

Revisiting History, Reshaping Memory: The Effects of Confronting Ingroup Atrocities *

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Abstract

How do voters react to challenges of collective memories? We study the controversial “Wehrmacht exhibition” (1995–1999), which exposed the German public to graphic evidence challenging the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht”—the false narrative that only the SS, not the military, systematically committed war crimes and perpetrated the Holocaust. To study the exhibition’s effects, we leverage survey data of over 830,000 voters in a staggered difference-in-differences setup. We complement this analysis with evidence from over 1,200 letters to the editor, an original survey of Germans born around the end of WWII, and interviews with public figures who spoke at exhibition openings. We find that the exhibition triggered political backlash, particularly among the children of WWII soldiers. However, this backlash was localized and short-lived. We also show that the exhibition effectively shifted public discourse on the Wehrmacht, demonstrating that memory entrepreneurs can overturn self-serving narratives without lasting political repercussions.

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1 Introduction

In 1998, a visitor left an angry note in the guestbook of an exhibition on the German military during World War II (WWII) in Dresden, Germany:

“I won’t let anyone say anything negative about the German Wehrmacht! It was the world’s greatest army! My father was also in the Wehrmacht, and I am proud of him! He fought honorably for the German Fatherland. However, he was not a murderer. This exhibition is a disgrace to the German people.”¹

This note illustrates one of the most contentious public debates on Germany’s Nazi past in the country’s post-war history. The first so-called “Wehrmacht exhibition” (1995–1999; *Wehrmachtsausstellung*) exposed the German public to details about crimes committed by the German army during WWII, forcefully challenging the – until then – widespread myth of a “clean” *Wehrmacht* that exclusively attributed Nazi atrocities to the notorious *Schutzstaffel* (SS) and its subdivisions.

More than 850,000 people visited the exhibition, which was shown in 33 German and Austrian cities in the span of four and a half years ([NDR 2022](#)). In dozens of right-wing protests, citizens accused the exhibition organizers of betraying fallen German soldiers. These protests were met by counter-protests that supported the exhibition’s challenge of self-serving narratives about Germany’s Nazi past. For years, the exhibition received sustained coverage in local, regional, and national media and triggered intense public debates in federal and state-level parliaments.

Such conflicts over the commemoration of historical ingroup atrocities are not specific to Germany. In many countries, they have recently moved to the center of broader “culture wars.” In the United States, they have manifested as protests around the removal of Confederate monuments and debates about the definition of school curricula ([Bevan 2022](#); [Kaufmann 2022](#)). Spain experienced protests in 2019 when the remains of fascist dictator Francisco Franco were

¹Quote drawn from the authors’ analysis of exhibition guestbooks at the *Hamburg Institute for Social Research* (HIS).

moved from a vast mausoleum to a family crypt to end the glorification of the authoritarian ruler (Jones 2019). In contrast, in an attempt to court conservative voters, French President Emmanuel Macron has resisted pressure from civil society organizations to revise France's commemoration of its violent past, highlighting in 2020 that "The Republic will not erase any trace or name from its history." (Williamson 2020). Although "memory wars" (Malinova 2021) play an important role in many societies, we still know relatively little about their political implications. How do voters react to challenges to collective memories of ingroup atrocities?

Several recent studies have found that exposure to information about *victims* of ingroup violence can induce positive attitudinal changes (Turkoglu, Ditlmann and Firestone 2023; Light, Crețan and Dunca 2021; Charnysh and Riaz 2023; Balcells, Palanza and Voytas 2022; Balcells and Voytas 2023). Other studies have investigated the effects of challenges to memories of ingroup *perpetrators*, generating mixed results. While Rahnama (2024) finds evidence that such challenges can improve attitudes towards victim groups, Villamil and Balcells (2021) and Rozenas and Vlasenko (2022) find that they increase support for political parties ideologically close to the perpetrators of past violence.

We aim to add to the latter strand of research. Thus far, analyses have focused on investigating the effects of the *outcomes* of local memory conflicts, arguing that they signal the dominance of specific narratives and thereby trigger processes of alignment or opposition mobilization. We contribute to this research by examining the politics surrounding the initial *challenges* to self-serving narratives. Understanding initial public reactions is crucial to understanding why political and social actors often refrain from challenging established self-serving narratives, contributing to the persistence of such narratives.

We argue that challenges to self-serving historical narratives can trigger backlash against political actors perceived as the primary initiators or supporters of these challenges. According to social identity theory, people derive self-esteem from a positive ingroup image. Self-serving collective memories downplay past ingroup atrocities and thereby help maintain this image. Memory entrepreneurs that challenge these memories and suggest that the ingroup has committed immoral acts threaten positive ingroup images and, therefore, can trigger de-

fensive reactions. Family histories play a crucial role in this process, as family experiences can influence the relevance and nature of self-serving collective memories and thus may moderate the intensity of the backlash against these challenges (Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall 2014). The more individuals are exposed to family memories that reinforce one-sided collective narratives, the more likely they are to react defensively to challenges against these narratives.

We test this argument in the context of the 1995–1999 Wehrmacht exhibition. We consider this an “extreme case” in terms of our explanatory variable of interest. The exhibition challenged a strong, deep-seated collective memory of a particularly gruesome ingroup transgression. Compared to other challenges of narratives—such as the removal of statues or the renaming of streets—the exhibition was a very comprehensive attack on a self-serving memory. It directly exposed hundreds of thousands of people to historical evidence and shocking images, forcefully dispelling preexisting myths. By centering on the crimes of the 17 million-man Wehrmacht rather than the Nazi elite and selective SS, the exhibition had immediate personal implications for the vast majority of German families in the late 1990s. The widespread impact on millions of families and the intensity of the historical challenge in this context increase our ability to detect political effects.

At the same time, we consider this to be a particularly relevant case. Narratives of WWII feature prominently in the collective memories of many states as well as in the family identities of their citizens (Welzer 2007). Surveys show that a majority of citizens across many countries see WWII as the most important event of the past 100 years (Pennebaker, Páez and Deschamps 2006). Most countries directly involved in WWII later propagated narrow and self-serving narratives of their role in the war (Lebow, Kansteiner and Fogu 2006). As such, the case allows us to investigate the effects of challenges to self-serving narratives in a context that is relevant to a larger set of countries.

To study the political effects of the Wehrmacht exhibition, we leverage high-frequency survey data of more than 830,000 voters. Our identification strategy leverages spatial and temporal variation in exposure to the traveling exhibition in a staggered difference-in-differences

setup. In our preferred specification, we compare respondents in counties that hosted the exhibition to respondents in counties that applied to host the exhibition but were not selected for idiosyncratic reasons. We complement this analysis with information from 1,200 hand-coded letters that citizens sent to newspaper editors across Germany to voice their sentiments toward the exhibition and with an original survey of Germans born before 1950.

Drawing on geo-coded letters to the editor as well as on survey data gauging the salience of different political issues, we first show that the exhibition generated significant public interest and contention in the treated localities. Our main analyses indicate that this translated into political backlash against the main political proponent of the exhibition, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD). Following the opening of the exhibition in a given locality, the SPD loses about eight percentage points in electoral support, on average—a substantial drop. However, we also find that the political effects of the exhibition are localized and relatively short-lived. We find that voters return to their pre-treatment political preferences after the traveling exhibition moves on to its next location.

In order to explore the mechanisms driving these effects, we test for treatment effect heterogeneity across age cohorts. We find that the backlash was particularly pronounced among respondents of age groups whose fathers were particularly likely to have served or died in WWII. Drawing on an original survey of around 1,300 Germans born around the end of WWII, we find evidence that this result is likely attributable to ingrained, glorifying family narratives about fathers who served or fell in the war, rendering challenges to the “clean Wehrmacht myth” particularly threatening to people’s self-image and group identity.

To assess the plausibility of our assumptions and main findings within the historical context of the Wehrmacht exhibition, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with public figures who spoke at exhibition openings throughout Germany. These included high-ranking politicians and well-known personalities, such as one former state governor (*Ministerpräsident*) and one of Germany’s most well-known publicists and public figures.² We asked about the exhibition organization, the positions of political parties, the degree to which the SPD was identified as the main party proponent of the exhibition, local and national debates,

²Reinhard Klimmt and Michel Friedman, respectively.

and the nature of the backlash against the exhibition.

As a further extension of our study, we investigate whether the Wehrmacht exhibition had a lasting impact on the public discourse surrounding the Wehrmacht. In other words, did memory entrepreneurs successfully shift collective memory in this context? Did the exhibition succeed in overturning the “clean Wehrmacht” narrative? We draw on Google Ngram data to examine this question. We find that after the exhibition launched in 1995, discussions of Wehrmacht war crimes in German-language books increased sharply and persistently. Although the political backlash was brief, the exhibition’s effect on collective memory was profound. It rendered the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht” untenable and fostered a lasting shift toward a more nuanced view of the Wehrmacht’s—and thus German society’s—involvement in World War II atrocities.

These findings make two main contributions: *First*, we contribute to an emerging research field studying the dynamics and consequences of contentious social and political debates on reinterpretations of history (Balcells, Palanza and Voytas 2022; Balcells and Voytas 2023; Balcells, Purdue and Voytas 2024; Rahnama 2024; Rozenas and Vlasenko 2022; Villamil and Balcells 2021). Adding to previous studies, we show how challenges of historical narratives can trigger substantive backlash against the actors associated with such challenges. This may explain why such challenges to self-serving memories are relatively rare and why such memories tend to be particularly persistent. Importantly, however, our results also show that (i) the political backlash against these challenges is short-lived and localized and that (ii) challenges to deeply entrenched collective memories can be successful in shifting public discourses. Thus, while the anticipation of strong counter-reactions may deter potential memory entrepreneurs, our findings suggest that the long-term benefits of challenging self-serving collective memories can outweigh any short-term political costs.

Second, the effect heterogeneity we demonstrate across birth cohorts highlights the crucial role of personal and family experiences in moderating the effects of challenges to established historical narratives. This finding may help explain the seemingly contradictory results in prior research. The time span between the historical episode of violence and the challenge to

the self-serving narrative determines the population shares with personal or proximate family experiences—i.e., the share of the population that is most likely to defend the mnemonic status quo, according to our findings. Thus, while early historical reinterpretations may trigger backlash due to greater personal proximity to perpetrators (e.g., [Rozenas and Vlasenko 2022](#)), challenges after longer time periods may have better chances of leading to substantive shifts in public discourses (e.g., [Rahnama 2024](#)).

2 Self-serving memories of a “dark past”

Collective memories are sets “of ideas, images, and feelings about the past” ([Irwin-Zarecka 2017](#), 4). Contrary to what is usually referred to as “history,” memories are not “objective” representations of past events. They are the product of interactions between various social and political actors engaged in “memory politics,” aimed at promoting a specific interpretation of a group’s collective past ([Berger and Niven 2014; Malinova 2021; Wertsch 2009](#)). Typically, these interpretations aim at reinforcing a positive self-image of the community, such as highlighting its purportedly glorious history and achievements ([Wertsch and Roediger III 2008](#)).

However, in many countries, memory entrepreneurs aiming to advance positive ingroup images must deal with their respective communities’ “dark past”: “a large-scale or systematic human rights atrocity that occurred in the past and for which the state bears some responsibility, either directly or as a successor to the regime that perpetrated the crimes” ([Dixon 2018](#), 15). In trying to maintain a positive self-image after such episodes of ingroup violence, communities have tried to advance collective memories that either omit or re-interpret their own role in committing atrocities.

For example, after Francisco Franco’s death in 1975, Spanish right- and left-wing parties concluded an informal pact of collective amnesia (*Pacto del Olvido*; Pact of Forgetting) about violence during the Spanish Civil War ([Malinova 2021](#), 1000). Investigating the development of collective memories in post-war Germany, [Kansteiner \(2006\)](#) shows how elites, institutions, and the media advanced public narratives designed to “lift the moral burden of Nazism” from

the shoulders of the population (p. 582). Still, other states have employed a more repressive approach: the Turkish censorship regarding the 1915 genocide of Armenians is one example of a state punishing the public acknowledgment of its “dark past” ([Bilewicz 2016](#)).

The resulting self-serving narratives tend to be “sticky”—transmitted through physical manifestations and social practices such as monuments, ceremonies, archives, museums, and school curricula. However, in many cases, memory entrepreneurs eventually challenge these dominant collective memories. *How do such challenges of self-serving narratives affect citizens' political attitudes and behavior?*

Relatively few quantitative studies have addressed this question systematically. A first group of studies investigates the effects of exposure to victim-centered information about past episodes of violence—highlighting the suffering of victims of ingroup violence. For example, [Turkoglu, Ditzmann and Firestone \(2023\)](#) find that exposure to local memorials that commemorate victims of atrocities by the Nazis reduces support for a revisionist far-right party in Germany. [Light, Crețan and Dunca \(2021\)](#) analyze how people react to a visit to a transitional justice museum in Romania and find that the visit increased people's support for remembrance of violence as well as their passion and empathy towards victims of violence. [Balcells, Palanza and Voytas \(2022\)](#) and [Balcells and Voytas \(2023\)](#) find evidence of similar effects in a systematic experimental study in Chile. They found that students who visited a transitional justice museum showed more support for victim compensation and less support for the punishment of perpetrators. Rather than polarizing visitors, the visit thus fostered convergence on divisive topics.

A second group of studies investigates the effects of challenges of collective memories of ingroup *perpetrators* of atrocities. [Rahnama \(2024\)](#) finds that the removal of Confederate symbols in the US decreased racial resentment—presumably because the removal signaled a shift in dominant public norms. [Villamil and Balcells \(2021\)](#) and [Rozenas and Vlasenko \(2022\)](#), on the other hand, find that the removal of symbols of past periods of violence and oppression triggers a backlash, increasing support for political parties ideologically close to perpetrators of past violence in Spain and Ukraine. Both studies attribute this effect to political competition.

According to Rozenas and Vlasenko (2022), changes to commemorative practices indicate a shift in the distribution of power in favor of political actors and parties advocating for change. This may then prompt competing political actors to mobilize their constituencies to counteract this shift.

These studies shed light on the outcomes of “memory wars” over symbolic representations of ingroup histories. They investigate the effects of the actual removal of statues, the destruction of monuments, or the renaming of streets and squares. The observable effects result from the fact that these “victories” in memory wars signal shifts in the dominance of certain norms and/or political actors, triggering processes of attitudinal alignment or counter-mobilization. We complement this research by zooming in on the *initial stages* of these memory wars: *How do voters react when counter-narratives emerge that challenge deeply entrenched, self-serving narratives about ingroup perpetrators and atrocities?*

3 How challenges of collective memories trigger backlash

While processes of alignment and counter-mobilization may explain the effects of the outcomes of memory wars, we argue that perceived identity threats can explain backlash³ against the initial challenges and challengers of self-serving collective memories. The following two subsections introduce our main argument and our expectations regarding effect heterogeneity for challenges to collective memories.

3.1 Self-serving narratives, identity threats, and defensive reactions

Collective memories constitute an essential element of social identity formation, as they “preserve the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity” (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, 130). In fact, collective memory and collective identities are so closely intertwined that some scholars perceive them as “two sides of a coin rather than different phenomena” (Olick 1999, 342). Thus, while self-serving collective memories

³We follow Alter and Zürn (2020), who understand backlash politics as a movement that aims to return to a prior condition, challenges broadly shared norms or narratives and shapes public discourse.

underpin positive group identities, challenges of these memories will threaten positive group images.

Research in social psychology shows that such identity threats can trigger defensive reactions. According to social identity theory, people derive self-esteem from their group identity. Thus, they want to perceive their ingroups in a positive light—as good and moral. Conversely, negative attributes of ingroups affect individuals' self-concept negatively (Tajfel and Turner 2004). When an ingroup is considered responsible for immoral behavior, individuals can feel collective guilt or shame.⁴ In order to reduce negative effects on individuals' self-concept, people will seek to downregulate these negative perceptions (Branscombe et al. 1999).

People can use a variety of strategies to reduce negative feelings of collective guilt and shame. They may try to minimize ingroup responsibility (Bilali, Tropp and Dasgupta 2012), use “motivated forgetting” about violence committed against outgroups (Rotella and Richeson 2013), or they may place responsibility for ingroup transgressions on a few individual “black sheep” (Marques, Abrams and Serôdio 2001). Finally, people may also try to defend collective memories against re-interpretation in order to reduce the social identity threat associated with exposure to the transgressions of ingroup members (Branscombe and Wann 1994; Tajfel and Turner 2004).

One possible element of such a defensive strategy is the derogation of the source of the identity threat: individuals criticize or denounce the attackers to discredit them and to mitigate the threat (Petriglieri 2011). Empirical studies show that ingroup criticism can indeed motivate people to punish individuals who are deemed responsible for identity threats (e.g., Hornsey and Esopo 2009; Thürmer and McCrea 2023; De Hoog 2013). In light of this research, we hypothesize that challenges of self-serving collective memories will lead many voters to distance themselves from the perceived sources of such challenges.

⁴For a review, see Branscombe and Doosje (2004).

3.2 Collective memories meet family experiences

Individuals do not simply “absorb” (self-serving) collective memories uniformly. They adopt those parts of collective interpretations that reflect their personal experiences and memories (Rosenthal 2015). The result is an “amalgam” of collective and individual memories (Reese and Fivush 2008). Families play an essential role in this merging process. Maurice Halbwachs’ pioneering work on the social construction of memories highlights families’ role as “mnemonic intersections” that transmit and transform higher-level collective memories according to the specific experiences of the family members (Erll 2011, 308). Recent empirical studies have shown how memories of war in particular are transmitted and sustained within families (Lemoli and Gennaro 2024). Against this background, we expect family histories to moderate the effects of challenges to self-serving memories in two important ways.

