
German Government's WWII Memory Building on Commemorative Days, 1945–2025

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Abstract

Contemporary international relations are deeply influenced by historical reflection, and how a state deals with its legacy directly affects its international image and identity. Germany's postwar reckoning with the Second World War serves as a paradigmatic case, where the construction of cultural memory reveals an evolution of historical consciousness shaped largely by official initiatives. Cultural memory, understood as the transmission of historical memory through cultural symbols, in the German context refers specifically to the ongoing critical engagement with Nazi crimes and the Holocaust. This memory is not static but has undergone a tortuous development from initial rejection and silence to active assumption of responsibility, eventually becoming a core component of German national identity. Memorial days, as state-sponsored vehicles, function both as pivot points for historical reflection and as witnesses to the transformation of cultural memory. Focusing on the commemorative date of 8 May (the end of the war in Europe), this paper analyzes the dynamic nature of German cultural memory. The findings show that in the early postwar period, German society resisted the notion of "collective guilt," and under Adenauer the government maintained a conservative stance. Brandt's "Warsaw Genuflection" marked a turn toward active remorse. Under Kohl, the concept of a "spiritual-moral turnaround" was advanced, and the Nazi past gradually became "normalized" in public discourse. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Holocaust memory has been integrated more deeply into national identity, with an increasingly ritualized and educational focus on 8 May. Germany's experience demonstrates that confronting historical truth is essential for building a peaceful identity. Its path toward reconciliation through cultural memory offers a reference for the international community, promoting a shared commitment to learning from history and cherishing peace.

Keywords

cultural memory, German government, 8 May, Second World War, collective remembrance, historical reconciliation

1. Introduction

In recent years, the international landscape has grown increasingly volatile, with ongoing conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and the Israeli-Palestinian dispute underscoring a profound transformation of our era. Historical legacies often lurk beneath the surface of present-day tensions, making it all the more important to handle the relationship between past and present wisely. In this context, Germany's postwar reckoning with its Nazi past offers a particularly instructive case. As the initiator of the Second World War, Germany

underwent a long and tortuous process of reflecting on its crimes, eventually developing a distinctive tradition of cultural memory. Yet how exactly did the official memory culture evolve over eight decades? And what role did the government play in shaping it? These questions warrant closer examination.

Commemorative dates serve as powerful vehicles for cultural memory, as they provide recurring, state-sanctioned occasions that shape collective remembrance through ritual and public discourse. Among these, 8 May – the day of Germany’s unconditional surrender and Europe’s liberation – holds a particularly significant position in the German context. Its dual symbolism has made it a focal point for negotiating the meaning of the Nazi past, and over time it has become a key site where official interpretations of history are articulated and contested. Indeed, the annual commemorations of 8 May have functioned as a barometer of Germany’s evolving relationship with its own history, reflecting broader shifts in national identity and international standing.

Scholars have already explored Germany’s WWII commemorative practices from various angles. Jan-Holger Kirsch (1999) systematically examined the 8 May commemorations in both East and West Germany as well as in the united country, demonstrating from theoretical and empirical perspectives how this date came to occupy a central place in the politics of memory, eventually turning into a key vehicle for acknowledging guilt and constructing democratic identity [1]. Meng Zhongjie (2015), focusing on the Holocaust memorial day, showed how Germany embedded historical reflection into public ceremonies, effectively addressing contemporary issues such as the resurgence of right-wing populism and the challenges of European integration [2]. These works offer valuable insights into the functions of memorial days. Nevertheless, they tend to concentrate more on the socio-cultural effects of commemorative activities, while giving less systematic attention to the government’s proactive strategies across different historical phases, especially over the long term. Moreover, few studies have treated 8 May as a continuous official discourse tool to examine how the government adjusted its historical narrative in response to shifting domestic and international circumstances. In other words, the dynamic interaction between official commemorative dates and the government’s evolving reflection policies remains an area that could benefit from further exploration.

