feel guilty. It's not my fault that my grandparents were somehow involved. It's not my fault. It's not my fault.
Michael (62):	No, that's what I just said. That's always the narrative that the AfD and some right-wing extremists say: that we're told we're personally to blame. You have no personal guilt. Neither do I. None of us, none of us who were children after '45 or during the Nazi era, are to blame either. But we do have a responsibility.

Both Kathrin and Michael make a clear distinction between guilt and responsibility. They seem to agree on the imperative of responsibility, and responsibility seems to include the duty to remember: "you shouldn't forget that under any circumstances." However, Kathrin repeats: "It's not my fault" three times, and she did so quite emphatically, almost angrily—as if in an attempt to fend off guilt. In response, Michael explains that the idea that Germans today are asked to feel guilty is a narrative of the right-wing AfD. He tries to confirm the "feeling rule" that he believes is actually valid in his eyes: "You have no personal guilt. [. . .] But we do have a responsibility."

Among Germans without a migration history, the notion of responsibility was frequently mentioned and was indeed referred to as a non-disputable fact. Most often it was linked to the duty to remember—as in the exchange between Kathrin and Michael. However, and as outlined above, it was often unclear what exactly should be remembered (note that Kathrin says that "that" should not be forgotten). Only three interviewees without a migration history became more concrete and established a link to fighting racism and current rightist movements. For example, 24-year-old Linda stated:

> The reason to talk about this is, of course, firstly out of respect for the victims and the bereaved, but above all to prevent anything like this from happening [again]. And perhaps some people translate that too much one-to-one: we must not build any more concentration and labor camps. But this culture of remembrance and prevention is actually about ensuring that people are no longer discriminated against on a massive scale. [. . .] That's why I think it's fatal to say we're going to stop with the culture of remembrance, because we're not fulfilling the purpose of this culture of remembrance at all. We are currently looking at developments in which people are suffering under oppressive systems, be it European border protection or the resurgence of antisemitism and racism in Germany, where criminal offenses are increasing every year. [. . .] That's why we shouldn't stop there in any case and perhaps continue even harder.

Linda offers a strong and well-articulated explanation of what she believes memory culture should mean: fighting against all kinds of prejudice, discrimination and "oppressive systems." It is important to note that Linda is one of only two interviewees (out of 36) who explicitly mentions the fight against contemporary antisemitism as something to be concluded from the fact that the Holocaust happened.

While only three German interviewees without a migration history linked remembrance of the Holocaust to contemporary struggles against racism and contemporary rightist movements, the connection was made more often, and in a different way, among Germans with a migration history—especially interviewees from Muslim-majority countries—as discussed in the next section.

Feeling and warding off fear: relating the past to contemporary right-wing movements and the experience of racism

In a focus group conducted with Germans with a migration history, 50 year-old Zeynep, who was born in Germany and had a Turkish background, responded first to the question of whether the memory of the Nazi era and the Holocaust played an important role in Germany as follows: "You hear on the news every day about people who still want to get that time [back] and are actively doing something about it, [so] you can't forget those times." She then explained that it was the success of right-wing movements in particular that kept the memory alive for her, but she also said:

> I believe that it's [the memory of the Nazi era and the Holocaust] simply no longer relevant to a large part of the population [. . .] because people have simply changed and many reject it [remembering the Nazi era and the Holocaust]. But when things like this keep coming up in the news, you're always reminded of what it was like back then and how fragile our current democracy is.

Other interviewees quickly turned the discussion to how they felt the German past had been "instrumentalized" and used to manipulate Germany as a state and Germans in general, and proceeded to make arguments that exonerated contemporary Germans. Zeynep, however, and at a later point, offered a very different, personal, and highly emotional account:

> For me, it [the Holocaust] means that I don't have complete trust. I lack it. [. . .] The current events, the fact that the AfD has so much support. I live here in Berlin, and so many things from the right-wing scene happen here every day, which makes me wary and suspicious. And this history, what happened with the Holocaust, this whole Nazi era. Of course, we had this at school for a very long time; I have it in the back of my mind, but because I also had to deal with these people [ordinary Germans] for almost 30 years in home nursing, I don't have 100% trust. In these families, I've seen time and again over 30 years how people from the Nazi era have passed these thoughts on to their children, to their grandchildren. That's why it never died out, that's why it's still there and gaining strength again. [. . .] It's not past, it's still current. [. . .] But I was attacked several times on my own body and had several experiences with the right-wing scene, with these National Socialists. I had several encounters. [. . .] We must not forget this worldwide. It is a lesson, and we can learn from it. Damn it all!