First, family experiences influence the relevance of self-serving collective memories to individuals’ identities. Gerber and van Landingham (2021) demonstrate how the salience of certain collective memories depends on family connections to the respective historical events. If parents, grandparents, or other relatives were directly involved in past episodes of ingroup violence, collective memories of these episodes will be more personally relevant and salient to individuals. Moreover, kinship ties to such events make it easier to relate to the participants in the violence emotionally. Thus, we expect a stronger role of self-serving memories and consequently also a more pronounced backlash against the challengers of these narratives among people whose close family members belong to the group of perpetrators in the respective historical episode of ingroup violence.

Second, in addition to salience, family experiences may also strengthen or weaken the one-sided and selective nature of self-serving collective memories. Through their daily interactions, family members transmit their own memories and interpretations of experienced events to the next generation. This way, parents and grandparents serve as agents of “mnemonic socialization” that shape how children understand their ingroup history (Reese and Fivush 2008; Erll 2011). Thus, the more individuals are exposed to family memories that reinforce one-sided collective memories of ingroup perpetrators, the more likely it is that challenges to

these collective memories trigger defensive reactions and backlash against the source of these challenges.

4 Background: the 1995–1999 Wehrmacht exhibition

The first Wehrmacht exhibition (*Wehrmachtsausstellung*) was a traveling exhibition examining the crimes of the Wehrmacht during World War II in the Soviet Union and the Balkans, titled “War of Annihilation. Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941–1944.”⁵ It was shown in 33 cities in Germany and Austria between March 1995 and October 1999.⁶ The exhibition was ultimately withdrawn and revised due to several errors in the labeling and attribution of photos. Nonetheless, these errors did not change the exhibition’s key message and societal lessons surrounding the refutation of the ‘myth of the clean Wehrmacht.’ A second exhibition, titled “Crimes of the Wehrmacht. Dimensions of the war of annihilation, 1941–1944,”⁷ was shown in 13 cities from November 2001 to March 2004. We focus on the 1995–1999 Wehrmacht exhibition because it first publicly challenged important post-war narratives, received far more attention, and sparked greater debate than the second exhibition did (see SI Section A).

4.1 Set-up and content of the exhibition

The exhibition set off a major public debate surrounding the war crimes committed by the German military, which had previously been shrouded by the ‘myth of the clean Wehrmacht.’ This widespread, false narrative held that the Wehrmacht was not implicated in war crimes and generally behaved honorably, while the SS and the Nazi Party alone were responsible for the Holocaust and all other German atrocities and war crimes. Countering this myth meant implicating not only the selective and voluntary SS and former German elites but also the 17 million men who served in the Wehrmacht during World War II (those born 1910–1927; Kroener, Müller and Umbreit 1988, 1999; Overmans 2004), mostly through universal

⁵“Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944.”

⁶Six Austrian cities and 27 German cities, including Hamburg twice, for a total of 34 showings in 33 cities.

⁷“Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944.”

conscription.⁸ This, in turn, meant that the vast majority of German families were confronted with the reality that their fathers, husbands, and brothers had been part of a massive criminal endeavor.

The exhibition was curated and run by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research (*Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung*), with local and state civil society organizations or government institutions hosting it for an average length of about five weeks per city. It consisted of 1,433 photographs and other documents printed on large, white display panels and contextualized with explanatory captions ([Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung 1997](#); [Arbeitskreis Militärgeschichte 2000](#)). Many of these photographs showed graphic violence and cruelty, covering the harrowing prelude, execution, and aftermath of mass murder and war crimes. They were largely photographed by Wehrmacht soldiers themselves, either as private keepsakes or through the Wehrmacht Propaganda Companies (*Propagandakompanien*). The subject matter and set-up of the exhibition made attending it an intense, personal experience for many visitors (see, e.g., [Beckermann 1996](#)).⁹

For instance, the exhibition documented the Wehrmacht's involvement in the 29/30 September 1941 Babyn Yar massacre in Kyiv, Ukraine, in which 34.000 Jews were murdered within 36 hours. The SS and the Wehrmacht's Sixth Army under Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau closely cooperated in preparing and carrying out the massacre and many other atrocities in Ukraine ([Rüß 1998](#); [Hoppe 2021](#)). Other sections of the exhibition documented German atrocities in Belarus and Serbia. Notably, the exhibition also critically examined the glorification of Wehrmacht soldiers and officers in postwar popular culture. In films, novels, and magazines, the war was depicted in equal parts as a gripping adventure abroad and as a national tragedy, with Wehrmacht soldiers as both keen daredevils and innocent victims of a system that betrayed them. This narrative emphasized qualities such as bravery, camaraderie, and loyalty while omitting any mention of the widespread atrocities soldiers had committed throughout Europe and elsewhere—thereby contributing to the image of a ‘clean Wehrmacht’ ([Hamburger](#)

⁸17.3 million men served in the Wehrmacht between 1939 and 1945, 0.9 million served in the Waffen-SS; [Overmans \(2004\)](#).

⁹One of our interviewees recalled the intensity with which visitors studied the exhibition’s images, see SI Section F.

Institut für Sozialforschung 1997, 8–18).

To illustrate the nature of the images shown and how they were captioned, the following page shows three photographs from before and after the Babyn Yar massacre and a fourth photograph from before the 1941 Lubny massacre, all of which were shown in the exhibition. While the documentary evidence and the content of the exhibition were well-established from a historiographic perspective at the time, it was not common knowledge among the German general public. [Please note that these include a graphic image of a corpse.]

4.2 Public reactions and attention in Germany

The exhibition was a major news item in Germany for years.¹⁰ Parliamentary debates in March and April 1997 over whether the exhibition was to be shown in the chambers of the *Bundestag* are considered to be among the great moments in the Federal Republic's parliamentary history (BPB 2017) and were mirrored in many state parliaments.¹¹ Exhibition openings were routinely met with aggressive far-right and neo-Nazi protests, which in turn triggered large democratic counter-protests.¹² On 09 March 1999, the exhibition site in Saarbrücken was the target of a bombing, most likely by neo-Nazi elements (SR 2024).¹³

Within this sustained national media coverage, the exhibition had three major peaks in public attention: its opening in Munich in February 1997 and the massive neo-Nazi protests and bombing in February and March 1999, as well as a smaller peak surrounding the 1999 controversies regarding the labeling of several photographs. We visualize temporal trends in national media coverage of the exhibition in Figure A.1 in the SI. Furthermore, local attention spiked wherever the exhibition was shown, as we discuss further in Section 6.1.

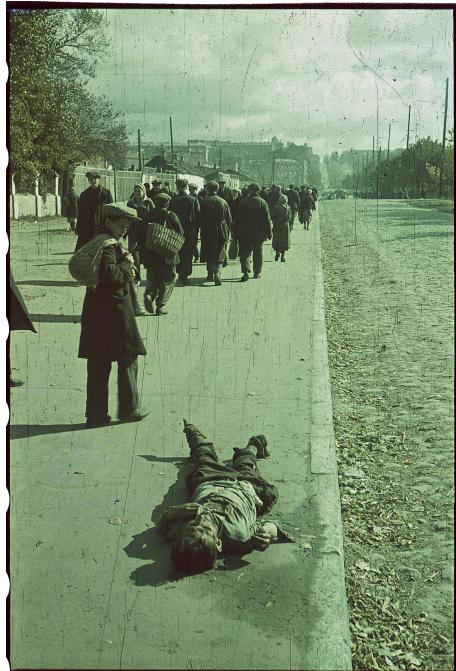
¹⁰Between February 1997 and November 1999, it was featured on the main eight o'clock news program, *Tagesschau* (watched, on average, by around 10 million people), eight times. Table A.2 in the SI lists these news segments with URLs to archival footage.

¹¹The latter were described in detail in several of our interviews, see SI Section F.

¹²Many of our interviewees relayed recollections of severe protests against the exhibition, see SI Section F.

¹³We interviewed three opening speakers of the Saarbrücken exhibition, see SI Section F.

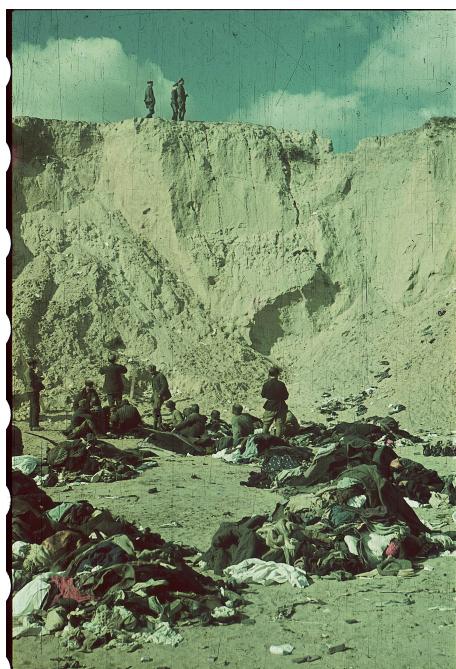
Examples of photographs and captions shown in the exhibition.



“Victims on the road to Babyn Yar.”



“Uniformed men rummage through the belongings of the murdered.”



“The murder sites.”



“Lubny, 16 October 1941: The Jewish population before its mass shooting.”

Note: These images were shown in the exhibition and the exhibition catalog: [Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung \(1997\)](#), p. 78–81). Note that these color versions were only shown in the second exhibition. The first exhibition used black-and-white copies. On the provenance and usage of these photographs, which came to be known as the “Hähle Photos,” see [Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung \(2021\)](#).

4.3 Partisanship and the exhibition

The exhibition split public opinion on major issues of German history and reckoning with the past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*), often along party lines. Importantly for our research interest, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) supported the exhibition and was clearly the party that was most closely associated with it, especially at the local and state level. Conversely, the Christian-democratic CDU and their Bavarian counterpart CSU overwhelmingly opposed the exhibition (Tagesschau/ARD 1997; WDR 2007). These clear-cut party dynamics were confirmed in all of our interviews (see SI Section F).

Of the 28 exhibition openings held in Germany, 20 featured at least one SPD official (71%) as a speaker, by far the highest share among all parties (Figure 1).¹⁴ The Greens had speakers at three openings (11%), and the CDU, FDP, and PDS were represented at one opening each (4%). Of the 37 speakers who were elected or party-nominated officials at the time, more than three-quarters were SPD members (29; 78%), 11% were Greens (4), and 3% were CDU, FDP, and PDS representatives each (1). Many of these SPD politicians were very well-known—they included state governors (*Ministerpräsidenten*), mayors of major cities, and elder statespeople¹⁵—while the other parties were mainly represented by local politicians, if at all.

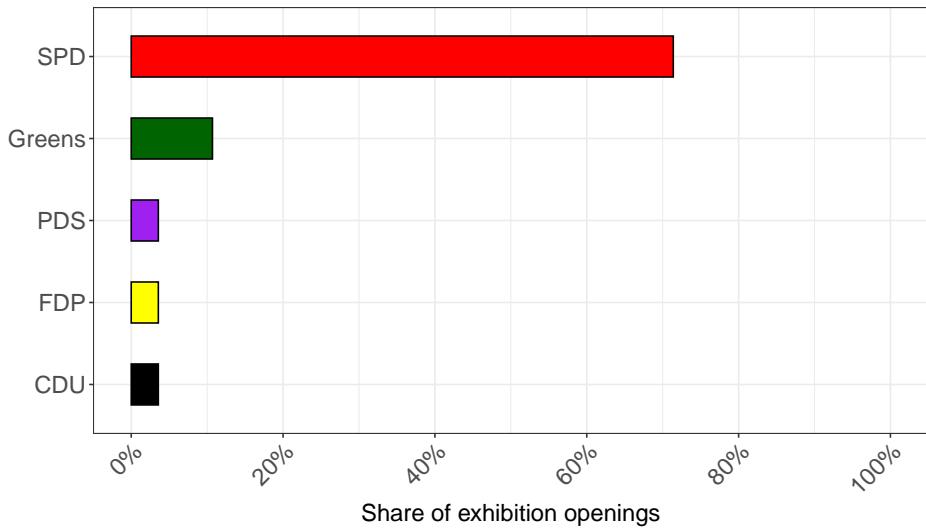
The SPD not only objectively played a prominent role in supporting the exhibition but was also perceived by the public as its main advocate. In a survey we conducted with approximately 1,300 German citizens in November 2024—nearly thirty years after the exhibition first opened—we asked respondents which party they recalled to have most strongly supported the Wehrmacht exhibition (see Section 7 and Appendix Section B.3 for detailed survey information). Among those who remembered the exhibition, about 50 percent identified the SPD as its strongest supporter.

The exhibition constituted a potent challenge to an established, self-serving collective memory and was strongly associated with the SPD in the public eye. Accordingly, our the-

¹⁴This share stands at 79% if we include public figures known to be simple party members, rather than only elected and party-nominated officials.

¹⁵E.g., Johannes Rau (Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia and soon-to-be Federal President of Germany), Hans Eichel (Minister-President of Hesse), Jutta Limbach (President of the Federal Constitutional Court), and Hans-Jochen Vogel (leader of the SPD from 1987–1991).

Figure 1: Partisanship and the exhibition



Note: Bars represent the share of exhibition openings that featured at least one speaker who was an official of the respective party. Openings typically featured 3 to 4 speakers, covering representatives of the host institution, civil society groups, survivors and eyewitnesses, local or state politicians, and the exhibition organizers (HIS).

oretical framework (Section 3) predicts that exposure to the exhibition will trigger a public backlash against the party. The following sections present the data and empirical strategy we use to test this empirical expectation.

5 Data & empirical strategy

5.1 Data sources

Exhibition venues: We collected detailed information on the Wehrmacht exhibition drawing on the archival records of the *Hamburg Institute for Social Research* (HIS). Specifically, we coded (i) the venues (counties) where the Wehrmacht exhibition was shown, (ii) the opening and closing dates of the exhibition in each location, and (iii) the opening speakers at each exhibition venue.

Exhibition applicants: We additionally collected information on localities that applied to host the exhibition but were not selected as venues for idiosyncratic reasons. We identified these locations ('applicant counties') on the basis of archival correspondence between the HIS

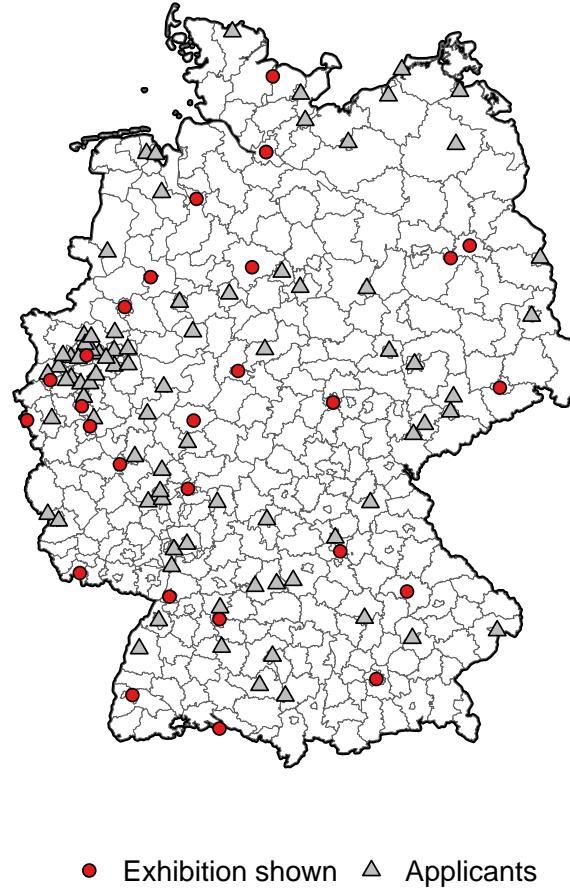
and interested parties, mostly local civil society organizations or local and state government institutions. The process for selecting cities to host the exhibition was informal and driven by expressions of interest sent to the HIS. No formal application criteria were set by the HIS except for adequate space and financial backing. The selection of exhibition locations was primarily driven by the timing of the application as well as the organizer’s preferences, which tended to favor larger cities (see Figure C.8). The spatial distribution of applicants and selected venues for the Wehrmacht exhibition is visualized in Figure 2. It should be noted that the vast majority of exhibition venues were located in West German cities.¹⁶ We thus do not have statistical power to examine heterogeneity between West Germany and the territories of the former GDR, which had a distinct memory culture ([Wolfrum 2008](#)).

Voting intentions: Our main outcome variable measures support for the Social Democratic Party (SPD), i.e., the main proponent of the Wehrmacht exhibition (see Section 4.3). To measure granular changes in SPD support immediately before and after the exhibition’s opening, we draw on a high-frequency representative survey conducted by the survey company *Forsa*. Each day, a cross-section of about 500 eligible voters are asked which party they would vote for if there were a federal election next Sunday (*Sonntagsfrage*, ‘Sunday question’; see SI Section B.1 for details). This is the most common survey item to elicit party preferences in Germany. In addition to voting intentions, we observe several individual-level socioeconomic characteristics and the county in which respondents reside. In total, we observe the voting intentions of 837,079 eligible voters surveyed between 1995 and 2000 (see Figures C.4 and C.5 for the number of observations by county and cohort). Our main outcome variable is a binary indicator $Y_{i,t}$ that equals one if respondent i interviewed in time period t intends to vote for the SPD and zero if not. We present summary statistics of this survey data in Table C.6 in the SI.

Issue salience: In addition to party preferences, we examine the exhibition’s impact on the perceived salience of different political issues. To do this, we use an open-ended question

¹⁶From 1995 to 1999, the exhibition was only shown in three East German cities (excluding Berlin), namely Erfurt, Dresden, and Potsdam.

