Germany-Deutschland

Collective Memories

Initial euphoria soon gave way to disappointment, as the challenges of moving from a state socialist to a capitalist economy became apparent – especially the closure of unviable industry and massive job losses. Eastern Germans began to feel like "second class citizens" in their country and nostalgia for the security of the socialist system emerged. The divisions between East and West are still apparent today, including in terms of politics – the right-populist party "Alternative for Germany" enjoys significantly more success in the eastern states. Germany has dealt thoroughly and publicly with its history as a perpetrator nation, it is often praised internationally for the candour and rigour with which it has addressed this past. However, significant divisions remain in the way that East and West Germans think about the GDR.

I see propaganda

"I think the older I get the more I reflect on this past [of state socialism] and the more I actually value it because I think it has given me a much more nuanced look at things. I see propaganda much earlier than other people. And it's interesting, also here now with the propaganda that sometimes goes on with avoiding certain topics and focusing on other topics, so the population just doesn't get suspicious, I find that very interesting, the similarities there."

War films

"I have never experienced negative attitudes towards me because of my nationality, never. The people are very positive towards Germans and that surprised me. Because if you look at the tabloid press or war films, which are constantly on TV, you would think the Brits hate the Germans but that's not actually the case."

Never rely on the system

"I think that's what I've taken from this past, from these system changes, whether that's the Nazi-Reich, or the dissolution of the GDR, how quickly that went. That you can never rely on the system around you being stable, just because that's all you know."

Britannia Rules the Waves

"I had a key experience … I was here in the 1990s as an exchange student… And my host family took me with them to Birmingham to a concert. It was Last Night of the Proms. And there was flag waving, singing songs about how great Britain is, Britannia Rules the Waves. And I think, I was so shocked… Because in the nineties, flags, that was all about Nazis for me. At least German flags. I also know how much I disliked this fashion in Great Britain in the nineties: these army coats with the German flag… To me, army and soldiers and Nazis, that was all really bad. And I think I then learnt in England – well sure, they can celebrate themselves for different reasons, but I also thought: well, the Empire. I'm glad there is more of a discussion starting about that now. But they were definitely like: the Empire was great, there was nothing bad about it."

It could happen again

"And very often, when I think about or read about something that's on the news, I keep thinking, it could happen again. It's that fear. It could happen again, it is happening again, when you see the news. Yugoslavia is one example, the genocide in ex-Yugoslavia. It can happen again, anywhere in the word. And if it happens in your country, even if it happened in the 1930s, 1940s, and I was born in the 1980s. Of course that's not my lived experience. But it still touches me, because it happened in my country. … And you don't want to repeat it. But you know that the Neo-Nazis have a big presence in Germany, still."

Nazi thing

"In the beginning at university, people were showing the Hitler salute and so on. I still get angry at that. And then an apology, that it was a joke. And I just thought, 'Oh God'. And then you are typically German and say, 'But that's not funny'. … And then I was thinking, well, if they find it funny here, then why do I feel so bad about it? … No matter what I do, I'm the stupid German… And what I really dislike … if someone at work is strict or whatever: 'Oh, he's such a Nazi.' … And I know that former colleagues also called me Hitler behind my back. … So that's a conflict, being German, there is always this Nazi thing, that will never end."

Never again

"In Germany we have internalised this 'never again' of exclusion and prosecution of a group, up to the Holocaust. I think that plays a role in my perception of the anti-refugee discourse you get here. I find that terrible, that a group is dehumanised like that, the kind of comments you sometimes read online and so on. As if they were not human. And I think there it plays a role, that we have internalised our past."

You are not part of that

"I remember, I had a hairdresser's appointment one or two days after the Brexit referendum. And I had known the hairdresser for so and so many years. And then it was all about these immigrations. That was the big topic. I say, 'You know, me too. I'm a migrant, too.' 'Yeah, no. You are not part of that. You are different.' I say, 'How am I different? I am one of those.' After all, most EU migrants are like me. They have learned the language. They work in Great Britain. They pay into the pension fund. They pay taxes. So what's the difference?"

I've never seen myself as a migrant

"I've never seen myself as a migrant … I've come to live in England because it's part of Europe and you could choose to live wherever you want to. … whilst you might think of a Polish community or of an immigrant community, I've never seen myself being part of that. … how I would see the term 'migrant' is about moving to another country where living conditions are better or where you're choosing to deliberately move to another country and I dunno, that just wasn't part of the decision. … maybe other people do see me as a migrant although … I don't know whether the German community is seen like that as much as other communities."
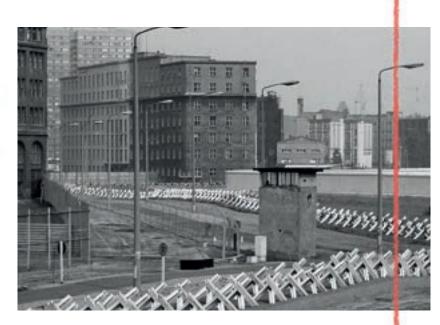

The good old days

"There's certainly certain people who will not come to terms with the past in the UK, Britain lost its empire after the second world war, so they lost a lot of stuff and it's down to us because we caused this, so when you see these programmes on TV or the fashion shows or whatever, it's always 1940s, they love that period when everything was really nice still, the good old days before it all went downhill … if you have discussions here with people there is a patriotism which we as Germans don't have because we were not allowed to have it. … I would love to see a history book that's used here just to get a sense what they actually teach, but I know from conversations certain things are just not covered, there is this glorification of the past, but there is no healthy coming to terms with the past, which Germans had to do many times and Germans in general and then East Germans as well, we had to do it so many times and it gives you a more neutral view of the past I think, it's not tinted with political glorification, which unfortunately they still have here."

Two World Wars, one World Cup

"I think I only really started dealing with my German history once I lived abroad. In the beginning I found it quite odd that there were so many jokes here. In the beginning I didn't get it at all… at university, people were saying 'Two World Wars, one World Cup' and I didn't get it, because I knew nothing about football. And I thought, yes, two world wars, I know what happened there. But I didn't get that it's about winning and losing. Because what I learned growing up is that war is always bad. That everyone loses in a war. That there are no winners when people die, when millions are killed."

• Hamburg

• Berlin

• Munich