Here, Zeynep clearly expresses emotions, such as a lack of confidence and trust in contemporary Germany and Germans, wariness, suspicion, and deep worry. The emotion that is possibly most striking and that informs the entire account is fear. Zeynep describes how she was personally and physically attacked "several times" by "National Socialists," and how she has experienced that older generations, "people from the Nazi era," do not only harbor "these thoughts" but have also passed them "on to their children." Indeed, anti-Muslim racism, often directed against Turks and their descendants, the largest immigrant group in Germany (see BAMF, 2023: 149), is a distressing and well-documented reality (Stichs and Pfündel, 2023). Zeynep does not blame anyone specifically for the current rise of the extreme right, but she argues that the Holocaust and the Nazi past offer a lesson from which "we can learn" (note that she includes herself). And she concludes emphatically: "Damn it all!"

As shown by Özyürek (2023), young Muslims may compare their everyday experiences of racism in contemporary Germany with those of Jews in the Nazi era; rising emotions of fear, however, are often not taken seriously, dismissed by German Holocaust educators as wrong, or interpreted as envy or "victim competition" (see Özyürek, 2023: 111–112). Within her focus group, which included only Germans with migration history, Zeynep's comment was not directly scolded as expressing "wrong" emotions, but it still received substantial criticism, with one participant doubting that rightist thoughts have actually been passed on since the Nazi era and another arguing that Germans without a migration history are discriminated against in certain neighborhoods, too.

In another focus group, also composed only of Germans with migration history, we observed the following exchange between two interviewees:

Emani:	But Germany has learned. It's very unlikely that something similar will happen again in Germany. I don't think so.
Can:	No, they'll make sure that doesn't happen.
Emani:	Yes, so something like the Second World War, where one ethnic group was wiped out or several ethnic groups that didn't fit into someone's image were wiped out, won't happen.
Can:	But the conditions were there then.
Emani:	Yes, back then.
Can:	But somebody provided that, that path and "resist the beginnings" and so on. . . . And now they're [referring to the AfD] slowly starting. [. . .] And the people who vote for them are quite a few. And they're not just an East German phenomenon.
Emani:	But they're even fewer than all the other parties put together.

Can: Well, yes, yes, yes, but there are areas where they have an influx. And if they have the field where they can play their game, then that's what they play. And then you can't boo afterwards and say, "Yes, why do they vote for that party?"

Emani: Yes, but they only vote for them because they're unhappy with the other politicians. And in recent years, the politicians have only screwed up with corona and inflation.

Herman: For example, we also have a yuppie as finance minister, so. . . .

This dialogue between Emani, of Lebanese descent, and Can, whose parents are from Turkey (both interviewees are German citizens), is intriguing, as they navigate their concerns about the rise of the AfD and its potential consequences. They exchange arguments that seek reassurance about the current political climate while also drawing parallels to the rise of the National Socialists in the 1930s. Their conversation is marked by a palpable fear, yet they ultimately conclude that the AfD's growing support is primarily due to dissatisfaction with "the other politicians." This sentiment is emphasized by Herman, who criticizes Germany's finance minister—at the time of the interview Christian Lindner of the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP)—as a "yuppie."

Overall, and across all the focus groups, the notion that fear is a legitimate and appropriate emotion in response to the rise of right-wing movements due to Germany's Nazi past was contested and challenged, perhaps paradoxically, by racialized individuals themselves.

Discussion and conclusion

This study adds to the growing literature on "lived multidirectionality" (Rothberg, 2022) in German immigrant society, extending beyond youth and educational contexts to examine attitudes and emotions among ordinary adult citizens with and without a migration history. There are three points we wish to discuss further here, as we believe that our exploratory study suggests fruitful avenues for future research.