Figure 2: Wehrmacht exhibition sites, 1995–1999



Note: The figure shows the localities where the Wehrmacht exhibition was shown between 1995 and 1999 (red dots) and localities that applied to host the exhibition but were not selected as venues (grey triangles).

from the *Forsa* survey, asking respondents to identify the most important political issues in Germany at the time of the interview. We aggregated these responses into four relevant categories: immigration, right-wing extremism, foreign deployments of the German military (*Bundeswehr*), and violent conflicts in general (see Table B.3 in the SI). For each category, we created a binary variable indicating whether a respondent mentioned an issue related to that category.

Letters to the editor: To examine the exhibition’s salience at the local level, we draw on a comprehensive collection of letters to the editor regarding the exhibition held by the HIS. We drew a random sample of 1,247 letters to the editor from a corpus of about 4.000–5.000 total items. This collection was compiled by the HIS as the exhibition was being shown by con-

tracting two media monitoring agencies specialized in collecting, filing, and labeling physical press clippings. We hand-coded these letters on key information such as publication date, author gender, location, overall sentiment towards the exhibition, and an inductively developed set of the most common reasons for exhibition support and opposition. We provide more details on this data source in Section B.2 in the SI.

5.2 Empirical strategy

To study political backlash against the exhibition among German voters, we estimate the causal effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on voting intentions measured in high-frequency geocoded survey data. The Wehrmacht exhibition traveled from city to city and thus opened at different times in different cities, i.e., voters in different localities were treated (i.e., experienced exhibition onset) at different times. Accordingly, we estimate a staggered difference-in-differences specification. Following the approach and notation of [Callaway and Sant'Anna \(2021\)](#), we proceed in two steps. First, we estimate group-time average treatment effects:

$$\text{ATT}(g, t) = \mathbb{E} [Y_t(g) - Y_t(0) | G_g = 1]$$

where t indicates the time period and the groups g are defined by the time period in which a unit first becomes treated, i.e., when the exhibition opens in a given county. $Y_t(g)$ indicates unit i 's potential outcome in time period t if treated at time period g . $Y_t(0)$ indicates the potential outcome under control status. G_g is defined as a binary variable that is equal to one if a unit is first treated in period g . In the second step, we partially aggregate these county-specific estimates. Specifically, we are primarily interested in the average treatment effect conditional on the length of exposure:

$$\theta(e) = \sum_{g \in \mathcal{G}} 1\{g + e \leq \mathcal{T}\} P(G = g | G + e \leq \mathcal{T}) \text{ATT}(g, g + e)$$

which gives the average effect of exposure to the Wehrmacht exhibition e months after its

opening. For our main results, we set $e = 1$, i.e., we estimate the average treatment effect one month after the exhibition opening in a given location. We show event-study estimates for varying lengths of exposure (e) in Figure D.11 in the SI.

As noted above, we observe treatment assignment at the county level. At the individual level, we thus not only consider those who personally attended the exhibition as “exposed,” but also those segments of the local population who were indirectly confronted with the discourse, controversy, and debate following the local opening of the exhibition. Between 1995 and 1999, over 750,000 people viewed the exhibition in Germany, yet its impact extended to many millions more. This indirect treatment exposure encompasses highly controversial debates in local newspapers,¹⁷ second-hand exposure through friends and family,¹⁸ or having large Nazi protests and democratic counter-protests in one’s own city.¹⁹ Hence, the vast majority of county residents were exposed to the exhibition, either directly or indirectly.

Analogous to the canonical difference-in-differences setup with two groups and two time periods, the group-time average treatment effects $\text{ATT}(g, t)$ are identified under the parallel trends assumption. In other words, our identification strategy requires that in the absence of treatment, average potential outcomes for group g and average outcomes in the control group would have followed parallel paths in the post-treatment period $t \geq g$. Crucially, this approach does *not* require treated and control localities to be similar (‘balanced’) with respect to background characteristics (e.g. population size or unemployment). The design accommodates level differences between treated and control groups and only requires that the two groups follow parallel *trends* (over-time changes) in the absence of treatment. We provide evidence in support of this assumption in Figure D.11 in the SI. Before the opening of the exhibition in a given location, treated and control counties follow parallel trajectories in their SPD support.

The construction of the control group involves a trade-off between its size and similarity to the treated group. We illustrate this trade-off in Figure C.8 in the SI, which visualizes average

¹⁷This was stressed by many of our interviewees, see SI Section F. See also our insights from letters to the editor in Section 6.1 and SI Section B.2.

¹⁸For instance, many high school classes visited the exhibition.

¹⁹See Table A.2 in the SI.

treated-control differences along a series of covariates for three reasonable choices for the control group: (1) all never-treated counties, (2) never-treated counties that applied to host the exhibition but were not selected for idiosyncratic reasons ('applicant counties,' see 5.1), and (3) applicant *city* counties, i.e., further narrowing down the group of applicant counties to larger cities. Finally, we can also use (4) not-yet-treated units as the control group. This latter choice implies the comparison of over-time changes in electoral preferences between counties where the exhibition opened earlier and counties where the exhibition opened at a later point in time. Unless otherwise noted, we use applicant counties (2) as the main control group throughout our empirical analysis. However, we demonstrate that our substantive conclusions and point estimates remain virtually unchanged for different choices of the control group (see Table 2). This provides further evidence that covariate level differences between treated and control localities are of minor importance for identification in our setting.

6 Results

6.1 Manipulation check

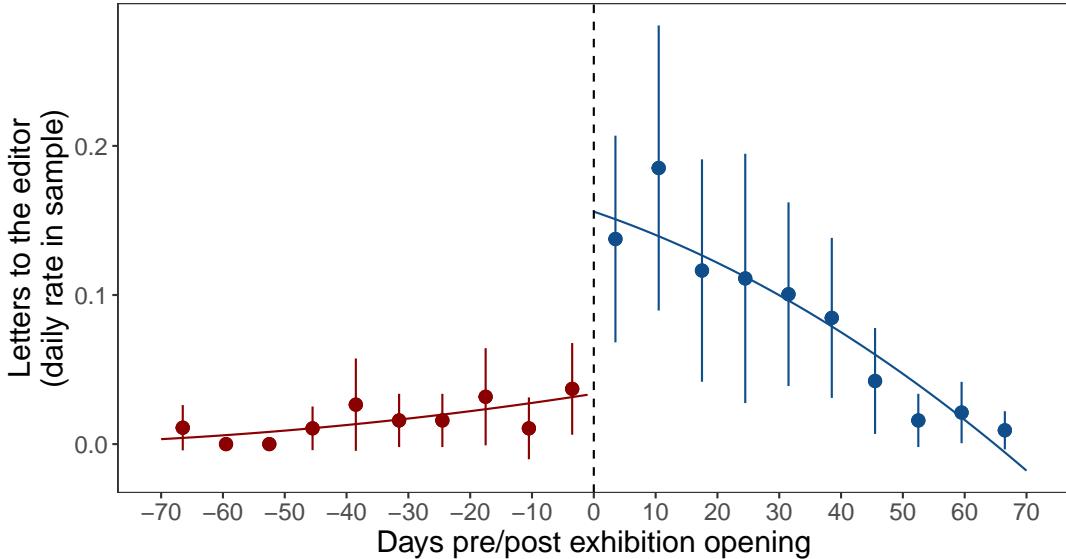
Before presenting our main results on political reactions to the Wehrmacht exhibition, we conduct a manipulation check to show whether the treatment of exhibition onset was perceived by voters in host localities. Specifically, we examine whether the exhibition (1) garnered significant attention at the local level and, more broadly, (2) altered the perceived salience of different political issues among voters.

We begin by examining the politicization and salience of the exhibition following its opening in a given locality. To do this, we test whether the volume of published letters to the editor about the exhibition increases in treated locations in the days and weeks immediately following the exhibition's opening. We draw on a geocoded sample of exhibition-related letters to the editor printed in local and national newspapers, which we collected in the HIS archives (see Section 5.1 and SI Section B.2). We geocoded these letters using information on the author's place of residence, which is typically listed next to their name. We then calculated the

aggregated count of letters at the county-day level and analyze this data using a regression discontinuity in time (RDiT) approach. We present the results in Figure 3, which shows the average daily rate of published exhibition-related letters ten weeks before and after the exhibition’s opening in a treated county. We find a clearly visible, statistically significant spike in the volume of exhibition-related letters published following the opening of the exhibition in a given locality ($p < 0.01$, see Table E.10).²⁰ We interpret this finding as strong evidence that the exhibition generated significant public interest and discussion in the treated localities.

These effects persist for about six weeks, after which the daily rate of exhibition-related letters recedes to its pre-treatment level. The temporal persistence of these effects closely maps onto the average duration of the exhibition: on average, the exhibition was shown for about 5 weeks in a given locality. We do not find strong evidence for anticipation effects, i.e., we do not find a substantial increase in the daily rate of exhibition-related letters in the days immediately before the opening of the exhibition.

Figure 3: Politicization of the Wehrmacht exhibition



Note: The figure shows the daily rate of exhibition-related letters to the editor printed in local newspapers right before and after the exhibition opening in a given county. The analysis is based on a randomly drawn sample of letters to the editor, which we retrieved from the HIS archives (see Section 5.1 and Section B.2 in the SI for details). The sample only includes treated counties that hosted the exhibition.

²⁰We note that the y-axis levels in Figure 3 and point estimates in Table E.10 underestimate the true volume of letters to the editor. This is because we coded a random sample of all exhibition-related letters, approximately 25–30% of all letters in the HIS archives. Accordingly, the true daily rate of letters is likely underestimated by a factor of about 3–4.

Table E.10 in the SI additionally disaggregates these results by letter sentiment. Following the exhibition’s opening in a given locality, we find a spike in both letters expressing opposition to *and* support for the exhibition. As outlined in Section 4, public opinion about the exhibition was divided, which is mirrored in the sentiments expressed in exhibition-related letters to the editor. However, we note that (1) the overall share of negative letters is substantially higher than the overall share of positive letters (Figure C.6 in the SI; 67% vs. 30%) and (2) the increase following the exhibition is likewise higher for negative letters (Table E.10 in the SI). Overall, negative reactions to the exhibition predominated in letters to the editor. Common arguments from those who opposed the exhibition were that it was historically inaccurate, driven by a “political agenda” or that the Wehrmacht’s crimes were not exceptional compared to other armies (see Figure C.7 in the SI).

Next, we examine whether exposure to the exhibition affected voters’ general political views and attitudes beyond the exhibition. Specifically, we examine the effects of the Wehrmacht exhibition on the perceived salience of different political issues as measured in the *Forsa* survey (see Section 5.1). The results for four aggregated issue areas—immigration, right-wing extremism, foreign deployments of the German armed forces (*Bundeswehr*), and violent conflicts in general—are presented in Table 1. As expected, we find that the Wehrmacht exhibition raises the political salience of issues related specifically to the German armed forces. We find statistically insignificant effect estimates of small magnitudes for all other issue areas, which are less directly related to the exhibition’s themes.

Table 1: Effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on issue salience

	DV: Issue mentioned (0/1)			
	Bundeswehr	Migration	Right-wing extremism	Int. wars / peace
ATT	0.019** (0.009)	0.013 (0.036)	-0.014 (0.017)	-0.001 (0.003)
N	206,802	206,802	206,802	206,802

Note: The table shows the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on the salience of four different political issues. We report estimates for the first month after the exhibition’s opening. Never-treated counties that applied for the exhibition constitute the control group. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

Overall, the results of both manipulation checks support the validity of our main analysis

by confirming that local exposure to the Wehrmacht exhibition elevated voters' attention to the exhibition specifically and the German military more generally. We now turn to examine the effects of the exhibition on voting intentions to examine the political reactions to and backlash against the exhibition.

6.2 Main results

We present our main results for the effects of exhibition exposure on electoral support for the SPD—the main proponent of the exhibition—in Table 2. In our preferred specification (column 1), we estimate that the Wehrmacht exhibition caused an eight percentage point drop in SPD support in treated localities from one month to the next. This is a substantively significant effect: for context, in the 1994 federal election, the SPD secured 36.4% of the nationwide vote. These effects are driven by an increase in the share of voters (1) without a clear party preference and (2) who support the center-right CDU/CSU, which maintained a much more critical stance towards the exhibition (see Figure E.16 in the SI). Overall, we find evidence of a strong backlash against the exhibition and its main supporters right after its opening in a given locality.

Our substantive conclusions remain unchanged for different choices of constructing the control group, i.e., for different choices of striking the trade-off between covariate balance and sample size (see the discussion in Section 5.2). The results for using (i) applicant city counties, (ii) never-treated counties, and (iii) not-yet-treated counties as the control group are shown in columns 2–4 in Table 2. Across model specifications, we estimate a statistically significant, negative effect of exposure to the Wehrmacht exhibition on electoral support for the SPD, the exhibition's most prominent supporters (recall Section 4.3). The effect estimates are stable across specifications, which indicates that covariate differences between treated and control localities are of minor importance for identification in our difference-in-differences setting.

To examine the durability of these effects, we present ATT estimates for varying exposure lengths in Figure D.11 in the SI. Our analyses suggest that the political backlash against the exhibition materializes during the first month after the exhibition's opening. This effect du-

Table 2: Effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on SPD support

	DV: SPD voting intention			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
ATT	-0.08*** (0.017)	-0.087*** (0.021)	-0.072*** (0.006)	-0.073*** (0.024)
N	323,680	213,001	837,059	154,735
Control group	Never-treated applicant counties	Never-treated applicant city counties	All never-treated counties	Not-yet-treated counties

Note: The table shows the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on SPD support in federal-level elections. We report estimates for the first month after the exhibition's opening. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

ration mirrors the average time the exhibition stayed in a given locality: about 5 weeks. We find that voters return to their pre-treatment political preferences after the exhibition moves on to its next location. In other words, the backlash against the exhibition—while it is politically salient at the local level—temporarily reduces SPD support but does not result in voters forming a lasting attachment to another party (see Figure E.16 in the SI). To further examine the duration of these effects, we also estimate a difference-in-differences specification using county-level election data for the federal elections of 1994 and 1998. The results from this analysis align with the event-study estimates. We do not detect electoral losses for the SPD in the 1998 federal election in treated localities (see Table E.11 in the SI). Overall, we find that the Wehrmacht exhibition triggered a substantial political backlash that was, however, localized and relatively short-lived.

6.3 Robustness & additional tests

We conduct a series of additional tests to ensure the robustness of our results and to address concerns about identification.

Spillover effects: For our main specification, we only code counties in which the exhibition was shown as treated. However, it might be the case that the exhibition likewise attracted attention in neighboring counties, as citizens may have commuted to the exhibition within a

limited distance and heard about it in the regional press. To address this concern, we proceed in two steps. First, we estimate the plausible geographic scope of spillover effects. Using the letters to the editor discussed in Section 6.1, we quantify the distance radius within which the exhibition attracted public interest and discussion (see Figure E.15 for details). As expected, we find that public interest in the exhibition strongly decays with greater distance from the exhibition venue. However, we also find that the exhibition attracted limited public attention within a distance of up to 60 kilometers around a given host city. Accordingly, it might be the case that our main effect estimates are downward biased, as a small number of control counties might, in fact, likewise experience political backlash against the exhibition. To address this concern directly, we conducted an additional robustness test that enforces a minimum distance of at least 60 kilometers between treated and control counties. Specifically, we construct a new control group comprising all never-treated counties at least 60 kilometers from the closest exhibition venue²¹. We find that our main substantive conclusions and point estimates remain unchanged (column 4 of Table D.8).

Political selection of exhibition venues: Next, we address the concern that political factors (e.g., anticipated backlash) may have affected the selection of exhibition venues from the pool of all applicants. To address this concern, we revisited the archival correspondence between the exhibition organizers (HIS) and applicant counties. Based on the official correspondences, we identified a small number of cases ($N = 8$) where political factors may have played a role (e.g., where a local city council strongly opposed the exhibition). In Table D.8, we present the results when using a narrowed-down control group of applicant counties that excludes these eight localities. Our substantive conclusions and point estimates remain unchanged when using this alternative control group.

Outliers: We rule out concerns that our results are driven by individual treated locations through jackknife resampling. We estimate our main specification, excluding treated counties from the analysis one by one. Figure D.12 shows treatment effect estimates in each subsample. We find that our main effect estimates remain stable and statistically significant across these

²¹We use county centroids to approximate the distance to the closest exhibition venue.

tests.

Temporal heterogeneity: In Table D.9, we examine whether the local effects of exhibition exposure are moderated by the nationwide discourse surrounding the exhibition. Specifically, we test for heterogeneity before and after the opening of the exhibition in Munich’s city hall in February 1997. The Munich opening was particularly controversial, increasing the national-level salience of the exhibition (see Sections 4.2 and 4.3). It marked the Wehrmacht exhibition’s first appearance on the 8 o’clock *Tagesschau* news and sparked sustained national media coverage of many subsequent openings (see Table A.2). We find that the exhibition had a statistically significant negative effect on local SPD support both before and after its Munich debut. However, we find marginally larger effect estimates after February 1997, suggesting that increased media attention and heightened public awareness amplified the local effects.

Effects of the exhibition on sample composition: Next, we address the concern that the exhibition could have differentially affected the survey response rate of different groups of voters. To assess if the exhibition had any effect on the composition of the *Forsa* survey sample in treated locations, we estimate our main specification using several socio-economic characteristics as placebo outcome variables (see Figure D.13). We find no evidence that the exhibition affected the composition of survey respondents in terms of gender, age, education, or household size. This reassures us that our results are not driven by respondents systematically opting in or out of the survey in response to the exhibition.

