

### **History of Memory**

My chief research interest is writing the history of how a society remembers its past, as well as how a society mourns its dead who lived in this past. More specifically, my research examines the history of public memorial days that mourned victims of the Second World War in post-1945 Germany. Historiographically, much attention has been devoted in recent decades to documenting Germans' hesitance to completely acknowledge the crimes committed in the name of the German people during the Third Reich. At the same time, there also exists much evidence of German society's wide-ranging political and cultural rebuilding across the post-war decades, with the peaceful reunification of the two German states in 1990 and the nation's strong preference for diplomacy over military engagement representing two recent examples of such reform. I seek to explain how these two stories intersect: how Germans could have successfully crafted a peaceful, democratic society while at the same time remaining largely silent and unwilling to remember their fascist history.

To answer this question, I study a variety of sources, including official published speeches from memorial ceremonies, private internal deliberations from planning committees, correspondence and counterproposals from the Protestant Church in Germany, negotiations and rulings from government ministers, as well as reactions (positive and negative) from the German public. Using this diverse collection of voices, I prove that official remembrance ceremonies on *Volkstrauertag* in Bonn and the *Gedenktage für die Opfer des Faschismus* in East Berlin capitalized on the context of Germans revising their attitudes toward warfare after 1945, and outlined how audiences should understand and remember the lives and deaths of the victims of the war. By illustrating the extents and limits to which these new cultural appraisals of the dead were publicly debated and popularly accepted, my research demonstrates a qualitative shift over time in the discourses of war, combat death, and wartime casualties, changes that can help explain the slowness with which Germans turned to discussing and remembering the Holocaust.

### **Cultural History of War**

In a larger sense, I see myself interrogating the cultural history of war and war's effects on societies. While more traditional operational military histories are immensely valuable to understanding armies' fortunes and soldiers' experiences in battle, I strongly believe that the battlefield and the uniformed services comprise only one part of an immensely complex story. Moreover, given the continued presence of large numbers of American armed forces in and outside of combat zones around the world, it is important to confront audiences with the historical reality that war is not an event strictly confined to a formal battlefield. Furthermore, soldiers and civilians alike should know that humans' individual and collective attitudes toward military institutions and warfare are products of historical circumstances and cultural construction, thus open to changes over time.

My research into the history of public mourning holidays in post-war Germany has shown that Germans rather quickly adopted a skepticism toward warfare and military institutions after 1945, despite a long-held and deeply entrenched system of values that once held warfare and military service in high regard. Despite some exceptions, German political leaders, church leaders, and military cemetery caretakers all presented the Second World War and the experience of wartime death to their audiences as negative, undesirable events. To be sure, the shift away from remembering soldiers as models of patriotism and selfless sacrifices took place unevenly. Yet the overall history indicates that, by the early 1970s, Germans generally agreed that peace was preferable to war, and they came to this conclusion due to the pain of suffering so many

dead casualties in the last war, as well as their certainty that another war would only bring the same fate.

### **Memory as social action**

Although my work prioritizes the officially-sanctioned and centrally-planned memorial ceremonies taking place in Germany's public spheres, future work will further explore the tension between ceremony organizers at different levels of Germans society, as well as more completely explain differences of opinion between representatives of memorial organizations, religious institutions, government agencies, and civil society more broadly. On the most local level, individuals or families sought to mourn their dead members publicly and emotionally while, on the larger community- or national levels, Germans were instructed to collectively remember only specific versions of this history and these dead members.

The potential for conflict within this process of selecting memories and refining them over time leaves a rich field of sources and questions for the historian to ponder. Moreover, the dynamics of German history in the post-1945 period require changes and continuities to be interpreted within several overlapping contextual frameworks, such as the transition from occupation to sovereignty, domestic political concerns over lingering connections to the fascist past, the perceived necessity of military rearmament and integration into defensive alliances, and larger diplomatic concerns related to the Cold War. To these more easily-identifiable structural conditions must be added the less-visible contexts of different generations' changing relationships to the Nazi past, an urban/rural dichotomy relating to the place of cemeteries and the dead within the community, as well as a gendered set of expectations for German women and German men confronting loss in the wake of the war and Nazi regime.

By harnessing the potential in each of these interpretive lenses, my goals are to both create a fuller history of these public mourning holidays, but also to capitalize on the notion of interpreting memory as a force capable of motivating "social actions" (Confino/Fritzsche), thereby rendering a history of memory that wields the explanatory power that is often difficult to trace in studies of narrative and representation.