Building on these considerations, the present study adopts the framework of cultural memory theory and uses 8 May as a focal point for observing the German government’s memory construction. The government’s official stance has been especially influential in moulding public perceptions and fostering national cohesion. By analysing the changing official interpretations of this date from 1945 onwards – across all relevant political periods – the study aims to uncover the internal logic of official memory politics and its developmental trajectory, and to discuss how this process has affected German national identity and international standing. In doing so, this research hopes to deepen our understanding of Germany’s postwar path of reflection, while also offering a modest reference for other societies grappling with difficult historical legacies.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Memory

Building on the theory of collective memory, Aleida and Jan Assmann developed the conceptual pair of “communicative memory” and “cultural memory.” Individual memory, they argue, is always embedded in a social and collective dimension. To capture this social aspect, they proposed the notion of communicative memory – a form of memory that arises through interpersonal exchange and dialogue between individuals and groups. In this sense, communicative memory shares a structural homology with Halbwachs’ collective memory, which is why the Assmanns also use the term “collective memory” interchangeably with “communicative memory” [3].

Aleida Assmann points out that communicative memory typically lasts only three to four generations (about 80 years), hence it is also referred to as “society’s short-term memory” [3]. Its storage medium is the biological carrier – the human brain – allowing people to communicate directly without external aids. Once intergenerational oral transmission ceases, this form of memory fades away. Cultural memory, in contrast, transcends such temporal limitations. Jan Assmann emphasises that “we should not confine the concept of memory to individual memory and its neural basis, nor stop at the somatic boundaries of the individual in memory research” [4]. Halbwachs’ theory, he notes, “long resisted entering the domain of symbolic and cultural frameworks of memory, which it regarded as an insurmountable boundary” [4]. To overcome this, Jan

Assmann argues that writing can preserve memory beyond bodily and physical connections, achieving lasting continuity. Aleida Assmann, for her part, highlights the role of literature, art, media, and public places of commemoration in the construction and dissemination of cultural memory [5].

Compared with communicative memory, cultural memory has a much longer temporal horizon, as it is anchored in stable media such as texts, rituals, myths, images, and dances. In brief, communicative memory is the everyday, life-world form of memory transmitted through social interaction and is largely isomorphic with collective memory; cultural memory, by contrast, is a long-term, supra-everyday memory that outlives the generational limits of collective memory, and it is passed on primarily through media or carriers. Aleida Assmann views culture as a “diachronic relationship between communication, memory, and media” (where “media” here means carriers) [6]. In the present study, the terms “carrier,” “medium,” and “communicative tool” are used interchangeably, as they all refer to the various forms – written texts, oral traditions, institutions, monuments, festive rituals, digital media, etc. – that enable the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, information, and tradition, thereby ensuring the durability and continuity of cultural memory.

2.2 Commemorative Days as Carriers of Cultural Memory

As a distinctive cultural practice in human societies, commemorative days serve multiple social functions and carry profound cultural significance. On a surface level, they satisfy basic psychological needs for historical memory and social identity through recurring ceremonial activities [7]. From a communication-studies perspective, commemorative days act like “symbolic currency” – they focus public attention, filter information overload, reinforce beliefs in legitimacy, and manifest the authority of those who name them [8]. At a deeper cultural level, they reconfigure historical time, transforming linear historical events into cyclical cultural memories and thereby establishing an ongoing dialogue between the present and the past [9]. Thus, commemorative days not only bear important emotional value but also perform essential social integration functions, becoming vital carriers of cultural continuity and collective identity.

As a concrete instantiation of cultural memory theory, commemorative days – through their institutionalised temporal markers and ritualised memory practices – serve as a special bridge between history and the present. Unlike material carriers such as museums and archives, commemorative days operate through non-material, abstract features and periodic repetition [10]. This makes them irreplaceable in the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim regarded commemorative days as a form of “collective transcendence,” whereby specific temporal markers and rituals lift group memory above the fragmented flux of daily life, creating institutionalised nodes of remembrance [10]. In the process of constructing cultural memory, commemorative days on the one hand “reactivate” memory through annual repetition [11]; on the other hand, they shape particular frameworks of collective identity through selective remembrance [12].

At the heart of these commemorative practices lies the ritual. “The function of commemorative day rituals is to keep the collective identity system alive and prevent it from falling into stagnation” [13]. Through year-after-year ritual repetition, commemorative days not only “transmit and pass on the knowledge that consolidates identity” [13], but also ensure the continuing cohesion of the memory community across time and space. Such ritualised memory practices thus elevate commemorative days from simple temporal markers to “important anchoring points of cultural memory” [14]. In doing so, they both sustain historical memory and continuously reshape the contemporary interpretation of historical meaning for the community.