Randomization inference: Finally, we conduct a randomization test. To do this, we use placebo variations of the treatment assignment mechanism and compare the resulting distribution of the test statistic to our main estimate. Specifically, we randomly reshuffle the treatment dates between treated counties. We present the resulting distribution of placebo effect estimates across 500 iterations in Figure D.14. We find that our main effect estimate is larger than any of the placebo estimates ($p < 0.01$). We conclude that our main results are highly unlikely to be the result of random chance.

7 Mechanisms

In this section, we explore the mechanisms driving our results. To do this, we first examine treatment effect heterogeneity across birth cohorts. This allows us to examine empirical implications derived from our theoretical framework, in particular regarding the moderating role of family experiences of historical phases of violence.

Specifically, we expect heterogeneous treatment effects depending on respondents' personal and/or family experiences in the Wehrmacht and WWII. We test this implication of our argument by estimating treatment effects for cohorts that vary in terms of the *shares* of respondents (i) who themselves served in the Wehrmacht, (ii) whose fathers served in the Wehrmacht and/or (iii) who lost their fathers in the war.²²

The first cohort comprises all respondents born before 1928. As the vast majority of men born before 1928 were subject to the compulsory draft for the *Wehrmacht* (see Figure C.9 in the SI), a high share of (male) respondents in this birth cohort personally experienced WWII as Wehrmacht soldiers. Only a small share of respondents (i.e., only the very youngest) in this cohort had fathers who themselves fought and/or fell in the war.²³

The second cohort includes all respondents born between 1928 and 1945. The men in this cohort were too young to be drafted for the Wehrmacht. However, as Figure 4b illustrates, this cohort was most likely to have (i) grown up with a father who fought in WWII or (ii) suffered the loss of their father during WWII (see also Franz, Hardt and Brähler (2007) and Section C.5 in the SI).

Finally, we also investigate treatment effects in four post-war cohorts. Respondents born between 1946 and 1961 neither fought in WWII themselves nor lost their fathers in the war.

²²In a supplementary analysis, we also examine effect heterogeneity by gender. While we find significant treatment effects in both male and female subsets, the estimated effect magnitude is nearly twice as large for men as for women (see Table E.13). These gendered dynamics may reflect the more central role of self-serving WWII narratives for men's identity formation, thus making challenges to these narratives particularly threatening. In SI Section E.8, we present additional survey-based evidence that supports this interpretation.

²³This cohort of Germans, especially those born between 1927 and 1929, was also highly exposed to Nazi indoctrination, particularly through the *Hitler Youth*. The Hitler Youth, established by the Nazi Party, aimed to indoctrinate German children and adolescents with Nazi ideology, focusing on loyalty to Adolf Hitler, racial purity, and militarism. In March 1939, membership became mandatory for all youths aged 10 to 18 (see SI Figure C.10 on Hitler Youth exposure by birth cohort).

However, a substantial share of these respondents' fathers did fight in WWII (see Figure 4b). Respondents in later birth cohorts are unlikely to share any of these specific family war experiences.

We present heterogeneous treatment effects across these cohorts in Figure 4a. Panel (a) shows average treatment effect estimates from staggered difference-in-differences specifications estimated within the cohort subsets of our data. The model specification is equivalent to our main results presented in Table 2. Panel (b) shows the link between (respondents') birth years and the likelihood that their father served (gray line) and died (black line) on the battlefield (see SI Section C.5 for details).

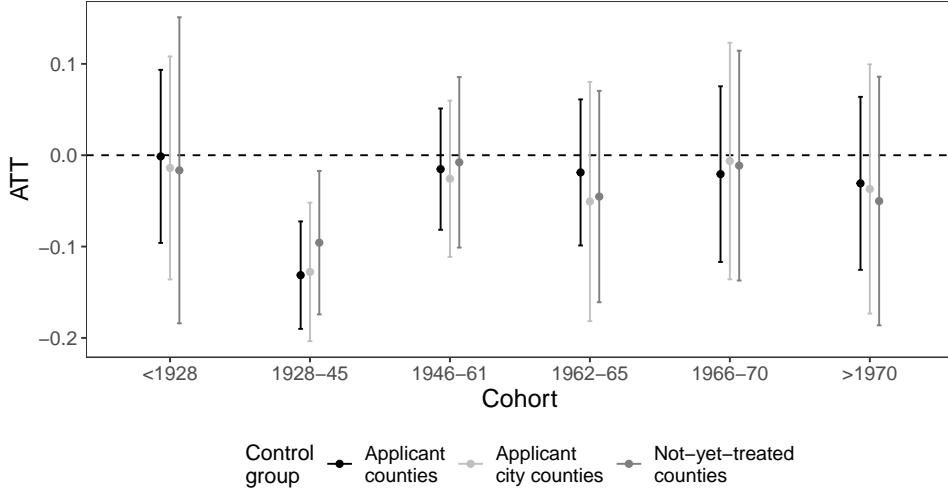
The results presented in Figure 4a have three important implications for our main argument. First, we find no evidence of linear age effects. The backlash against the SPD was not more or less pronounced among particularly old or young respondents. Instead, the backlash was concentrated in one specific cohort: respondents born between 1928 and 1945. Second, the figure shows that the cohort driving the backlash against the exhibition is the cohort with the highest proportion of individuals whose fathers served or died on the battlefield. Third, the null results for the preceding and succeeding cohorts suggest that neither respondents' own war experience nor the military service of their fathers alone determined Germans' response to the Wehrmacht exhibition.

Why did the 1928–1945 birth cohort react particularly strongly to challenges of the myth of the “clean” Wehrmacht? Previous research discussed in Section 3 highlights that family narratives can interact with collective memories—weakening or reinforcing their one-sided nature (“memory type”) and their relevance to the individual (“memory salience”).

Research on commemoration of the Nazi regime shows how family narratives emerged and evolved across generations. Welzer, Moller and Tschuggnall (2014) coined the term “cumulative heroization” to describe this process. Parents and grandparents who lived through the 1930s and 1940s tended to highlight their individual suffering and bravery when describing their personal experiences. Their children and grandchildren replicated and strengthened these one-sided memories to reconcile their family histories with their own moral standards

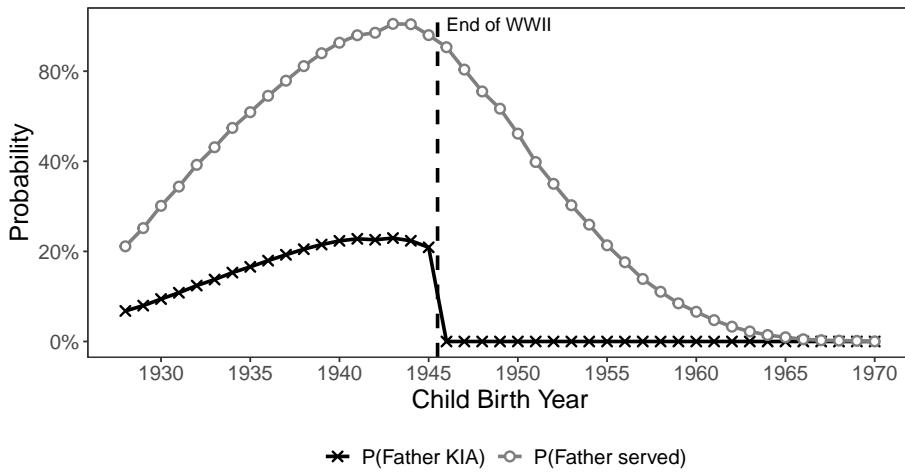
Figure 4: Exploring the mechanisms

(a) Treatment effect heterogeneity by birth cohort



Note: Panel (a) shows estimates for one-month ATTs estimated in different subsets of the Forsa voting intentions survey split by respondent year of birth. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

(b) Father's war experiences by birth year



Note: Panel (b) shows the probability of fathers' war participation (served) and battlefield death (KIA) conditional on children's birth years. The estimation is based on 1970 census data and data on WWII battlefield deaths by birth cohort (see Section C.5 of the SI for details).

(see also [Welzer 2007](#)).

In line with this research, previous biographical studies on WWII veterans specifically illustrate how their battlefield experiences significantly shaped the war narratives within their families. Many former soldiers struggled to communicate the atrocities they witnessed and the crimes they committed, not due to denial of their own actions but rather because they believed their families could not comprehend these experiences. Conversely, family members

often refrained from inquiring about these types of experiences, fearing the possible confirmation of their husbands', sons', or fathers' involvement in wartime atrocities (Goltermann 2009). Consequently, when veterans did discuss the war, they typically focused on less distressing topics, such as detailed descriptions of war tactics, peaceful interactions with civilian populations, and the perceived superiority of the Wehrmacht (Rosenthal 1991, p.36). As a result, many family narratives emerged that emphasized the hardships soldiers endured, their resilience, and the injuries they sustained (Goltermann 2009).

Analyzing 30 biographies in East and West Germany, Seegers (2013) shows how families of *fallen* soldiers developed similar narratives about the war. Family stories idealized their loyalty, sense of duty, and bravery. Their roles in the Nazi party or on the battlefield were often downplayed. Moreover, many families constructed narratives of “conversion,” suggesting that the fallen soldiers had distanced themselves from the Nazi regime prior to their deaths as a result of their war experiences. Contrary to the families of returning veterans, accounts of the war and personal victimization played a prominent role in many families of fallen soldiers. Seegers (2013) shows how accounts of fathers killed in action circulated among families like an “imaginary family photo album”; many homes prominently displayed photographs of fallen soldiers in their Wehrmacht uniforms.

It seems plausible that such *family* narratives reinforced similar self-serving *collective* memories, explaining the strong backlash among members of age cohorts with high shares of respondents whose fathers served and/or were killed in WWII. These families developed particularly salient and one-sided narratives of the war, the role of the Wehrmacht and its soldiers. In light of the important roles of these narratives in family identities, family members reacted particularly strongly to the perceived challenges to these identities.

In fact, defending the perceived honor of fathers and family members was a common theme of the political backlash and demonstrations surrounding exhibition openings. Peter Gauweiler, the Munich CSU chairman and a state MP at the time, sent a four-page personal letter to 300,000 Munich households severely criticizing the exhibition in its opening weeks (taz 1997; Pohl 2024). The exhibition's insinuation that all Wehrmacht soldiers were guilty

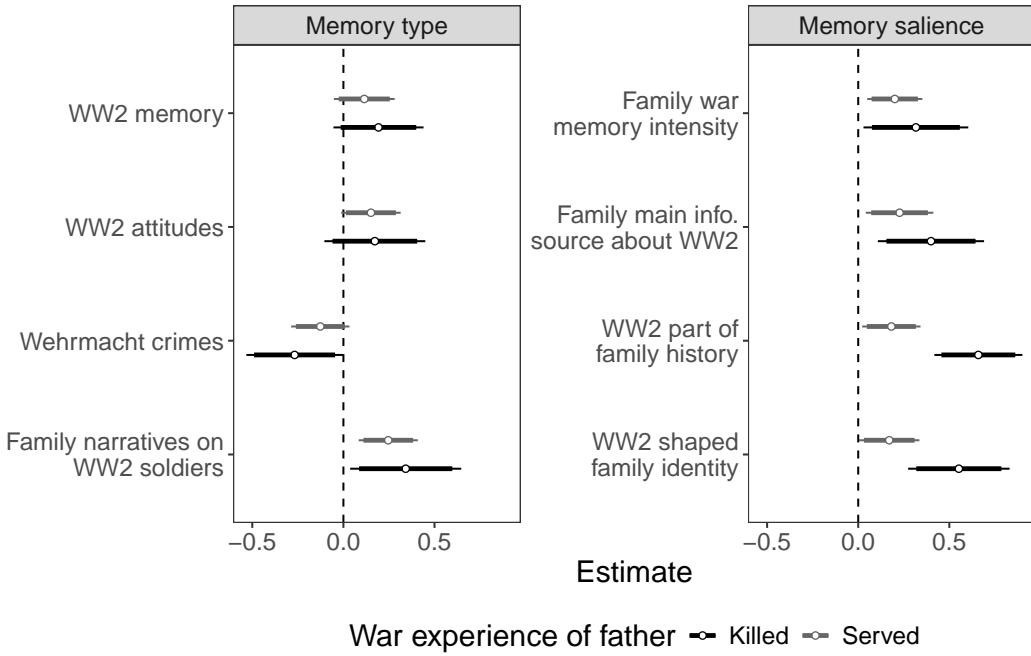
of war crimes—though its organizers explicitly did not claim this (Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung 1997, 7)—was, in Gauweiler’s words, a “slap in the face” of millions of German families who had lost sons, husbands, and fathers, as well as a “late, deliberate humiliation of countless men who served honorably” (Gauweiler 1997, 4). Similar accusations were levied against many of the opening speakers we interviewed (see SI Section F).

In order to investigate the plausibility of our explanation in more detail, we administered an online survey—targeting the hard-to-reach population of German respondents born before 1950, i.e., those cohorts that seem to be driving the backlash against the exhibition. In total, 1,294 respondents completed the survey (see additional information on the survey design in SI Section B.3; for summary statistics, see Table C.7).

We use these original survey data to explore associations between the war experiences of respondents’ families, the content of war-related family narratives, and their attitudes toward collective memories of the Wehrmacht and WWII. We provide an overview of the wording of the specific survey items that we used in B.3. Figure 5 shows associations between respondents’ fathers’ experiences during WWII and items gauging the type (left-hand panel) and salience (right-hand panel) of family memories of the Wehrmacht and WWII.

The left-hand panel of Figure 5 indicates that survey respondents whose fathers served or were killed in WWII tend to show stronger support for statements that cast the Wehrmacht in a favorable light along several measures: (1) an index assessing perceptions of the Wehrmacht’s role (e.g., *Other warring parties were just as guilty during the war as the Germans*), (2) an index evaluating attitudes toward World War II and Wehrmacht commemoration (e.g., *Too little attention is given to German victims of World War II*), (3) a survey item directly asking about the Wehrmacht’s involvement in war crimes and the Holocaust, and (4) an index focused on the content of family narratives, particularly the extent to which discussions highlighted the selflessness and heroism of German soldiers. We note that while all partial correlations point in the same direction, only some reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Notably, we do not find significant differences between respondents whose fathers returned from the war and those whose fathers were killed.

Figure 5: Family experiences and collective memory



Note: The figure shows coefficients from OLS regressions of several survey items (y-axis) on two indicators of respondents' fathers' experiences during WWII (an overview of our survey items is provided in SI Section B.3). Thin (thick) lines represent 95% (90%) confidence intervals based on heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. All models control for gender, education, religious affiliation, and state.

Moving from memory types to the salience of those memories, the right-hand panel of Figure 5 shows that respondents reporting that their fathers served or fell in WWII (1) engaged more frequently in discussions about their family members' wartime experiences, (2) are more likely to attribute their perspectives on WWII to family influences, (3) are more convinced that WWII is integral to their family history, and (4) more strongly agree that WWII shaped their family's identity. Notably, response patterns differ based on the nature of family war experiences: respondents who lost their fathers in the war are significantly more likely than those whose fathers returned to emphasize the impact of WWII on their personal family history and identity.

Overall, the descriptive analysis of our original survey data supports our interpretation of the main results highlighted earlier: family war experiences exert long-term influences on narratives and memories of WWII and the Wehrmacht. Some of these effects appear to be more pronounced among respondents whose fathers were killed in action. These patterns correspond with the findings depicted in Figure 4a: the backlash against the Wehrmacht ex-

hibition was most pronounced in the birth cohort with a high proportion of children of both surviving veterans *and* fallen soldiers—while families of both of these groups seem more likely to have developed family narratives that clashed with the content of the Wehrmacht exhibition, this clash is likely to have been particularly threatening to the identity of the children of fallen soldiers.

In addition to probing the mechanisms driving our main results, this survey also allows us to assess to what extent our findings may be specific to (a) the Wehrmacht exhibition as a particular form of challenge to a self-serving memory as well as (b) to the SPD as the primary memory entrepreneur associated with this challenge.

To examine these potential scope conditions of our findings, our survey included a brief vignette that informs respondents of a controversy regarding the commemoration of the Wehrmacht within the contemporary German armed forces. In 2018, Ursula von der Leyen, the then-Federal Minister of Defense and a member of the CDU, revised the so-called “Tradition Decree,” which outlines the preservation of tradition within the German armed forces. This amendment declared the Wehrmacht as a whole “not worthy of shaping tradition” (*nicht traditionswürdig*) because it “served the National Socialist regime of injustice and was culpably involved in its crimes” ([Bundesministerium der Verteidigung 2018](#), 4).

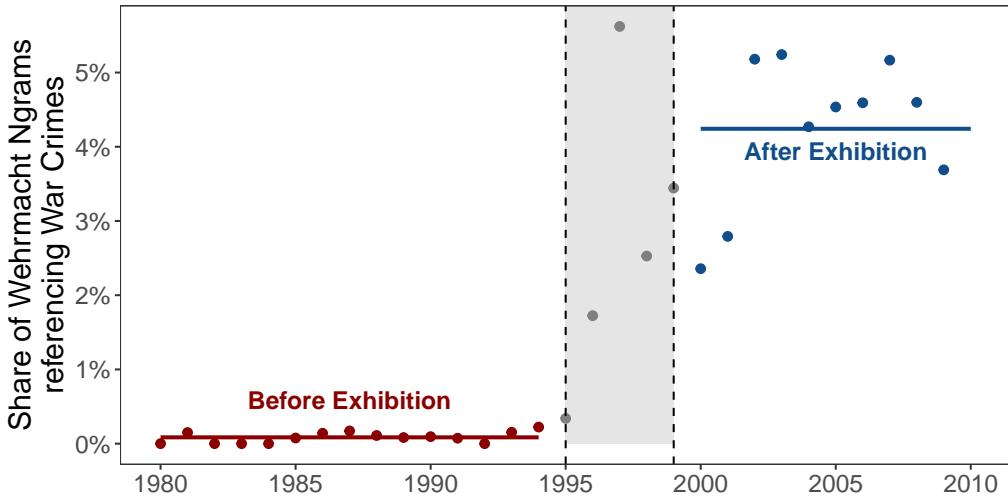
If challenges to self-serving narratives provoke backlash against the respective mnemonic entrepreneurs, regardless of (a) the form of the challenge and (b) the general political orientation of the respective entrepreneur, we would expect this declaration to elicit negative reactions towards the Christian Democrats (CDU). We test this hypothesis in Table [E.12](#) by regressing respondents’ support for the statement, “If the CDU maintains its position on the Tradition Decree, that would be a reason for me to vote for another party” on their family war experiences. Consistent with our theoretical framework, there is stronger support for this statement among respondents whose fathers either served or were killed in World War II. This finding supports our interpretation that our main results reflect a backlash against any challenges of self-serving narratives—*independent* of the form of the challenge or the political orientation of the challenger.