First, the relationship between ordinary people's talk about the role of the Holocaust and the Nazi past and what have been described as hegemonic notions in the German public is not straightforward. On the one hand, the singularity of the Holocaust was not mentioned even once. Furthermore, comparisons to other genocides were common, especially among interviewees with a migration history who did not view comparing the Holocaust to other genocides as taboo. On the other hand, in line with what has been identified as a hallmark of official discourse, it was often mentioned, without generating dissent, that "we" have a "duty to remember it"—with "it" often remaining undefined.

In addition, guilt was deemed inappropriate for Germans without a migration history, with a focus on responsibility instead. In particular, interviewees with a migration history aimed to absolve contemporary Germans of guilt. However, the emotionality with which some Germans without a migration history discussed the question of guilt indicates that emotions such as guilt and shame still play a role for some Germans, who may engage in mechanisms to suppress or reject them (*Schuldabwehr*) (see, for example, Frie, 2017; Salzborn, 2020).

It is also noteworthy that there was no comment on Germany's responsibility toward Israel in relation to the Holocaust, even though this notion is closely intertwined with Germany's culture of remembrance. However, the interviews were conducted in summer 2023. It is reasonable to expect that interviewees would have reacted differently in 2024, just a few months after Hamas attacked

Israel, and in the current situation of war, in which Germany's support for Israel is receiving some international criticism.

Regarding the "responsibility to remember" so that "it never happens again," it was evident that respondents had diverse understandings of what "it" refers to, which were not limited to the Holocaust. Yet, this ambiguity may also present opportunities for individuals to interpret history in such a way that it feels relevant to them in their everyday lives. For instance, Linda connects the duty to remember with present-day anti-racism efforts. Similarly, Zeynep's fear of "today's National Socialists" and her plea "We must not forget this worldwide," illustrate that the duty to remember is more than mere rhetoric—it is an expression of deeply felt concerns by Germans with a migration history and represents a stark contrast to feelings of boredom and historical distancing. Future research could further explore how different groups, including those with a migration history, give substance to this "duty to remember" and when and how it becomes relevant in their lives.

Second, and in line with previous research, we found that people with a migration history have different histories, memories, and experiences to draw on, resulting in what Rothberg (2022) prominently argues is "lived multidirectionality." However, in the case of the interviewees in our study, we also found that such multidirectionality can have ethically problematic aspects, resulting from the drawing of certain types of comparisons. In this context, we would like to recall Alina's suggestion that Germans might learn from how Russians remember the Stalin era, but also from other comparisons made with countries that "have not apologized." In our data, comparisons to other genocides or states that have committed atrocities were mainly used to "exonerate" Germany and contemporary Germans, rather than to establish ethical links with the past by focusing on the victims of these genocides. While Rothberg (2011: 523, 525) acknowledges that in the public sphere "remembering one event" does not necessarily "erase others from view," he also emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between productive memory and forms that may "lead to competition, appropriation or trivialization." Future research should critically assess the productivity and ethical implications that follow from individuals' relating to various pasts in multidirectional ways (see also Arnold and Bischoff, 2023).

Third, our study not only revealed distinctions between interviewees with and without a migration history but also indicated that there may be significant variation among different immigrant communities and their descendants which could be explored in future research. While some second-generation immigrants from Muslim-majority countries (primarily Turkey in this study) associated Holocaust memory with their experiences of racialization, there were also second-generation immigrants, particularly from the former Soviet Union and Poland, who challenged such associations. While existing literature often focuses on minorities from Muslim-majority countries (not least due to accusations of antisemitism), immigrants and their descendants from the former Soviet Union (the largest group in Germany with around 4 million people; see Destatis, 2023) and Poland (the third largest, with around 2.2 million) also warrant attention. Our findings suggest that their perspectives on the Holocaust and Nazi past may diverge from both those of Germans without a migration history and of non-white immigrants and their descendants. However, given the exploratory nature of this study and the small number of participants from each group, further research is needed to explore such differences. It could do so, for example, by focusing on refugees from Syria and Afghanistan and their descendants, on whom public debate in Germany has increasingly focused.

Relatedly, and although the participants in this study were recruited in West and East Germany with the aim of making the sample as diverse as possible, we did not focus on differences between interviewees with and without a migration history in both parts of Germany. Given the different

memory cultures in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) (see Herf, 1997), future interview-based research may want to explore such differences.

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Supplemental material

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