3. The Initial Reckoning with the Nazi Past in Postwar Germany (1945–1949)

At the end of the Second World War, the Nazi regime collapsed. Germany was subsequently divided into several occupation zones, and the existing German government ceased to exist. This chapter examines how German society dealt with and reflected upon the Nazi past during this period under Allied control. Overall, the Allies advocated the notion of “German collective guilt,” but many Germans did not accept this view.

3.1 The Situation in Postwar Germany

The Second World War was the largest conflict of the twentieth century. Two-thirds of the world’s nations were drawn into the war, with a total of 110 million soldiers mobilised and over 55 million military and civilian

casualties – among them, six million Jews murdered in the Nazi Holocaust alone [15]. At its peak, Nazi Germany expanded aggressively to acquire vast “living space” (*Lebensraum*) [16]. However, as the war escalated, the anti-fascist forces formed an alliance against Germany and the other fascist states, eventually overwhelming Nazi Germany and leading to its defeat. Following Hitler’s suicide, Germany’s defeat became irreversible. On 7 May 1945, German military representatives signed an unconditional surrender at Allied headquarters, stipulating that all military operations on the European front would cease at 23:01 on 8 May [17]. Thus, the six-year war in Europe ended with Germany’s unconditional surrender. On 23 May, the Allies arrested the remnants of the Nazi government led by Dönitz; *Time* magazine reported that “in the bright morning light of 23 May 1945, the German Reich died.” With the collapse of the Nazi regime, the four victorious powers – the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain, and France – assumed supreme authority over Germany.

The Potsdam Conference established the fundamental principles for dealing with Germany: the country was to be divided into four occupation zones, and Berlin into four sectors. The Soviet zone was known as the East, while the other three zones constituted the West. The Allies pursued policies centred on the “four Ds” – denazification, demilitarisation, democratisation, and decentralisation – aimed at permanently eliminating Germany’s war potential and preventing the resurgence of militarism and Nazism. A comprehensive purge was carried out at the societal level: politically, Nazi laws were abolished, Nazi symbols were removed from public spaces, and related publications were banned; former Nazis were excluded from important positions; and the Law against the Formation of New Parties [18] was repealed, allowing party politics to resume in order to advance democratisation. The Communist Party of Germany was the first to be re-established, followed by the Social Democratic Party, the Christian Democratic Union, and others [19]. Economically, the Allies imposed sanctions through the dismantling of industrial facilities. According to estimates, the total value of dismantled equipment in the western zones amounted to approximately 5.4 billion marks, while in the Soviet zone it was about 5 billion marks [20]. Germany was also required to pay war reparations to the victorious powers. At the social level, large numbers of former Nazis and Nazi affiliates were detained; between 1945 and 1950, the Allies held over 400,000 Germans in preventive detention without individual case reviews [21]. Cities lay in ruins, countless buildings had collapsed, and the population was displaced, destitute, and starving. Poverty, cold, disease, and hunger defined daily life; German society as a whole was in a state of collapse.

3.2 The Stunde Null

The German population perceived the Allies’ notion of “collective guilt” (*Kollektivschuld*) as a wholesale indictment of the German nation. Many Germans resisted this imposed view of collective guilt, believing that responsibility for the war and genocide rested solely with Hitler, the Nazi leadership, and the social elite, rather than with the entire German people or individual perpetrators. They widely saw themselves as victims of the war, and this victim consciousness profoundly influenced their perception of the Nuremberg trials. German public opinion on the Nuremberg verdicts was markedly divided. Initially, 78% of the population in the western zones considered the trials fair, but according to a 1949 US opinion survey, this approval rate had dropped to 38% [22]. Many regarded the Allied detention measures and the proceedings of civil and military courts as “victors’ justice” (*Siegerjustiz*), viewing the subsequent trials as little more than show trials or “substitute trials” (*Stellvertreterprozesse*) designed to prove “German collective guilt” [23]. The German public’s reaction to these trials was not only one of shock but also deep scepticism towards the “collective guilt” thesis. Many whispered among themselves after watching related propaganda films, believing them to be nothing more than political propaganda by the victorious powers.