8 Long-term effects on collective memory

The Wehrmacht exhibition aimed to challenge and overturn the prevailing “clean Wehrmacht” narrative (see Section 4). Did it achieve this goal and shift collective memory?

Measuring the exhibition’s ultimate impact on collective memory is difficult. Ideally, we would track changes in attitudes and beliefs regarding the Wehrmacht’s involvement in WWII war crimes over time in a nationally representative sample. However, longitudinal data that would allow us to measure changes in these beliefs over time are not available in our context. Instead, we use a proxy based on Google Ngram data for German-language books (see Section B.4 in the SI for details on data processing). Specifically, to measure whether the exhibition undermined the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht,” we measure over-time changes in the co-occurrence of the terms “Wehrmacht” and “Verbrechen” (crimes). The underlying assumption of this approach is that references to Wehrmacht war crimes in written texts proxy for changes in collective memory linking the Wehrmacht to these atrocities.

Figure 6: References to Wehrmacht War Crimes in German-Language Books



Note: The y-axis shows the yearly share of Google Ngrams referencing war crimes in connection with the *Wehrmacht*. We calculate this by subsetting to Ngrams mentioning the Wehrmacht and computing the share that also references “crimes” (“Verbrechen”). Ngrams mentioning “exhibition” (e.g., “Ausstellung”) are excluded. The light grey area marks the exhibition period (1995–1999), and the blue and red horizontal lines indicate the average shares before and after the exhibition. See SI Section B.4 for additional details on data processing.

Figure 6 shows the results. Prior to the Wehrmacht exhibition, the “clean Wehrmacht” narrative prevailed: we find virtually no linkage between the Wehrmacht and (war) crimes

before 1995 (red line) in written texts.²⁴ This changes discontinuously with the exhibition’s opening. We observe a sharp, sustained increase in the discussion of war crimes attributed to the Wehrmacht after 1995. In Figure E.18 in the SI, we demonstrate null results for a set of Wehrmacht-related placebo terms, suggesting that the shift we observe is driven by an increased discussion of war crimes specifically rather than a general shift in the discourse surrounding the Wehrmacht. These findings suggest that, although the political backlash against the exhibition was short-lived, its impact on collective memory was profound. The exhibition rendered the “clean Wehrmacht” narrative untenable, an insight also relayed to us in many of our interviews (see SI Section F). It fostered a lasting shift toward a more nuanced view of the Wehrmacht’s—and thus German society’s—involvement in WWII atrocities.

9 Discussion

Self-serving narratives on past ingroup atrocities play an important role in the collective memories of many societies across the world—narratives related to colonization, slavery, repressive autocratic rule, or other forms of mass violence. Focusing on one of the most intense “memory conflicts” in Germany’s postwar history, we demonstrate that challenges of such narratives can trigger a backlash against political actors challenging the self-serving memory.

Our analyses allow us to specify this backlash in two important ways. First, we find evidence of strong defensive reactions predominantly among segments of the population with personal connections to ingroup perpetrator groups—indicating that backlash did not result from threats to collective (national) identities but rather from challenges to more narrow family narratives. Second, while the magnitude of the backlash is substantial, it is also localized and short-lived. We find a drop in public support for the “political face” of the challenge only in areas close to locations where evidence against the narrative was on display and only *while*

²⁴The Wehrmacht exhibition is one link in a long process of historical reckoning in Germany. During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a broader engagement with the role of the German population in the Holocaust, exemplified by the *Historikerstreit* and the publication of Goldhagen (1996). This is reflected in the rise of Ngrams referencing the Holocaust starting in 1980 (see Figure E.17). However, this trend does not align temporally with the opening of the Wehrmacht exhibition. Moreover, earlier milestones of historical reckoning focused on the Holocaust more generally rather than specifically addressing the involvement of ordinary German soldiers, as evidenced by the pre-1995 trends shown in Figure 6.

the evidence was on display. Furthermore, SPD representatives maintained or even increased their support and presence at openings during the second iteration of the Wehrmacht exhibition,²⁵ suggesting that the original backlash was not sustained enough to reconsider this support.

We do not know if the observable backlash ended because public debates refocused on other issues or because public opinion converged on a new memory consensus. However, our analyses clearly show that memory entrepreneurs face only short-lived political costs among certain segments of society when trying to reshape even deeply entrenched, self-serving collective memories. Indeed, our findings indicate that while memory entrepreneurs may only incur short-term political costs, their actions can have a lasting impact on public discourse that persists long after the initial controversy subsides. The Wehrmacht exhibition exemplifies this dynamic: a short-lived backlash ultimately gave way to a profound transformation in how society interprets its past.

Our single-case study does not allow us to empirically assess the generalizability of these findings to other countries and historical cases. However, we can identify relevant scope conditions based on (social) identity theory, on which we base our theoretical argument. First, we expect backlash reactions only in response to challenges of a certain type of collective memory: entrenched narratives about a large group of perpetrators involved in mass violence committed in the ingroup's recent history—only for this kind of narrative will challenges constitute significant, immediate identity threats for a large share of the population, increasing the likelihood of defensive reactions.

The second condition refers to the type of challenge. The Wehrmacht exhibition was based on a large body of historical, photographic evidence on crimes committed by Wehrmacht soldiers. This kind of evidence-based challenge leaves little room for alternative (non-defensive) socio-psychological reactions to identity threats, such as downplaying the gravity of the in-group wrongdoing or reinterpreting perpetrators and victims.

The third condition refers to the type of memory entrepreneur challenging the collective

²⁵For instance, State Minister for Culture Julian Nida-Rümelin (SPD), who reported directly to Chancellor Gerhard Schröder (SPD), spoke at the second exhibition's overall opening in Berlin.

narrative. Defensive reactions will most likely result in political backlash if the challenge can be associated with one specific actor—for example, a specific political party. Conversely, diverse coalitions of memory entrepreneurs will make it more difficult to blame challenges on the vested interests or specific political ideology of any particular actor.

Thus, we believe that our findings on the case of the 1995–1999 Wehrmacht exhibition in Germany can provide important lessons for memory politics in countries such as Spain, France, Italy, the UK, and Turkey. In present-day Germany, the previously widespread “myth of the clean Wehrmacht” is no longer part of mainstream collective memories of WWII. The Wehrmacht exhibition triggered the process that led to the narrative’s demise, despite presenting a direct challenge to the identities of many millions of German families. The political costs that supporters of the exhibition faced were substantial but short-lived. Thus, our findings indicate that memory entrepreneurs’ concerns over the political costs of challenges to self-serving narratives may often be overstated. Potential memory entrepreneurs’ hesitation may constitute a greater obstacle to re-interpretations of collective narratives than the actual backlash against such challenges does.

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Revisiting History, Reshaping Memory: The Effects of Confronting Ingroup Atrocities

Supporting Information (online only)

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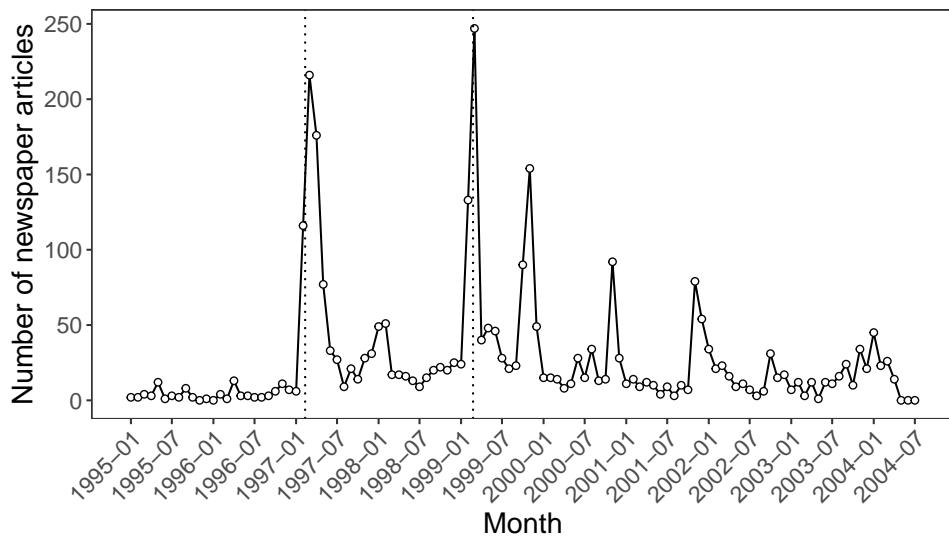
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A Coverage of the exhibition in national and local news

Figure A.1 and Table A.1 describe coverage of the exhibition in national and regional newspapers from 1995 to 2004. Table A.1 shows two clear peaks in media attention: the February 1997 exhibition opening in Munich and the March 1999 bombing in Saarbrücken. Table A.2 lists all eight instances of the exhibition being featured in the eight o'clock *Tagesschau*—by far Germany's most-watched news program—from 1995–1999.

Jan Philipp Reemtsma, the wealthy director and patron of the HIS, initiator of the exhibition, and a well-known public figure in his own right, was kidnapped and held for ransom from 25 March to 26 April 1996. This kidnapping received significant media attention but was not related to the exhibition and had purely financial motives. The search queries shown in Figure A.1 and Table A.1 are phrased so as to exclude coverage of the kidnapping that also mentioned the exhibition in passing.

Figure A.1: Wehrmacht exhibition news coverage



Note: This figure shows the monthly number of articles in German media discussing the Wehrmacht exhibition. The two dotted vertical lines represent the dates of the exhibition opening in Munich (24 February 1997) and the bombing of the exhibition in Saarbrücken (9 March 1999). Newspaper data is taken from the Genios database (<http://www.genios.de>). We identify articles that contain the terms ‘wehrmachtsausstellung’, ‘reemtsma’ + ‘wehrmacht’, ‘hannes heer’ + ‘wehrmacht’, or ‘die verbrechen der wehrmacht’ + ‘ausstellung’. See Table A.1 for the number of articles by news outlet.

Table A.1: Wehrmacht exhibition news articles by outlet

Newspaper	No. of exhibition articles (1995–2004)
Bonner General-Anzeiger	96
DER SPIEGEL	76
DIE ZEIT	93
Der Tagesspiegel	280
F.A.Z. Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ)	329
FOCUS	62
Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (FAS)	66
Handelsblatt	15
Handelszeitung	1
Mitteldeutsche Zeitung	195
Nürnberger Nachrichten	117
Rhein-Main-Zeitung	151
Saarbrücker Zeitung	413
Stuttgarter Zeitung	125
Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ)	525
WirtschaftsWoche	1
taz. die tageszeitung	454

Note: This table shows the total number of articles about the Wehrmacht exhibition per newspaper.

Table A.2: Wehrmacht exhibition coverage in the *Tagesschau* 8 o'clock news, 1995–1999.

Date	Timestamp	Duration	Topic	URL
24 February 1997	08:08	1:35	Exhibition opening, Munich	URL
01 March 1997	–	1:34	Neo-Nazi protests and counter-protests in Munich	–
13 April 1997	11:26	0:30	Exhibition opening, Frankfurt am Main	URL
07 December 1997	07:38	1:34	Human rights prize (Carl von Ossietzky Medal)	URL
24 January 1998	08:42	0:32	Neo-Nazi protests and counter-protests in Dresden	URL
30 January 1999	08:11	0:35	Neo-Nazi protests and counter-protests in Kiel	URL
09 March 1999	07:01	1:29	Bombing in Saarbrücken	URL
04 November 1999	02:43	1:29	Exhibition moratorium	URL

Note: Footage from 01 March 1997 is not available to the public online due to an injunction proceeding.

B Data collection and processing

B.1 Forsa survey data

The ‘Forsa Bus’ survey asks around 500 respondents per weekday (as a repeated cross-section) about their electoral preferences and socio-demographic attributes. The survey is based on computer-assisted phone interviews and is representative of the German voting-age population. For our main analysis, we merge the annual datasets from 1994 to 2000 into a single data set ([Forsa 2013a](#), [1998a](#), [2013b](#), [1998b](#), [1999](#), [2013c](#), [2001](#)). We check all variables for changes in their coding between years and harmonize variables where needed.

Using the county key contained in the survey, we are able to determine the county of a respondent’s place of residence at the time of the survey. We are not able to map the place of residence of approx. 9% of respondents to a contemporary county due to administrative changes in the 1990s, mostly in areas of the former GDR. However, this has little impact on our analysis as the Wehrmacht exhibition was predominantly shown in West Germany (recall Figure 2 in the main text).

Table B.3: Issue aggregation

Answer label	Issue category
German military deployment in Bosnia	Bundeswehr
German military deployment in Yugoslavia	Bundeswehr
General German military deployments	Bundeswehr
German involvement in Iraq	Bundeswehr
Germany's involvement in NATO alliance case (Afghanistan)	Bundeswehr
Deaths of German soldiers in foreign deployments	Bundeswehr
UN deployment of the German military	Bundeswehr
Peace / preservation of peace	Int. wars/peace
Conflict in Afghanistan	Int. wars/peace
Conflict in Liberia	Int. wars/peace
Conflict / deployment in Congo	Int. wars/peace
Costs of the Kosovo war	Int. wars/peace
War in Yugoslavia, Yugoslavia	Int. wars/peace
Wars in the world	Int. wars/peace
US operations against terrorism, debate about Iraq war	Int. wars/peace
Planned US operations (Syria)	Int. wars/peace
Asylum seekers, asylum policy	Migration
Asylum seekers, asylum law	Migration
Asylum debate, asylum topic	Migration
Emigrants and resettlers	Migration
Foreigners	Migration
Foreigners (overpopulation)	Migration
Foreigners' crime	Migration
Foreigners' policy	Migration
Debate about immigration	Migration
Refugees	Migration
War refugees	Migration
Muslims in Germany, headscarf debate	Migration
Dual citizenship	Migration
Attacks on Jewish establishments in Germany	Right-wing extremism
Antisemitism	Right-wing extremism
Xenophobia	Right-wing extremism
NPD ban	Right-wing extremism
Right-wing extremist marches	Right-wing extremism
Right-wing extremist violence	Right-wing extremism
Right-wing radicalism, right-wing extremism	Right-wing extremism
Republicans	Right-wing extremism
Electoral success of right-wing extremist parties	Right-wing extremism
Organized right-wing extremism	Right-wing extremism

Note: This table lists codings for the aggregation of individual answers to the survey question “In your opinion, what are the three biggest problems in Germany at the moment?” into four broader issue areas.

B.2 Letters to the editor

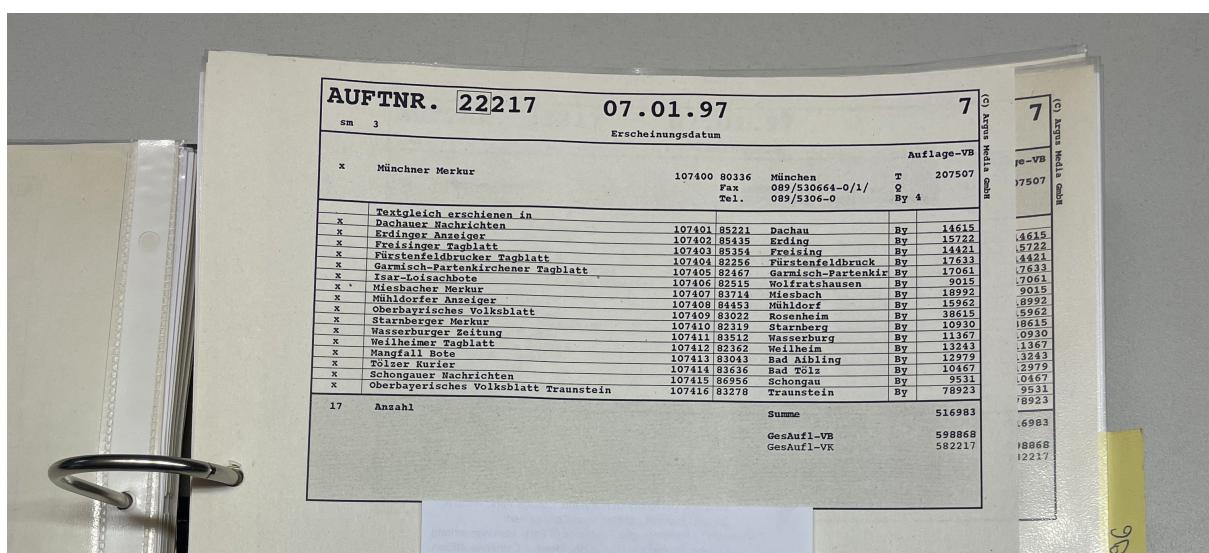
We were granted access to a large systematic collection of letters to the editor concerning the exhibition, written and published between 1995 and 2000 in Germany and Austria and commissioned by the HIS at the time. The collection covers the entire span of the exhibition from March 1995 to October 1999, as well as another year through December 2000. The collection was compiled by two firms specializing in media monitoring, including collecting and labeling physical press clippings.²⁶ It is held at the *HIS* archive in Hamburg.

