

Foreign Policy

Q&A

Germany's Lessons on Confronting a Racist Past

Philosopher Susan Neiman explains what the United States can learn from postwar Germany.

BY ALLISON MEAKEM | JANUARY 30, 2021, 6:00 AM

Despite a centurieslong history of violent racism and its bitter legacy that remains very much alive, American society has long managed to avoid fully confronting its brutal past. It was only the tumult of the Trump era and last year's protests following the killing of George Floyd that have led to a crescendo of pleas for the United States to finally reckon with its history. But exactly how such a reckoning would look has opened up a whole new debate.

Germany's *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, or "processing the past," is often praised as a model for other countries facing a legacy of historical evil and systemic racism. To learn more about *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*—and how it might be adapted as Americans confront their own bitter past—*Foreign Policy* spoke with Susan Neiman, an American philosopher who has served as the director of the Einstein Forum, a scholarly foundation in Potsdam, Germany, since 2000. Neiman is the author of the *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*.

Susan Neiman in Berlin on May 28, 2017. KARLHEINZ SCHINDLER/PICTURE-ALLIANCE/DPA/AP IMAGES

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Foreign Policy: You decided to write *Learning from the Germans* after the 2015 Charleston church shooting. Why then?

Susan Neiman: President [Barack] Obama's eulogy for the nine people massacred in Charleston seemed to really be a moment where an American *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* had truly begun. It was the first time that a major national figure, much less the president, connected the violence of the present with our ignorance of the violence of the past. And that was a moment where it just seemed to me, gosh, America is waking up to this.

I think that there are lessons that America and other countries can learn from the Germans. The Germans didn't address their past perfectly. They didn't even do it willingly for a long time. It was a long, slow process. And I think that may be the most important lesson that we have to learn from them. But I still think Germany did something absolutely historically unique.

FP: So how did *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* come about?

SN: What happened in about the first 15 years after the end of World War II was a kind of repression. West Germans thought of themselves as the worst victims of the war. The really interesting epiphany I had was when I realized that postwar West Germans were using exactly the same tropes as the defenders of the Lost Cause: "We lost the war, our cities were in ashes, our men were killed or in prisoner-of-war camps, we were hungry, and the [victors] wanted to convince us that war was our fault!" It's exactly the same state of mind.

FP: Today's Germans no longer embrace victimhood. What changed?

SN: Toward the late 1950s, there was a very small group of people—church activists, writers, and artists—beginning to demand that people come to terms with the war. And in the 1960s, there was an incredible disgust when the children of Nazis grew up and realized what their parents had done.

I am more and more convinced of the part that culture plays. You had a national narrative of victimhood, and then some Germans began to read things like survivors' testimony, which gave another narrative. A big breakthrough for West Germans was in 1978, when the American television series *Holocaust* was played on West German television. For ordinary West Germans, instead of having this abstract number 6 million, [the series] reduced that to two comprehensible stories of a small number of particular people that they could identify with. And that was tremendously important.

Then, in 1985, West German President Richard von Weizsäcker gave a famous speech finally calling May 8 [the capitulation of defeated Germany in 1945] a day of liberation. That was the first official public declaration from the state making a move [away from victimhood] to say: Yeah, we suffered a lot after the war—but actually, other people suffered more, and their suffering was our fault.

FP: In your book, you argue that East Germany did *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* better.

SPONSORED



Women As Levers of Change: December 2020 Roundtable Synthesis Report

Female leaders in male-dominated industries discuss FP Analytics' groundbreaking Women As Levers of Change report, explore why female participation matters for bottom-lines, and highlight ways to support women's advancement throughout the professional pipeline.

SN: They did not reduce all of the crimes of the Nazis to anti-Semitism. They talked about Nazi crimes against 14 million Slavic civilians, slaughtered. Sometimes they talked about what the Nazis' plans for Africa would have been, had [Gen. Erwin] Rommel not been stopped. And they viewed the leading sin of the Nazis as being a crime against universal human rights. There are some people who say East Germans didn't talk about the Holocaust and that meant that they were anti-Semitic. No, they did talk about the Holocaust. They just didn't talk only about the Holocaust. West Germans—and also, I fear, many in America—have made it way too easy on themselves by reducing Nazism to anti-Semitism.

We forget that the Nazis were not only anti-Semites, they were general racists. They were absolutely in favor of nationalism and against any kind of internationalism, and they were against communists and socialists. So what that meant is that, at least under

the East German leadership, there was a very genuine anti-fascism that didn't exist in West Germany.

Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil; Susan Neiman; Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 432 pp.; \$30; August 2019

FP: What are some issues with how modern Germany goes about Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung?

SN: Its first basic flaw is that it erased the memory of what went on in East Germany. Instead of taking over a universalist vision of Nazi crimes, [today's Germany] simply focuses on anti-Semitism. And the other thing is that Germans sort of decided: "We feel so guilty toward the Jews that we will agree with virtually anything that Israel says." There is now also a recognition that Germany has a colonialism problem—discussions that picked up steam in the wake of Black Lives Matter.

FP: Based on what you've learned from the German experience, what's your blueprint for the United States?

SN: Working through our history is an incredibly deep and complicated operation. It affects the way people raise their children, the way people view their parents. It affects what kind of songs you sing. What kind of art you watch or participate in or create. And so, for all those reasons, you cannot focus on one thing. It has to be a multipronged

endeavor. First of all, you need to work out a national narrative. And the narrative needs to be transported in schools. We have a problem with this, since every state gets to prescribe its own curricula. What you learn in Texas is not what you learn in Massachusetts.

FP: What are your thoughts on the “1619 Project” and its attempt to reshape the U.S. national narrative?

SN: The “1619 Project” was a good thing—in some ways. But there are historical problems with the “1619 Project,” starting with the fact that you cannot say that 1619 was the true founding of the United States of America. It just wasn’t, there was no United States of America. Secondly, if we’re talking about national crimes, you’ve got to start with the murder and theft of Indigenous people, which began significantly earlier. So that kind of rhetoric has been problematic for that project.

FP: How so?

SN: A nation cannot survive if its only narrative is a narrative of its crimes. I deeply believe that nations need heroes, because heroes embody the values that we want our communities to share.

FP: This is something Germany never really mastered. I can’t think of any celebrated national heroes besides the national soccer team.

SN: I tried to run a conference about heroism [once] and my staff just completely revolted. They said: “We cannot use the word ‘hero.’” But this is changing. That was 10 years ago. And they realize that you can look at your national history in a complicated way. In the 1980s it was as though all of German culture was entirely contaminated because of Germany’s crimes. I worry about a similar tendency that I sometimes see in young people on the American left.

FP: So what sort of new national heroes could all Americans look up to?

SN: Let me remind you of a quote from Bryan Stevenson [who created the national lynching memorial in Montgomery, Alabama]: There were white people in the South who stood up against lynching, and you don’t know their names. And you need to remember their names.

FP: What are your thoughts on reparations?

SN: Reparations are both a question of justice and a question of tactics. Americans really need to develop a question of social rights that other developed countries have, where things like education, health care, vacation, and parental leave are not considered benefits but rights. Some of the proposals for reparations have been directed toward securing those things for some groups—particularly African Americans. But for tactical reasons, reparations should start with getting rights for everyone.

FP: But are reparations a realistic prospect in the United States?

SN: German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer only got a fairly small amount of reparations [to Holocaust survivors in Israel] through the German parliament [in 1952] against his own party's wishes. There are more Americans now in favor of reparations in some form to the African American community than there were Germans in favor of reparations to Holocaust survivors [back then].

FP: Should Indigenous Americans also get reparations?

SN: Absolutely.

FP: Do you think the American tendency to focus on the future and stay positive will undercut any serious efforts at *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*?

SN: Popular culture has been chipping away at that. People are engaging with questions of racism in our history in popular culture, which is really important. I would be happy if people would also point out how far behind the United States is compared to other developed countries in quality of life. When I tell [Europeans] that, during a pandemic, the United States doesn't have anything like a national sick leave policy, they don't just say, "Oh, that's too bad." They look at me as if I'd said we chop up little babies and eat them for dinner. They see it as barbaric. We've been fed a lot of propaganda.

But I think that American hopefulness truly is a virtue. The belief that people joining forces and working together can make the world a better place is something that I often miss in Europe. In order to keep up our ability to make more moral progress, we do need to look back on the progress that has been made. And in my own lifetime, tremendous things have happened that I could not have imagined. So I think American hopefulness is something that's worth hanging on to, but it needs to be balanced. It can't just be relentless positivity.

Allison Meakem is an editorial fellow at *Foreign Policy*. Twitter: [@allisonmeakem](https://twitter.com/allisonmeakem)