Beyond their resistance to the collective guilt thesis, German intellectual and cultural elites also voiced sharp criticism of the re-education policies, which they saw as detrimental to German culture. These representatives of the cultural elite were committed to salvaging the spiritual world of postwar Germans. On the question of German war guilt, Karl Jaspers, in his writings, distinguished between different types of guilt and argued that all Germans bore some degree of responsibility for the crimes [24]. Some historians sought to revive the national spirit by returning to traditional culture, thereby circumventing the discussion of German guilt. Liberal Catholic leaders, meanwhile, called for both religious revival and the moral reconstruction of the German people. Although the German Catholic Church actively participated in the movement for conscientious self-renewal, the dissemination and popular acceptance of these ideas would take time. At this stage, discussions of National Socialism in German society remained largely confined to small circles of

intellectuals. Moreover, the denazification and re-education policies pursued by the Western Allies, while dominating the early reckoning with the Nazi past, had rather limited practical social effects [25]. The German public at the time was more preoccupied with immediate suffering and was unwilling to engage deeply with questions of war responsibility or to acknowledge German and personal guilt [26]. Many believed that the suffering they and Germany had endured was sufficient to absolve them of responsibility. They regarded the surrender of the Wehrmacht and the collapse of Nazi Germany as a catastrophe, and for this they coined a specific concept – the “Zero Hour” (*Stunde Null*). This concept carried both the despair of viewing total defeat as an endpoint and the hope of comprehensive political and social reconstruction [27]. In the German historical context, “Zero Hour” (*Stunde Null*) refers to 8 May 1945 and the immediate postwar period, because from the day of Germany’s surrender all military operations ceased. From midnight onwards, the guns fell silent on all fronts – as the final Wehrmacht communiqué stated: at the “Zero Hour,” the armed forces ceased their hopeless struggle. Nearly six years of heroic resistance had come to an end. Against overwhelming odds, the German Wehrmacht had finally been defeated with honour.

For most Germans, however, “Zero Hour” meant not only the end of the war but also total defeat and destruction. It referred to the unconditional surrender of the Wehrmacht, the subsequent collapse of the Nazi regime, and the massive destruction of cities, industrial and commercial facilities, and infrastructure – a complete and total rupture in German society, as if there were no continuity between the Federal Republic and its predecessor states [28]. Because military occupation after 1945 had deprived the German people of self-determination, German society seemed to have ceased to exist. In this situation, everything had to begin anew. One could say that “Zero Hour” was associated both with disaster and with a fresh start [27]. This reflected public attitudes and perceptions of the war’s end and surrender, and it also shaped the German public’s reckoning with the Nazi past, as discussed above.

Overall, the Western Allies’ approach to National Socialism after the Second World War brought the issue into German public discourse. But “collective guilt” was not accepted by the majority of Germans. Denazification and re-education, to some extent, led many Germans to regard the Nazis as “the other” and to refuse to see themselves as war criminals. In short, between 1945 and 1949, reflection on war guilt had not yet become a central component of German national and social consciousness.

4. The West German Governments’ Reckoning with the Nazi Past

This section divides the federal governments’ reckoning with the Nazi past into four phases, examining the successive administrations of Konrad Adenauer, Willy Brandt, Helmut Kohl, and the federal governments since the turn of the twenty-first century. For each period, the analysis focuses on the changing interpretations of the commemorative date of 8 May within the respective political context.

4.1 The Adenauer Government: Collapse and Defeat

During the Adenauer era, 8 May was initially perceived as a symbol of Germany’s defeat and the end of the Second World War. As the federal government issued no official public statement on this date during this period, its political interpretation revolved largely around the theme of “collapse.” Nevertheless, the date’s special political significance was revealed through representative events and the statements of key political figures.

On 8 May 1949 – the fourth anniversary of Germany’s unconditional surrender – the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) was adopted at 23:55. In his speech, Heinrich von Brentano, Chairman of the Parliamentary Council, captured the profound implications of this coincidence: “Today is 8 May. Four years ago to this day, the total war ended in total defeat. Four years later, at this very hour, we have gathered in Bonn to deliberate and decide on the foundation of a new and better state” [29]. He also noted that at this time four years earlier, the German people were still reeling from the “shock of collapse” [29]. Given the urgency of rebuilding democratic institutions and the postwar economy, there was as yet “no spiritual reckoning with recent history” [29].

