

Germany slowly relaxes its grip on how it confronts the Holocaust

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(Photo: Kim Hjelmgaard, USA TODAY)

BERLIN — As Germany marks Friday's 75th anniversary of a meeting where senior Nazi officials devised a plan to murder all European Jews, there are small signs the country is relaxing its grip on how it confronts the Holocaust. For decades, Germany has taken a sober, straightforward approach to explaining its Nazi-era heritage. It has avoided sensationalizing, historical facsimiles or anything that can't be meticulously documented.

"It's an approach that's based on the idea that people shouldn't be intimidated and shocked but informed in a matter of fact, factual way," said Hans-Christian Jasch, a former government lawyer and director of the House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Educational Site, a villa in southwest Berlin where 15 high-ranking Nazis conceived the plan to deport and kill Jews during World War II.

"It is not always necessary to show big piles of corpses," Jasch said. "The point is not to overwhelm people with history yet still grant them access to it."

Museums and exhibits in the United States, Britain and France often present information about Nazis and the Holocaust in a different way, said Hanna Liever, an adviser to Germany's federal agency for civic education who helps organize information about Holocaust memorial projects.

"They really try to work more on an emotional level, with replicas and other methods," she said, mentioning a film at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington that follows a boy growing up in Nazi Germany. "In Germany, we are very strict about authenticity. We just wouldn't do that."

Still, a replica of Adolf Hitler's bunker office where he spent his final days went on display last fall in an air raid shelter where Hitler had committed suicide on April 30, 1945. The replica in Berlin is part of a private initiative that includes a portrait of Hitler's favorite Prussian leader, Frederick the Great, an oxygen bottle with a mask and a statue of the Nazi leader's dog, Blondi.

"A lot of people come to Berlin and think there is one central place where they can learn about Hitler or see some traces of what his life was like, but there isn't," said Enno Lenze, founder of the Berlin Bunker Story, the company behind the display. "People want to know all the details, even about the rumors, if they are accurate or not. There needs to be an exhibition about Hitler himself, because he was the one who more or less caused World War II and whose death ended it."

Critics have accused organizers of showing a lack of respect for "objective" history.

Kay-Uwe von Damaros, a spokesman for the Topography of Terror, a museum in Berlin located on the site that housed the Gestapo secret police and Hitler's SS paramilitaries, said Lenze's replica, which he has not seen, was not something his institution would consider doing.

German authorities have resisted creating a single repository for information about Hitler, worrying that neo-Nazis could turn it into a shrine.

Lenze said he is providing a teaching experience. "The Topography of Terror has a lot of text and a lot pictures, and the content is great. But let's face it: If there's a school class, they don't want to read all this stuff. They want to listen to someone who can show and tell them about Hitler in an accessible way."

Germany has more than 2,000 memorial sites, including Wannsee, noting the Nazi-committed horrors that killed 6 million Jews and millions of others during World War II, according to the Berlin-based International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

In 2017, Germany will spend about \$21 million running and conserving these sites, according to the department of culture and media.

"Germany makes absolutely no attempt to cover up. It's an exemplar in its openness for dealing with its difficult and conflicted past," said John Lennon, a professor at Glasgow University whose research focuses on people attracted to sites of mass killing, genocide and assassinations. "There is a very high willingness to debate the past, such as do you let the ruins crumble or do you shore them up? There is also almost an obsession with documentation and evidence."

A recent debate centered on a scholarly annotated version of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's manifesto published in 1925 that was banned in Germany for seven decades for fear it could be used as propaganda. The book sold 85,000 copies last year, making it one of the best-selling non-fiction titles in Germany in 2016, according to its publisher, the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich.

"The number of sales has completely overwhelmed us. No one could have predicted it," Andreas Wirsching, the institute's director, told the German news agency DPA. The institute said the book has been bought by political and history buffs and educators, not "reactionaries or right-wing radicals."

As the Nazi era recedes in time, Germans have been more willing to explore and question their own family history, said historian Oliver von Wrochem, who heads a research center that studies the Neuengamme concentration camp near Hamburg. Over the past five years, he said a small, but increasing number of people are asking him to help find more about what their relatives did during the war.

"It seems almost natural that we should be able to talk about our history now in a more lighthearted way," said Timur Vermes, whose 2012 best-selling book *Look Who's Back*, a satire that re-imagines Hitler in present-day Germany, was made into a movie in 2015. "Humor is a way of dealing with terrible things. In Germany's case, it has taken quite a long time because of what we did, and on what scale we did it."

"A book like mine would probably have been possible 10 years ago here, but not 20. But I don't think there's necessarily some huge demand in Germany for dealing with Hitler or the Nazis in the way I did," Vermes said. Christoph Kreutzmüller, a curator at the Jewish Museum of Berlin, said the Nazi era is becoming "normal history," allowing Germans to talk about it with less trepidation.

"Modern history is defined by eyewitnesses being there. And as they have disappeared, it has changed things. It is not the society's parents anymore. It's not even the society's grandparents anymore. It's the society's great-grandparents who did something, and most of us have a very weak connection to them," he said. Jasch, the director of the Wannsee memorial, said he is working with a production company on the idea of installing screens in the villa to show short biographical films on the Nazi officials who attended the meeting 75 years ago.

"I'm concerned about it, but I'm still supporting it," Jasch said. "People have an urge to 're-live' history in this way. There is a danger that it somehow becomes kitsch."

The Wannsee Conference took place on Jan. 20, 1942. International Holocaust Remembrance Day is Jan. 27.