The collection encompasses 23 binders of clippings (Figure B.2). Typically, each press clipping was contained in the collection at least twice: once as an original cut from the newspaper and pasted on a sheet of paper with standardized information such as the date and newspaper, once as a photocopy of this sheet, and sometimes as further photocopies. Figure B.3 shows the headers of the press clippings, as compiled by the media agency covering the German press.

Figure B.2: The archival collection of letters to the editor.



Figure B.3: Header for German press clippings as compiled by the media agency.



²⁶Argus Media in Germany and Observer in Austria, who have since merged.

Our unit of analysis is the individual letter to the editor. Many of these press clippings contain multiple letters compiled by the newspaper into a single ‘letters to the editor’ page. We ultimately hand-coded a random sample of 1,247 letters that were directly related to the Wehrmacht exhibition, which we estimate to cover about 20–30% of the entire collection.

As these are published letters to the editor, there are likely several selection mechanisms at play. On the one hand, newspaper editors assumedly screened out views that were considered extremely right-wing at the time.²⁷ On the other hand, letters were likely also selected for particularly interesting content and viewpoints, such as first-hand experience as a Wehrmacht soldier. Finally, because the exhibition directly covered a formative phase of their lives, Wehrmacht veterans were certainly more likely to write in than most other Germans in the first place. The strong over-representation of self-identified Wehrmacht veterans among the letter-writers—18% of letters vs. perhaps 3% of the German population at the time—suggests that these mechanisms were indeed at play.

Sampling procedure: We generated a series of random numbers to be used to count off and select letters in the 23 binders, the largest of which contained about 300 different letters. The first round of coding was completed in eight working days (05–14 February 2024). As we still had two remaining working days in the archive (15 and 16 February), we generated another 21 random numbers between 1 and 300 which had not previously been used and appended these to the coding sheets.

Coding procedure and descriptives: We coded letters for simple demographic characteristics (gender, age if given), newspaper details (publication, location), sentiment towards the exhibition (negative, positive, or neutral), and the stated arguments for or against the exhibition. Figure C.6 shows that the majority of these letters to the editor (67%) voiced criticism of the exhibition, while about three in ten supported it (29%). 86% of letter-writers were male, 11% were female, and 4% could not be determined (e.g., anonymous letters). 18% of authors claimed to have served in the Wehrmacht, and another 5% said that close family members did (while they themselves did not), for a total of 23% of letters explicitly mentioning family ties to the Wehrmacht.

²⁷Note that this has since changed; many of the printed letters would today likely be deemed outside the bounds of acceptable public speech in democratic German civil society.

B.3 Contemporary survey of Germans born before 1950

B.3.1 Design and implementation

In order to probe the mechanisms driving our main results, we implemented an online survey targeting German citizens above the age of 75 (i.e., born before 1950). We defined a target sample size of 1,300 respondents for the survey. As our main analyses revealed that treatment effects seemed to be driven by men born before the end of the war, we set a minimum quota of 400 male respondents aged 79 or above (i.e., born before 1946). The data collection was implemented by the survey company Bilendi/Respondi. Fieldwork began on November 11, 2024, and was completed on November 23. In total, 1,294 eligible respondents completed the survey, including 558 respondents born before the end of WWII (412 male, 146 female). Table C.7 provides summary statistics for the final sample.

The survey instrument featured four main sections. The first section focused on basic demographic information (e.g., home state, education). The second section aimed to collect information on respondents' parents, e.g., the war experiences of their fathers. The two remaining sections included questions on (1) respondents' family memories and personal attitudes on WWII and the Wehrmacht, as well as on (2) respondents' awareness and perceptions of the Wehrmacht exhibition. Table B.4 provides an overview of the survey items used in the analyses presented in the main paper. The survey design and content received ethics clearance from the institutional review board of the home institution of one of the authors.

Table B.4: Overview of survey variables

Variable	Item(s)
WW2 Memory (Index)	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</p> <p><i>"I doubt that everything reported about the extent of the Wehrmacht's crimes is true."</i></p> <p><i>"Too little attention is given to German victims during the Second World War."</i></p> <p><i>"When remembering the Second World War, more emphasis should be placed on the courage and sacrifices of German soldiers."</i></p> <p><i>"No one paid a higher price for the war than the children who lost their fathers in the war."</i></p>
Family Narratives on WW2 (Index)	<p>If your family talked about the wartime experiences of its members, how often were the following topics emphasized?</p> <p><i>"The suffering and sacrifices of German soldiers during the war."</i></p> <p><i>"The selflessness of German soldiers."</i></p> <p><i>"The actions German soldiers had to commit."</i></p> <p><i>"The heroism of German soldiers."</i></p>

(Continued on next page)

Table B.4 (continued)

Variable	Item(s)
WW2 Attitudes (Index)	<p>Which of the following statements about the Second World War do you agree with?</p> <p><i>"Other warring parties were as guilty during the war as the Germans."</i></p> <p><i>"The German soldiers at the time fought honorably."</i></p> <p><i>"Although German soldiers were involved in mass crimes, they were simply following orders."</i></p>
Wehrmacht crimes	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statement?</p> <p><i>"The Wehrmacht was actively involved in numerous war crimes, including the Holocaust."</i></p>
Family war memory intensity	<p>How often was the wartime experience of your family members discussed in your family?</p>
WW2 part of family history	<p>To what extent do you agree with the following statements?</p> <p><i>"The Second World War is part of my family history."</i></p>
WW2 shaped family identity	<p><i>"The Second World War has shaped my family identity."</i></p>

Note: The table lists the variables used in the analysis of our survey data. Index variables are constructed by averaging the corresponding items and standardizing the resulting measure.

To assess respondents' perceptions of their own father, our survey included an open-ended question asking participants to list characteristics (adjectives) that best described what kind of person their father was. We rely on ChatGPT 4o-mini to systematically code these responses. Using the prompt below, we ask the model to identify whether individual descriptions mirror classical militaristic values associated with the German Wehrmacht:

I have a dataset of free-text survey responses to the question: 'Nennen Sie bitte drei Merkmale (Adjektive), die Ihrer Ansicht nach beschreiben, was für ein Mensch Ihr Vater war.'

The responses contain adjectives and short descriptions. I want you to evaluate each response to determine whether it reflects classical militaristic values associated with the German Wehrmacht. These values include: Discipline, Duty, Loyalty, Obedience, Bravery, Leadership, Order, Resilience, Patriotism.

If the response reflects these values, respond with '1'. Respond with '0' in all other cases. Ignore any neutral or ambiguous phrases that do not clearly align with these traits.

For example: Input: ‘musikalisch’ Output: ‘0’

Input: ‘kameradschaftlich’ Output: ‘1’

Input: ‘Preußische Tugenden’ Output: ‘1’

Use this structure for all responses and respond only with ‘1’ or ‘0’.

B.4 Google Ngrams

We use data from *Google Books Ngram* (2012) to trace the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on collective memory. The data is based on a cleaned subset of the *Google Books* corpus, covering about eight million digitized books (Lin et al. 2012). The term “n-gram” refers to a contiguous sequence of n items from a given text, where n can be any number. “Technology has changed the world” is a 5-gram, for example.

For our analysis, we only use the corpus of German-language books and retrieve all 5-grams that contain the word “Wehrmacht”. To ensure that our analysis reflects general discourse rather than discussions of the Wehrmacht exhibition itself, we excluded n-grams that directly relate to the exhibition. Specifically, we removed any n-grams containing one of the following keywords: “Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941”, “Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941–1944”, “Ausstellung Verbrechen der Wehrmacht”, “Ausstellung über Verbrechen der Wehrmacht”, “Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis”, “Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1944”, “Wehrmachtausstellung”, and “Ausstellung”. We identified these keywords manually by examining all unique N-grams in our data.

Next, we identified n-grams containing the term “Verbrechen” (meaning “crime” or “crimes”) to determine how frequently the Wehrmacht was connected to war crimes in published books. By calculating the annual share of these references, we assessed the proportion of Wehrmacht mentions that also included war crime associations each year. We compare these rates before and after the exhibition to evaluate its impact on collective memory and the portrayal of the Wehrmacht in German-language books (see Figure 6).

C Descriptive statistics

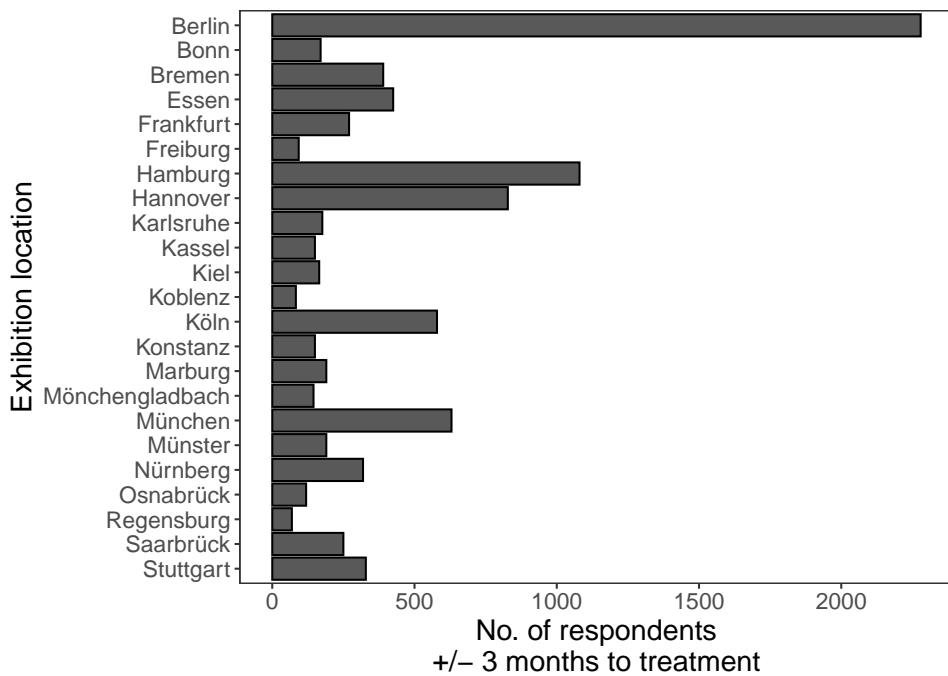
C.1 Forsa survey data

Table C.6: Summary statistics, *Forsa* survey data

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Year	869,215	1996.99	2	1994	2000
Month	869,215	6.47	3.42	1	12
Day of Month	869,215	15.73	8.69	1	31
Birth Year	869,215	1951.47	17.46	1890	1986
Male (0/1)	869,213	0.45	0.5	0	1
Education: No degree (0/1)	815,314	0.02	0.14	0	1
Education: Lower secondary (Hauptschule) (0/1)	815,314	0.38	0.49	0	1
Education: Lower secondary (Mittl. Reife) (0/1)	815,314	0.26	0.44	0	1
Education: Lower secondary (Polyt. Oberschule) (0/1)	815,314	0.06	0.25	0	1
Education: Upper secondary / university degree (0/1)	815,314	0.27	0.44	0	1
Household Size	865,646	2.69	1.54	1	95
Exhibition county (0/1)	869,215	0.18	0.39	0	1
Applicant County (0/1)	869,215	0.23	0.42	0	1
Distance to closest exhibition (km)	796,644	38.01	30.76	0	185.57
City (0/1)	869,215	0.27	0.44	0	1
Issue Bundeswehr (0/1)	528,385	0.01	0.07	0	1
Issue Migration (0/1)	528,385	0.12	0.33	0	1
Issue Right-Wing Extremism(0/1)	528,385	0.16	0.36	0	1
Issue Int. Wars/Peace (0/1)	528,385	0.01	0.11	0	1
Voting intention SPD (0/1)	837,059	0.29	0.45	0	1
Voting intention CDU/CSU (0/1)	837,059	0.27	0.44	0	1
Voting intention FDP (0/1)	837,059	0.02	0.15	0	1
Voting intention Greens (0/1)	837,059	0.06	0.24	0	1
Voting intention PDS (0/1)	837,059	0.02	0.14	0	1
Voting intention Republicans (0/1)	837,059	0.01	0.08	0	1
Voting intention Other (0/1)	869,215	0.01	0.09	0	1
Voting intention Non-response (0/1)	869,215	0.3	0.46	0	1

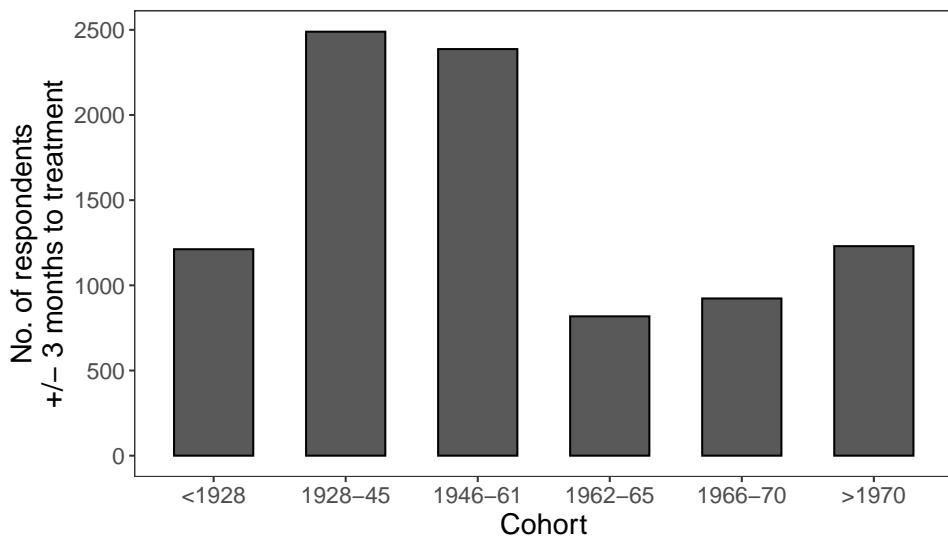
Note: Summary statistics for the Forsa Bus data.

Figure C.4: Sample size per exhibition county



Note: The figure shows the number of survey respondents in the Forsa Bus per treated county within three months before and after the exhibition.

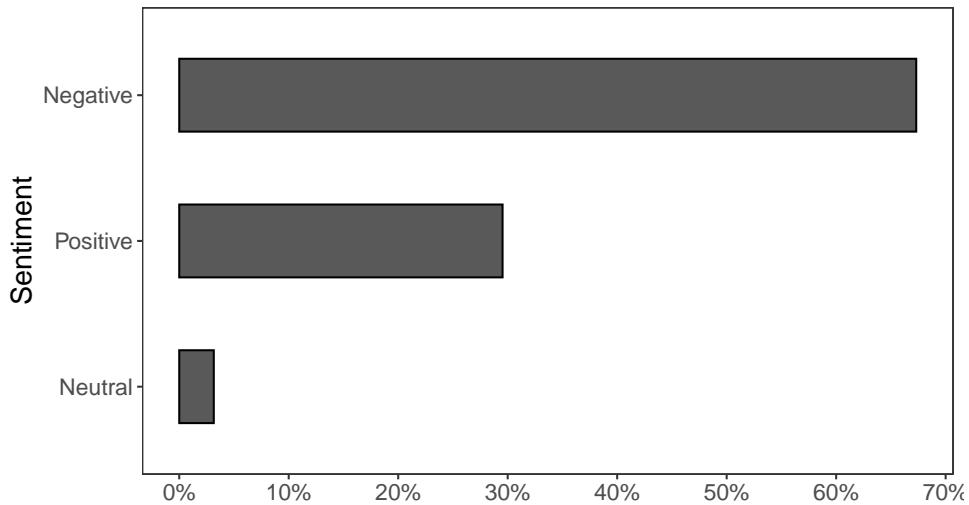
Figure C.5: Sample size per cohort



Note: The figure shows the number of survey respondents in treated counties per cohort within three months before and after the exhibition.

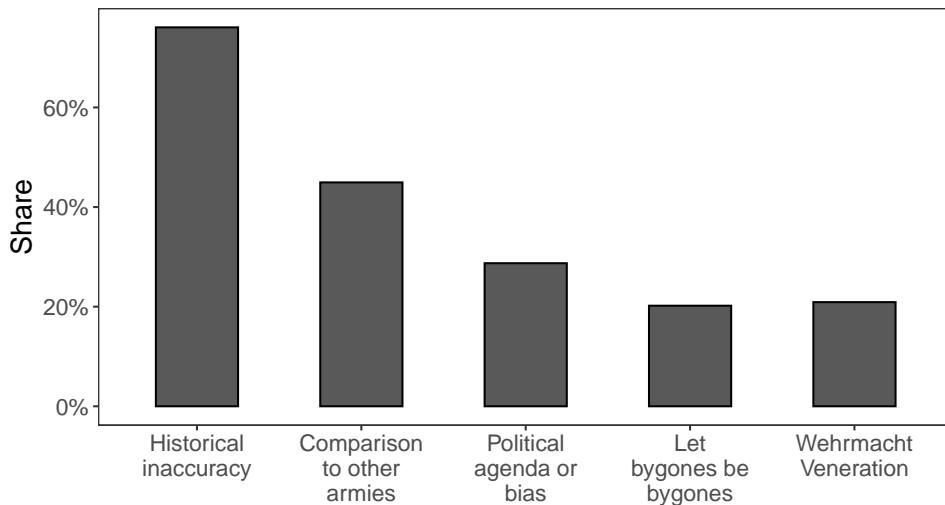
C.2 Letters to the editor

Figure C.6: Letters to the editor by sentiment



Note: The figure shows the share of WME letters to the editor by sentiment.