Federal President Theodor Heuss, speaking before the Parliamentary Council, captured the date’s duality with an epigrammatic statement: “In essence, 8 May 1945 remains for each of us the most tragic and questionable paradox in history – because we experienced both salvation and destruction at the same time”

[30]. This formulation precisely captures the ambivalent nature of Germany's surrender day: it was both the "salvation" from Nazi tyranny and the "destruction" of the nation's fate. With the country occupied and divided, Germany ceased to be a unified entity, and 8 May thus became a double-edged symbol.

Konrad Adenauer himself leaned towards interpreting it as the collapse of tyranny. On 8 May 1949, the day the Basic Law was passed, he declared: "For the German people, this is the first day of celebration since 1933. However grave the years of collapse may have been, we wish to start anew from this point, rather than counting from the defeat of 8 May 1945" [31]. This forward-looking stance acknowledged that 8 May marked the end of dictatorship, yet throughout the Adenauer period no nationwide commemorative events were held at the federal level. On 8 May 1955, only Bundestag President Eugen Gerstenmaier delivered a brief radio address [32]. In effect, the 8 May of the Adenauer era not only symbolised the demise of Nazi dictatorship but also heralded the beginning of democratic reconstruction – although, within the political interpretive framework of the time, the date had not yet received sufficient attention [1]. While the federal government was aware of its special significance, it consistently refrained from an official position. The few public statements that were made merely emphasised the break with the Nazi past, and relevant interpretations were largely shaped by individual politicians. This ambiguity reflected the limitations of the period's reckoning with the Nazi legacy – it was neither deepened nor did it address many specific issues.

During the Adenauer era, the federal government remained silent on 8 May, and public opinion largely mirrored this silence. In the early postwar years, West Germans mainly associated the end of the war with "collapse" (*Zusammenbruch*) and defeat rather than "liberation." A U.S. occupation survey reported in 1950 showed that the share of respondents who believed "Nazism was a good idea badly carried out" rose from 52% in 1947 to 59% in 1949 [33]. A HICOG survey released in January 1953 found that 44% of respondents thought Nazism had more good than bad sides, while only 39% saw more bad sides; among those aged 18–24, 49% viewed Nazism positively, compared with 29% who did not [34]. In this climate, 8 May was not a date most Germans actively interpreted in public. It remained tied to private memories of defeat, occupation, territorial loss, and survival. The Adenauer government's decision not to hold federal commemorations was therefore less a top-down shaping of public memory than an accommodation of an already silent public. Official restraint and popular avoidance reinforced each other, and this mutual avoidance became the defining feature of the period's memory culture.

4.2 The Brandt Government: From "Defeat" to "Liberation"

Under Brandt, the date of 8 May acquired a new interpretation as a "day of liberation" [35] and as a symbol of the war's end. This shift is particularly evident in the perspective and public speeches of Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt. In contrast to the Adenauer era's one-sided view of "collapse," the Brandt government established a dual meaning of "defeat" and "liberation."

Even before Brandt took office, signs of a change in interpretation had already emerged within the federal government. Former Chancellor Ludwig Erhard, in his commemorative speech, was the first to propose a dual reading: 8 May was both a dark moment for "reliving grief and suffering" and an opportunity for Germans to "build a new world from the ruins." He specifically noted that this day could truly become a "day of liberation" only when global injustice and violence came to an end [36].

On 8 May 1970, Brandt systematically articulated this dialectical understanding in a speech. On the one hand, it was a day of mourning for the victims of war and Nazi tyranny; on the other, it offered a historical opportunity to look forward and build a new democratic order [35]. He insightfully pointed out that what Germans saw as a "national catastrophe" was for other nations a "day of liberation from foreign rule" [35] – this very difference in perception constituted the historical basis of its dual meaning. Brandt further incorporated the question of guilt into his discourse: "We are well aware that there are different standards for measuring guilt, and that some of our compatriots are still in prison to this day" [35]. He particularly emphasised the value of peace: "These days make us all the more acutely aware of our responsibility for peace," and called for confronting history with sobriety: "Only those who remember yesterday can understand today and foresee tomorrow" [37]. This connection between historical reflection and contemporary political responsibility marked a major breakthrough in memory culture.

Under Brandt's interpretive framework, 8 May was not merely a historical juncture but also the starting point of democratic rebirth. This cognitive shift was closely linked to his proactive approach to reckoning with

the Nazi past: it was precisely through deepening historical reflection that the political significance of this date was expanded. As a carrier of cultural memory, the evolution of the commemorative day's interpretation directly reflected changes in official historical consciousness. Brandt's re-interpretation laid the groundwork for the subsequent public acceptance of historical guilt in German society and had a lasting impact on the policies of later governments.

Willy Brandt's reinterpretation of 8 May in 1970 was not simply imposed on a passive public. It responded to psychological and generational changes already underway in West German society. In 1965, *The New York Times* reported a telling exchange between West Berlin high-school students: one insisted, "I don't feel guilty for what happened in Hitler's time – I wasn't even born then, and collective guilt doesn't exist anyway," while another asked, "Don't you think all Germans must bear responsibility for what the Nazis did to the Jews?" [38]. This exchange captures the generational rift that was beginning to open. Brandt, himself a former exile and resistance figure, gave official voice to the historical questions already being raised by the younger generation. His 1970 speech linked mourning for the victims with a forward-looking responsibility for peace and democracy [39]. In this sense, the official "liberation" narrative resonated with, rather than created, an emerging shift in public consciousness. Yet the shift was uneven: older cohorts and more conservative groups remained attached to the language of defeat and collapse. The Brandt era thus marks a moment when official interpretation began to align with social change, while generational conflict over the meaning of 8 May persisted beneath the surface.

4.3 The Kohl Government: "Liberation"

In the 1970s, although German political circles made some principled statements about 8 May, its commemorative significance remained undefined, and related activities lacked continuity. In 1975, the Schmidt government even reached an agreement with France that "the anniversary of this day will no longer be commemorated in the future" [40]. However, under the Kohl government, the federal government's interpretation of the date gradually became clearer – it was seen both as a day of liberation from Nazi rule and as a commemoration of the war's end. With the increasing number of speeches and commemorative events, the status of 8 May as an official carrier of memory was significantly elevated.

On 8 May 1985, the Bundestag held a high-profile commemorative ceremony, marking an important breakthrough in historical consciousness. Bundestag President Philipp Jenninger delivered the first official brief address, opening with: "Everyone understands 8 May differently, because it concerns the memories, experiences, and images that each of us associates with it." He went on to emphasise humanity's liberation from Hitler's tyranny, and that the German people could draw breath again after defeat. More remarkably, he called on Germans to look back on this day with pride, because "over the past forty years, Germans have consistently shouldered their responsibility" [41]. This discourse demonstrated a more positive official perception of the date.

But it was Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker's address to the Bundestag that truly caused a sensation. He explicitly defined 8 May 1945 as a "day of liberation," stating that on that day the German people were "liberated from the system of Nazi violence that despised humanity" – a formulation that completely broke with the cognitive framework of the early postwar period. Weizsäcker also established it as a day of remembrance, enumerating all groups of victims of war and tyranny: six million Jews, fallen soldiers, murdered Sinti and Roma, persecuted homosexuals, mentally ill patients killed by euthanasia, executed hostages, and others. He endowed remembrance with a sacred dimension: "Remembrance is the experience of perceiving God's work in history, and it is a source of faith in salvation. This experience creates hope – hope for redemption, for the reunion of the divided, for reconciliation." The speech has been hailed as "a shining moment in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany" [42].

Weizsäcker particularly stressed Germany's responsibility for European unity and the safeguarding of peace, pointing out that cooperation at the European level was not just a vision but the key to overcoming the past and shaping the future. This cross-border appeal helped push the memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust towards a transnational and European dimension. The 50th-anniversary commemorations on 8 May 1995 offered clear evidence: at the state ceremony held at the Berlin Konzerthaus, the German government for the first time invited the heads of state of the four Allied powers to attend together. The leaders of Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States each delivered speeches, offering multiple

perspectives on the historical event. Federal President Roman Herzog, in his opening address, acknowledged that Germany had unleashed the “most terrible war” and had ultimately suffered the “most bitter defeat.” On the debate over whether it was a “day of defeat” or a “day of liberation,” he considered it “not of great significance,” preferring to see it as a moment when “the door to the future was forced open” [43]. French President François Mitterrand’s remarks highlighted historical reconciliation: “Yesterday’s enemies have become today’s friends” [44].