Figure C.7: Stated reasons for negative sentiment



Note: The figure visualizes the arguments made in letters expressing opposition to the exhibition. We code five (non-mutually exclusive) categories: Historical inaccuracy (the Wehrmacht exhibition is said to be historically inaccurate), Comparison to other armies (minimizing the Wehrmacht's crimes by pointing to others), Political agenda or bias (the exhibition is accused of pushing a biased narrative), Letting bygones be bygones (the need for the exhibition is questioned), and Wehrmacht veneration (explicit praise of the Wehrmacht).

C.3 Contemporary survey of Germans born before 1950

Table C.7: Summary statistics contemporary survey data

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Year of birth	1,294	1945.38	3.38	1930	1949
Gender: Female	1,294	0.3	0.46	0	1
Gender: Male	1,294	0.7	0.46	0	1
Religion: Catholic	1,294	0.18	0.39	0	1
Religion: Protestant	1,294	0.34	0.48	0	1
Religion: Other	1,294	0.02	0.13	0	1
Religion: None	1,294	0.45	0.5	0	1
Education: None	1,294	0	0.03	0	1
Education: Elementary / Lower secondary	1,294	0.19	0.39	0	1
Education: Polytechnic secondary school	1,294	0.04	0.19	0	1
Education: Intermediate	1,294	0.29	0.45	0	1
Education: Upper secondary	1,294	0.11	0.31	0	1
Education: University degree	1,294	0.37	0.48	0	1
Education: Other	1,294	0.01	0.1	0	1
Father served in WW2	1,294	0.77	0.42	0	1
Father killed in WW2	1,294	0.07	0.25	0	1
Father decorated	1,294	0.09	0.28	0	1
WW2 memory	1,122	0	1	-2.49	1.95
WW2 attitudes	1,079	0	1	-2.78	1.47
Wehrmacht crimes	1,178	5.86	1.51	1	7
Family narratives on WW2 soldiers	1,078	0	1	-1.51	2.75
Family war memory intensity	1,267	2.51	0.98	1	5
Family main info source about WW2	1,276	3.54	1.14	1	5
WW2 part of family history	1,265	4.63	1.95	1	7
WW2 shaped family identity	1,219	4.07	1.93	1	7
No. of Wehrmacht adjectives	1,294	1.14	0.99	0	3
State: Schleswig-Holstein	1,294	0.06	0.23	0	1
State: Hamburg	1,294	0.03	0.18	0	1
State: Lower Saxony	1,294	0.09	0.29	0	1
State: Bremen	1,294	0.01	0.1	0	1
State: North Rhine-Westphalia	1,294	0.17	0.37	0	1
State: Hesse	1,294	0.08	0.27	0	1
State: Rhineland-Palatinate	1,294	0.04	0.21	0	1
State: Baden-Württemberg	1,294	0.1	0.3	0	1
State: Bavaria	1,294	0.12	0.33	0	1
State: Saarland	1,294	0.01	0.12	0	1
State: Berlin	1,294	0.09	0.28	0	1
State: Brandenburg	1,294	0.05	0.22	0	1
State: Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	1,294	0.02	0.14	0	1

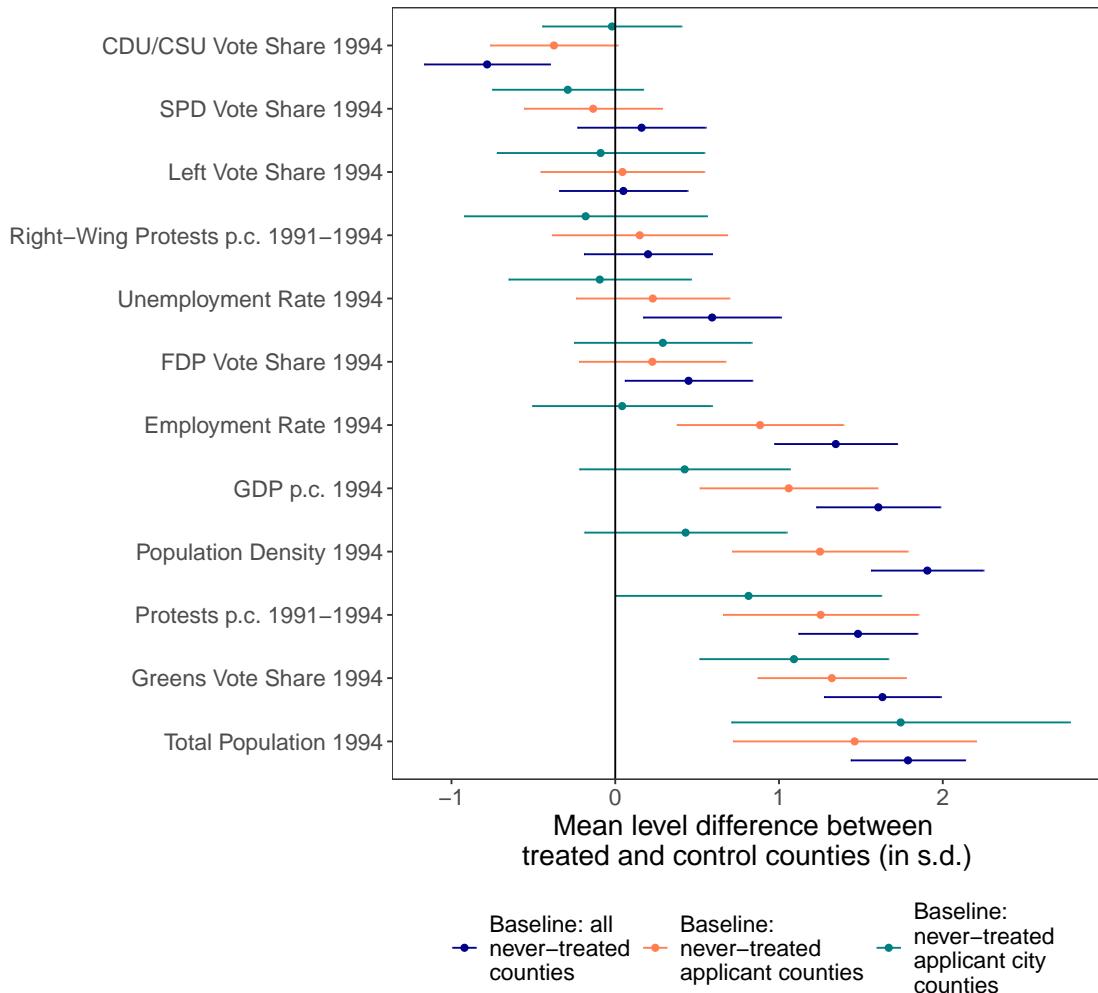
Table C.7: Summary statistics contemporary survey data (*continued*)

Variable	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
State: Saxony	1,294	0.07	0.26	0	1
State: Saxony-Anhalt	1,294	0.03	0.17	0	1
State: Thuringia	1,294	0.03	0.16	0	1

Note: This table contains summary statistics for the survey data.

C.4 Characteristics of treated and control localities

Figure C.8: Covariate characteristics of treated and control counties



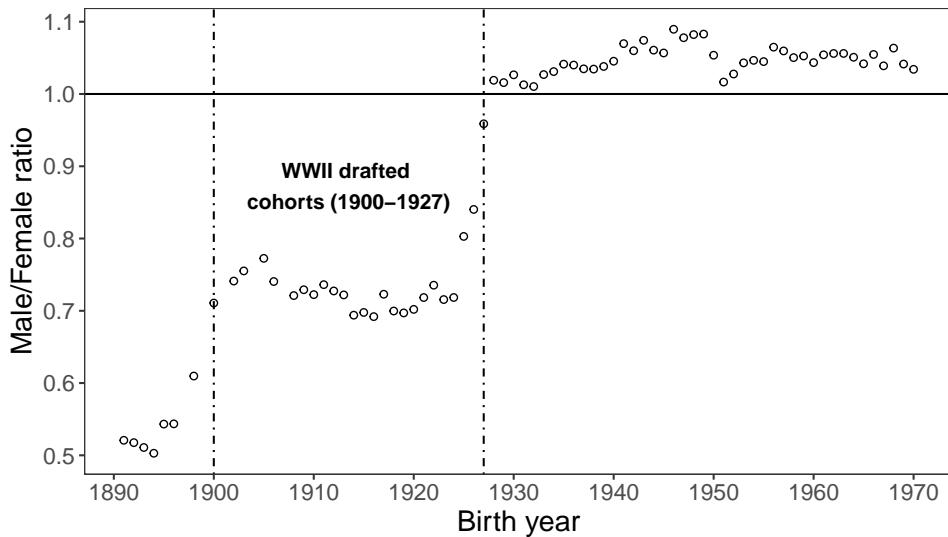
Note: The figure visualizes level differences between treated ($N = 27$) and control counties across multiple pre-treatment covariates. We regress each covariate on a dummy variable indicating treated counties that received the exhibition. We compare treated counties to three groups of comparison: (1) all never-treated counties that did not receive the exhibition ($N = 366$), (2) never-treated counties that applied to receive the exhibition but did not receive it ($N = 70$), and (3) applicant *city* counties (*Stadtkreise*) that applied to receive the exhibition but did not receive it ($N = 34$). The group of never-treated counties excludes counties that received the Wehrmacht exhibition in its 2nd phase (see Section 4). Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

C.5 Exposure to WWII by birth cohort

In Figure 4a, we use birth-year cutoffs to examine heterogeneity between citizens who personally experienced WWII and their children who do not have personal frontline experiences. In this section, we provide additional background information on how cohort birth years correspond to personal and family experiences based on 1970 census data (5% sample; $N \approx 3$ million). These data are available from the *Forschungsdatenzentren der amtlichen Statistik* ('FDZ').

First, we identify the male birth cohorts most likely to have served in WWII by examining the male-to-female population ratio by birth year (see Figure C.9). Men are notably underrepresented among the cohorts born between 1900 and 1927, consistent with historical data on the WWII draft ([Wurdack 2002](#)). Starting with the 1928 birth cohort, the male-to-female ratio spikes and approaches parity. Although some men born in 1928 died in combat, battlefield losses affected only a small share of this cohort. For our analysis, we therefore consider the 1900–1927 cohorts as drafted.²⁸

Figure C.9: Male to female gender ratio by birth year



Note: The figure shows the male-to-female population ratio by birth year. Each dot corresponds to one birth year. The figure is based on data collected in the 1970 census (*Volkszählung 1970*). The core cohorts that were subject to the WWII draft are indicated by vertical lines (1900–1927 male birth cohorts). Men born before 1900 were subject to the WWI draft.

Next, we link the birth year of children to their *father's* experiences during WWII. This is more challenging, as there is no single data source that allows us to simultaneously observe (1) the father's year of birth, (2) the children's year of birth, and (3) the father's war experiences. To circumvent this issue, we combine the census data with information on battlefield deaths by birth cohort compiled by ([Wurdack 2002](#)).

To estimate the probability that a child's father died during WWII based on the child's year of birth, we first define the following random variables:

²⁸We note, however, that the draft was incomplete among older cohorts (1900–1910, see [Wurdack \(2002\)](#)). We also note that while year of birth strongly predicts WWII participation, this is an imperfect approximation; a small proportion of men in drafted cohorts did not serve as soldiers due to exemptions, such as medical disqualifications.

- Let Y_C denote the child's year of birth.
- Let Y_F denote the father's year of birth.
- Let Y_M denote the mother's year of birth.
- Let D_F be an indicator variable where $D_F = 1$ if the father died during WWII, and $D_F = 0$ otherwise.
- Let S_F be an indicator variable where $S_F = 1$ if the father served in WWII, and $S_F = 0$ otherwise.

Using these definitions and the law of total probability, we can express the probability that a child's father died in the war as:

$$\begin{aligned} P(D_F = 1 \mid Y_C = y_c) &= \sum_{y_f} P(D_F = 1 \mid Y_F = y_f, Y_C = y_c) P(Y_F = y_f \mid Y_C = y_c). \\ &= \sum_{y_f} P(D_F = 1 \mid Y_F = y_f) P(Y_F = y_f \mid Y_C = y_c). \end{aligned}$$

assuming that battlefield death of fathers (D_F) is independent of children's year of birth (Y_C), given father's year of birth (Y_F). We note that this assumption only holds for children born before 1945 (more on this below). Now all that is left for us to do is to estimate $P(D_F = 1 \mid Y_F = y_f)$ and $P(Y_F = y_f \mid Y_C = y_c)$.

- $P(D_F = 1 \mid Y_F = y_f)$ represents the probability that a father born in year y_f died during WWII. This probability is obtained from battlefield death rates compiled by [Wurdack \(2002\)](#). To ensure consistency with our estimates for $P(S_F = 1 \mid Y_F = y_f)$ (see below), we set $P(D_F = 1 \mid Y_F = y_f) = 0$ for the birth cohorts 1928/29 and those born before 1897. This discards a very small share of deaths (0 – 2%) in these cohorts.
- The term $P(Y_F = y_f \mid Y_C = y_c)$ is the conditional probability of the father's birth year given the child's birth year. We estimate this distribution using data from the 1970 census, assuming that fathers are, on average, four years older than mothers (i.e., $Y_F = Y_M + 4$). We have to make this assumption because we can only link children to mothers, but not fathers. We base this assumption on the facts that (1), on average, men born between 1900 and 1927 (i.e., drafted cohorts) married women 3.76 years younger than themselves, and (2) more than 90% of children were born in wedlock during the post-war period ([Statista 2024](#)).

Finally, $P(D_F = 1 \mid Y_C = y_c) = 0$ by definition if $y_c \geq 1946$; fathers of children born after 1946 must have survived the war.

To estimate the probability that a child's father served in WWII, we assume that all men born between 1910 and 1927 were drafted ([Wurdack 2002](#)). For men born between 1897 and 1909, we estimate \hat{p}_{1942} based on the number of drafted men as of 1942 ([Wurdack 2002](#)). Therefore, we define:

$$P(S_F = 1 \mid Y_F = y_f) = \begin{cases} 0, & \text{if } y_f \leq 1886, \\ \hat{p}_{1942}, & \text{if } 1897 \leq y_f \leq 1909, \\ 1, & \text{if } 1910 \leq y_f \leq 1927, \\ 0, & \text{if } y_f \geq 1928. \end{cases}$$

Using this, the probability that a child's father served is:

$$P(S_F = 1 \mid Y_C = y_c) = \sum_{y_f} P(S_F = 1 \mid Y_F = y_f) P(Y_F = y_f \mid Y_C = y_c).$$

The results from the estimation are presented in Figure 4b. Our estimates are consistent with a 2003 survey, which reported that 19% of individuals born before 1947 experienced the loss of their father (Franz, Hardt and Brähler 2007).

C.6 Nazi indoctrination by birth cohort

Figure C.10 illustrates the number of years German youths were legally required to be members of the Hitler Youth (*Hitlerjugend*). The Hitler Youth, established by the Nazi Party, aimed to indoctrinate German children and adolescents with Nazi ideology, focusing on loyalty to Adolf Hitler, racial purity, and militarism. In March 1939, membership became mandatory for all youths aged 10 to 18, covering four sub-organizations for boys and girls aged 10–14 and 14–18 years. The cohorts born between 1927 and 1929 experienced the highest exposure to this indoctrination, spending at least six years in the Nazi Youth organization.

Figure C.10: Mandatory Hitler Youth membership by birth cohort

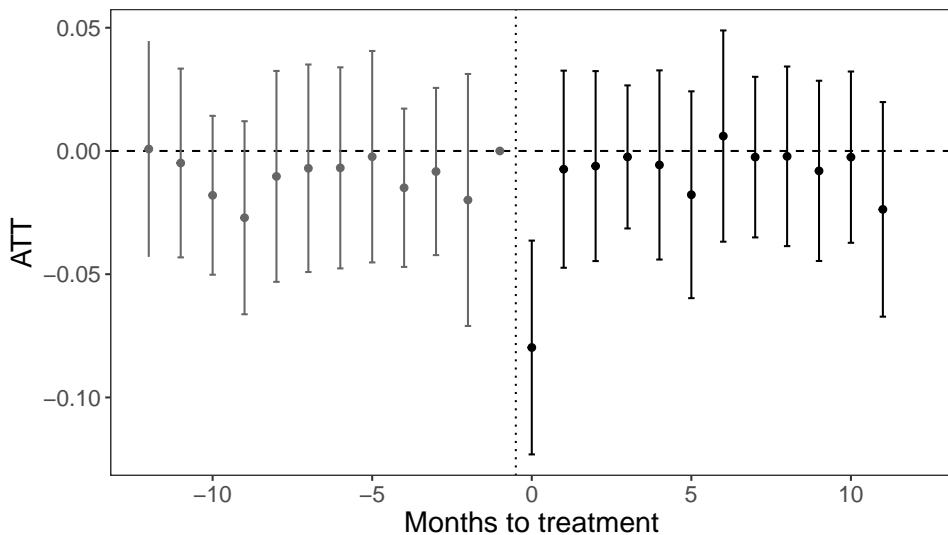


Note: The figure shows the number of mandatory years in the Nazi Youth organization (*Hitler Youth*) by birth year.