The political interpretation of 8 May during the Kohl era displayed three characteristics: first, it was deeply intertwined with the reckoning with the Nazi past, with the government using this date to guide public historical understanding; second, the space of memory expanded to a European dimension; and third, commemorative activities were concentrated on the five- and ten-year anniversaries, reflecting the conservative nature of its historical policy. As a senior Kohl government official put it: “Only by remembering the lessons of history can we have reason to believe that the horrors of the past will not repeat themselves” [45]. Although it was stressed that “this is not a day of celebration, but a day of weariness, disorientation, and concern” [46], it was precisely through such solemn commemoration that Germany truly achieved reconciliation with its history.

During the Kohl era, official commemorations and interpretations of 8 May developed significantly. The meaning of this commemorative day became more concretely defined and could be recognised within a broader European framework. However, related commemorative activities remained largely confined to five- and ten-year anniversaries (such as 1985 and 1995). This limitation reflected, to some extent, the conservative character of Kohl’s historical policy – during his tenure, commemorative events were not held annually on 8 May, but only on the round anniversaries.

Under the Kohl government, public memory became more unified around the “liberation” interpretation. In 1975, the Schmidt government had even agreed with France that the anniversary would no longer be officially commemorated [47]. By the 1980s, however, the federal government gradually gave 8 May a clearer and more positive meaning. On 8 May 1985, Bundestag President Philipp Jenninger delivered the first official address, stressing that Germans could look back with pride because they had shouldered responsibility [46]. The decisive moment, however, was Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker’s speech, which explicitly called 8 May 1945 a “day of liberation” from Nazi tyranny [48]. The public response was extraordinary: the Federal President’s Office received about 38,000 letters and calls, and around 1.5 million citizens requested reprints of the speech [48]. An Allensbach survey in March 1985 found that 58% of respondents experienced 8 May 1945 as “liberation,” including 54% of refugees from the East; at the same time, 50% still associated the date with “the sudden collapse of their world,” and one third said it had not substantially changed their lives [49]. These figures show that “liberation” had become the dominant public framework, but the older “collapse” experience had not disappeared. The Kohl government’s decision to concentrate commemorations on five- and ten-year anniversaries reflected a cautious management of this still-dual memory rather than a simple imposition of consensus.

4.4 Federal Governments since the Turn of the Century: “Never Again War”

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the federal government has further expanded the depth and breadth of the “liberation” connotation of 8 May, developing it into a nationwide day of commemoration. Its meaning has been continually enriched through connections with contemporary issues. Commemorative formats have become increasingly diverse, and media coverage has significantly amplified their reach. Some federal states have even established it as a public holiday, sparking widespread social debate. Despite the variety of forms, all commemorative activities convey a shared core message – “Never again war.”

On 8 May 2005, Federal President Horst Köhler, speaking at the Reichstag in Berlin on the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, emphasised: “It is our duty to remember all the suffering and its causes, and to ensure that history does not repeat itself” [50]. This position was sustained at the federal level. Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had already stated unequivocally in 2000: “Today no one can deny that 8 May 1945 was a day of liberation – liberation from Nazi rule, from racial genocide, and from the horrors of war” [51]. He also pointed out that this was not only a day of liberation but also a “day of remembrance and commemoration” [51]. On that day, a Jewish cultural exhibition was opened to remember the Holocaust. Schröder specifically reminded his audience: “Even though 8 May as a day of liberation is recorded in history, it cannot free us from history” [51]; Germans must reflect on their responsibility for the persecution of Jews,

for humanity and tolerance, and for freedom. He further linked the date to the vision of European unity: “The most important lesson we should draw from 8 May is to build a Europe in which peoples live together in peace.” He concluded with a government declaration: “In Germany and in Europe, 8 May must forever convey a clear message: Never again war!” [51]

In 2020, senior German constitutional bodies gathered at the Neue Wache (the Central Memorial for the Victims of War and Tyranny) in Berlin for a wreath-laying ceremony, at which President Frank-Walter Steinmeier delivered a speech, broadcast live across the country. The 2021 commemorations also adopted a hybrid online-offline format. These practices not only underscored the importance of the date but also demonstrated innovation in commemorative forms – on 7 May 2020, the German Digital Library launched the virtual exhibition “The End of the War 1945: Impressions,” which used video testimonies from five contemporary witnesses to reconstruct historical memory through digital technology [52]. Live broadcasts and digital exhibitions transcended spatial and temporal limits, enabling intergenerational dialogue and preserving a multi-dimensional memory resource for future generations.

As research into the Nazi past deepened, interpretations of 8 May also became increasingly diverse. Against the backdrop of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war, Steinmeier re-interpreted the date in his address to the Federal Congress of the German Trade Union Confederation: it was not only a “day of memory and warning” and long considered a “day of hope,” but “today the dream of a common European home has been shattered, replaced by a nightmare” – making the 8 May of 2022 a “day of war” [53]. Cities such as Berlin simultaneously held wreath-laying ceremonies, demonstrations, and other commemorative activities, with peace appeals being particularly prominent.

Given the federal government’s profound awareness and reflection on the Nazi past, the possibility of establishing 8 May as a nationwide public holiday remains low. This is based on a dual consideration: first, the date itself carries a special “dual meaning” in German history – marking both the end of Nazi tyranny and the memory of national trauma; second, as a key carrier of German cultural memory, 8 May has an irreplaceable symbolic function. As Social Democratic state premier Dietmar Woidke put it: “We must ensure that war, death, and suffering no longer ravage the world. And 8 May symbolises this mission more than any other date” [54].

Since 2000, the “liberation” narrative has become an overwhelming public consensus, and official discourse has continued to reinforce it. By 2015, a Forsa survey commissioned by the Körber Foundation found that 89% of Germans saw 8 May 1945 as a day of liberation, while only 9% saw it as a defeat [55]. This consensus has developed alongside a fixed official commemorative format: federal ceremonies still centre on major round anniversaries, and even the hybrid online-offline format used in 2020 did not fundamentally change the official framework. At the same time, civic memory practices have become increasingly diverse. The Stolpersteine project, for example, had placed more than 100,000 stumbling stones in over 1,800 German towns and 30 countries by 2025, making it one of the world’s largest decentralised memorials [56]. The MEMO 2025 study reports that 13.4% of respondents spontaneously mentioned Stolpersteine, second only to memorial sites at 40.3% [57]. Thus, public opinion has largely continued to follow the official “liberation” narrative, while the forms and carriers of memory have been increasingly redefined by civil society. The official role is less that of shaping public opinion from above than that of providing a stable symbolic anchor for an already pluralised memory culture.

5. Conclusion

Drawing on the framework of cultural memory theory and using 8 May as a focal point, this paper has systematically examined the changing official interpretations of this key date across different periods of the Federal Republic of Germany, revealing the deep mechanisms of Germany’s postwar reckoning with the Second World War and the political logic underlying its construction of cultural memory. The study shows that 8 May, as a significant carrier of cultural memory, gradually evolved from a mere temporal marker of military surrender into a mnemonic site laden with multiple historical meanings. This transformation vividly reflects the trajectory of German society’s changing perception of the Nazi past.

At the theoretical level, this paper draws on the Assmanns’ development of Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory, treating 8 May as a special textual site in the construction of German cultural memory. This date not

only transcends the three-generation limit of communicative memory but has also, through government-led commemorative rituals, political speeches, and institutional arrangements, formed a memory paradigm transmitted across generations. From the “narrative of collapse” under Adenauer and the “dual interpretation” under Brandt, to the “discourse of liberation” under Kohl and the “Never again war” commitment conveyed through multi-dimensional interpretations in the new century, successive governments’ political encoding of this commemorative date has in essence been a process of institutionalising historical reflection.

As the eightieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War approaches, the German experience offers valuable lessons for the construction of historical memory globally. First, political authority plays a guiding role in shaping memory: by controlling the interpretive power over commemorative dates, governments can steer the direction of collective remembrance. Second, innovations in mnemonic media – such as digital memorials – open up new possibilities for historical reflection. Third, the building of transnational memory communities – as seen in joint German-French commemorations – can help transcend nationalist narratives. Countries that have yet to complete their own historical reckonings may draw inspiration from Germany's handling of the 8 May commemorations – for, as President von Weizsäcker reminded us, genuine reconciliation lies not in forgetting, but in “remembering with dignity” [46].

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