D Robustness tests: electoral effects

D.1 Event study results

Figure D.11: Event study specification



Note: This figure shows estimates for the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on the intention to vote for the SPD in federal-level elections at different time periods. Reported estimates are from specifications using respondents in applicant counties as the control group. Error bars are uniform 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

D.2 Alternative control groups

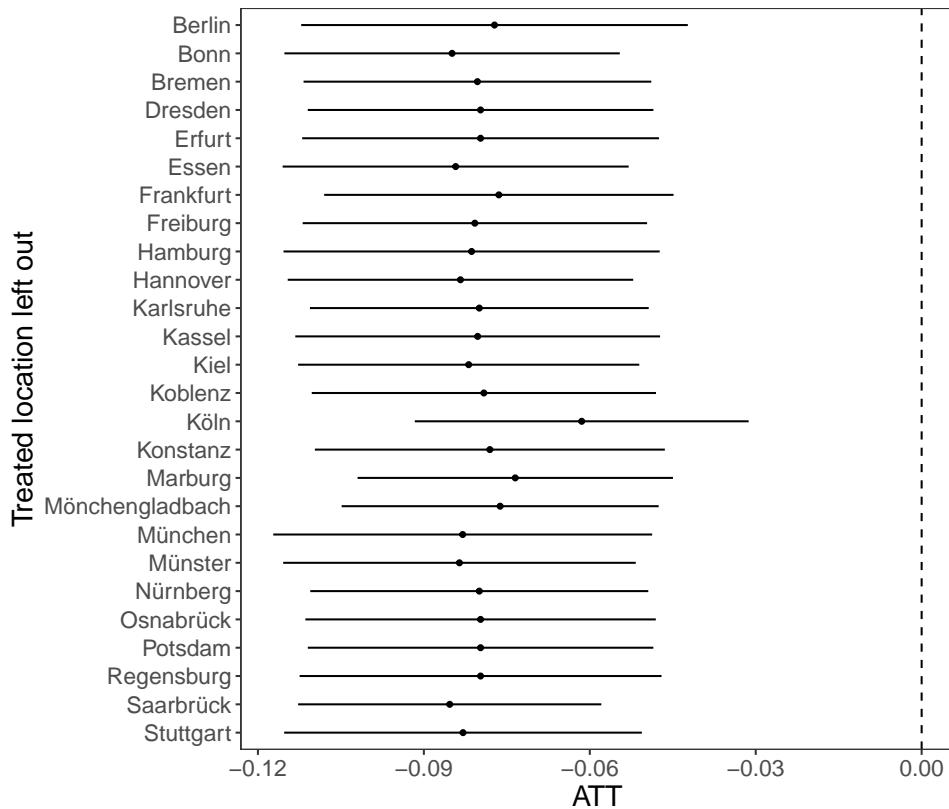
Table D.8: Alternative control groups

	DV: SPD voting intention	
	(1)	(2)
ATT	-0.08*** (0.017)	-0.076*** (0.011)
N	305,948	316,045
Control group	Applicants (Decline apolitical)	Never-treated (>60km to Exhibition)

Note: This figure shows estimates for the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on the intention to vote for the SPD in federal-level elections based on specifications using two alternative control groups. Column 1 shows an estimate from a model using only the set of applicant counties that rejected hosting the exhibition for apolitical reasons. Column 2 is an estimate from a specification using never-treated counties, excluding respondents from counties within 60 kilometers of an exhibition location (see Figure E.15).

D.3 Jackknife resampling

Figure D.12: Jackknife resampling by treated county



Note: This figure shows the results of our main analysis estimating the effect of the exhibition on support for the SPD in different subsamples. Each subsample excludes one treated county at a time. Applicant counties constitute the control group in all models. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

D.4 Effect heterogeneity before and after the Munich exhibition

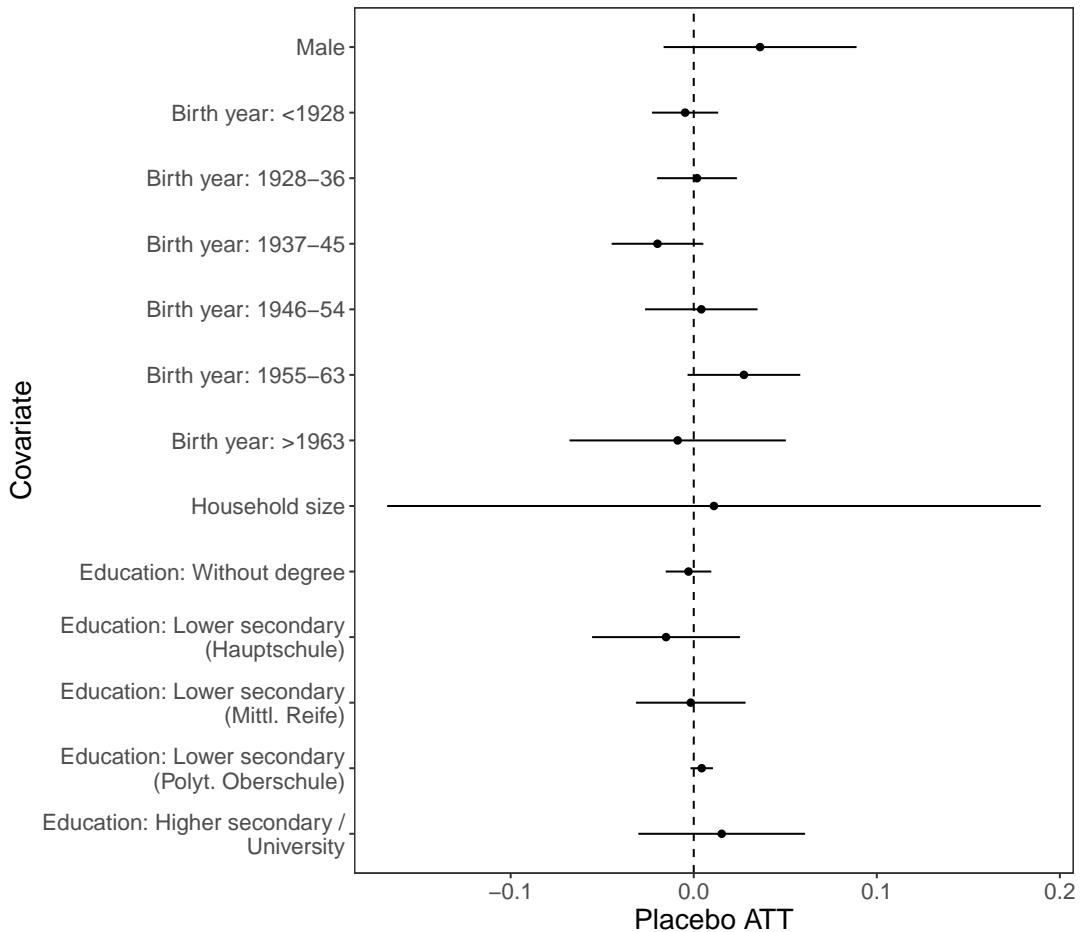
Table D.9: Treatment effect heterogeneity pre-/ post-Munich exhibition opening

Period:	DV: SPD voting intention					
	Pre Munich		Post Munich			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ATT	-0.065*** (0.013)	-0.067*** (0.017)	-0.049** (0.021)	-0.088*** (0.026)	-0.092*** (0.024)	-0.098** (0.038)
N	143,661	94,652	68,992	143,306	80,870	47,859
Control group	Never-treated applicant applicant counties	Never-treated applicant applicant counties	Not-yet-treated applicant counties	Never-treated applicant counties	Never-treated applicant city counties	Not-yet-treated applicant city counties

Note: This table shows estimates for the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on the intention to vote for the SPD in federal-level elections before and after (including) the exhibition in Munich. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

D.5 Effects of the Wehrmacht exhibition on sample composition

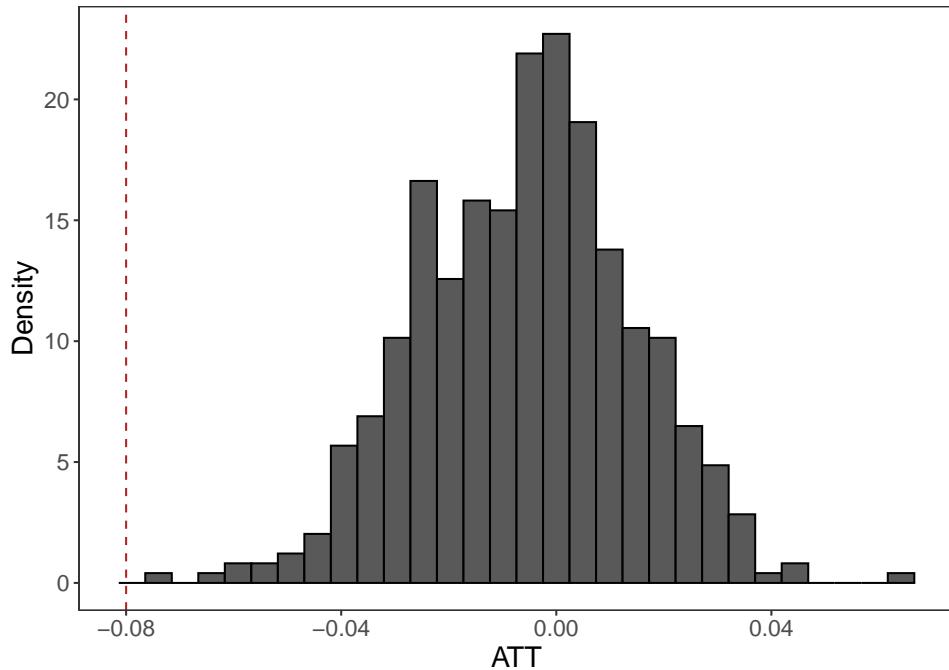
Figure D.13: Effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on sample composition



Note: This figure shows the results of several placebo tests assessing if exposure to the exhibition affected the composition of the survey sample. We report estimates based on our main specification using applicant counties as the control group. All outcomes except for household size are dummy variables. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

D.6 Randomization inference

Figure D.14: Randomization inference



Note: The Figure visualizes the distribution of ATT estimates for 500 random permutations of treatment dates. We generate permutations by randomly reshuffling treatment dates within the set of counties that at some point received the exhibition. All estimates are obtained through our main specification using applicant counties as the control group. The red vertical line indicates the point estimates from our main results.

E Additional results

E.1 Effects of the Wehrmacht exhibition on letters to the editor

Table E.10 shows that exhibition onset significantly increased the volume of published letters to the editors in local newspapers, both negative and positive.

Table E.10: Effect of Wehrmacht exhibition on letters to the editor in local newspapers

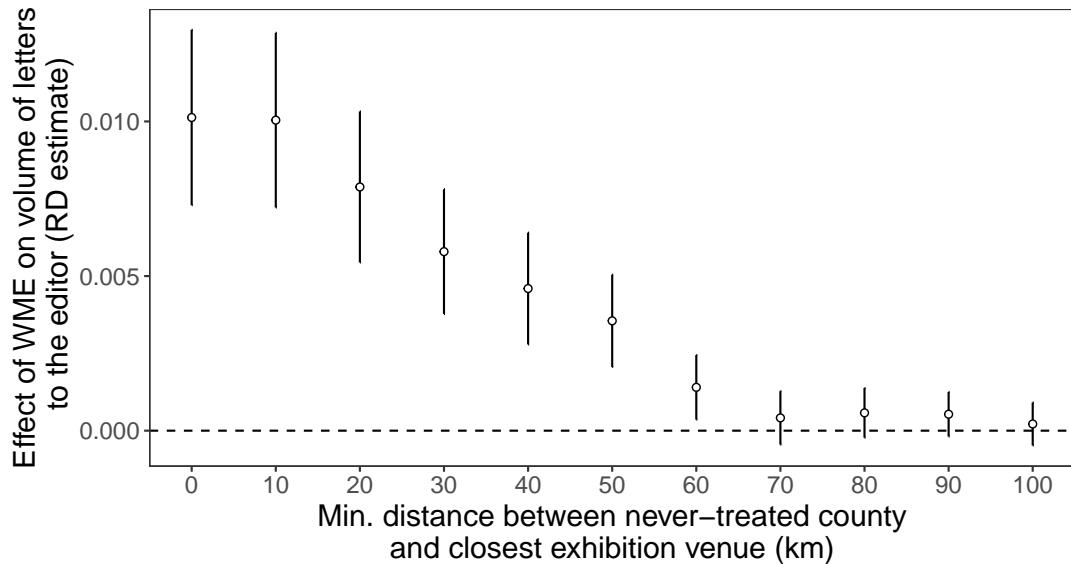
	All Letters		Positive Letters		Negative Letters	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Estimate	0.12***	0.12***	0.04***	0.04***	0.06***	0.06***
Polynomial	Linear	Quadratic	Linear	Quadratic	Linear	Quadratic
Bandwidth (days)	150	292	187	350	174	328

Note: The table presents the results from a series of regression discontinuity in time analyses. The outcome variable is the daily count of exhibition-related letters to the editor in counties that hosted the Wehrmacht exhibition. Columns 3 – 6 differentiate between letters that express support vs. opposition to the exhibition. Models are estimated using optimal bandwidth selection and robust bias-corrected standard errors (Calonico et al. 2017). *** indicates p-value < 0.01.

E.2 Estimating the geographic scope of potential spillover effects

Figure E.15 examines the geographic scope for potential spillover in the effect of exhibition onset. It does so by estimating the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on the daily rate of exhibition-related letters to the editor printed in local newspapers at different distances between never-treated counties and the geographically closest exhibition venue. Details are provided in the Figure caption.

Figure E.15: Estimating the geographic scope of potential spillover effects

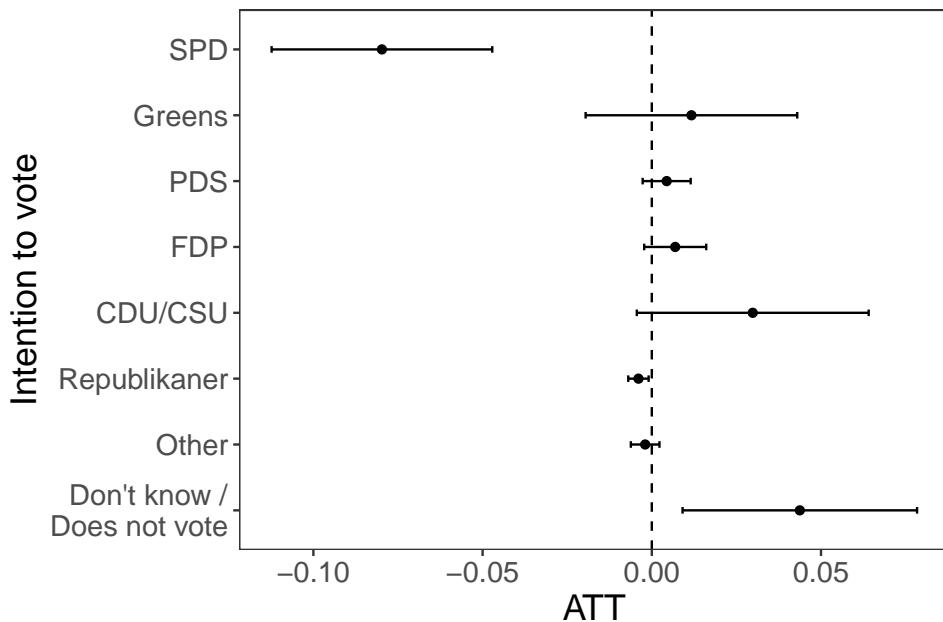


Note: The figure shows the results from a series of regression discontinuity analyses that estimate the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on the daily rate of exhibition-related letters to the editor printed in local newspapers. The analysis is analogous to the specification presented in Table E.10 (column 1) with one crucial difference: this analysis focuses on the group of never-treated counties that did not host the exhibition. For each untreated county, we code a ‘placebo exhibition opening date,’ which is defined as the date at which the exhibition opened in the most geographically proximate treated county. We present results as we vary a minimum distance caliper between 0 and 100 km. For a distance caliper of 0km, we do not restrict the sample of treated counties to code the placebo exhibition opening date. For a distance caliper of 50km, for example, we code the placebo exhibition opening date based on the closest treated county that is *at least* 50 km away from a given never-treated county. All distance calculations are based on pairwise distances between county centroids. The analysis is based on a randomly drawn sample of letters to the editor, which we retrieved from the archives of the *Hamburg Institute for Social Research* (see Section B.2 in the SI for details). Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

E.3 Effects of the Wehrmacht exhibition on other parties

Figure E.16 presents the ATT estimates for exhibition onset across all political parties covered by the *Forsa* dataset on voting intentions. The estimated -7.97 percentage-point effect on SPD support is the main result discussed in the text. This negative effect appears to be driven by voters temporarily shifting to the CDU/CSU ($+2.98$ percentage points, $p < 0.1$) and voters moving to the undecided/does not intend to vote category ($+4.37$ percentage points, $p < 0.01$). We also detect a slight negative effect for the *Republikaner* party (-0.39 percentage points, $p < 0.05$), a small right-wing party that enjoyed several local, regional, and European successes in the 1980s and 1990s. We presume that this decline stems from some members of the *Republikaner* publicly aligning themselves with Neo-Nazi protesters at exhibition openings, along with the far-right *National Democratic Party of Germany* (NPD). These protests garnered significant media attention, perhaps leading less hardline supporters to question their party preference and turn their backs on the party.

Figure E.16: Effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on support for other parties



Note: This figure shows estimates for the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on voting intentions in federal-level elections. Reported estimates are from specifications using respondents in applicant counties as the control group. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.

E.4 Long-term electoral effects of the Wehrmacht exhibition

Table E.11: Effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on SPD federal election result

DV:	SPD vote share	
	Full sample	Treated + Applicant counties
	(1)	(2)
Post × Treated	-0.0015 (0.0047)	-0.0008 (0.0051)
R ²	0.980	0.985
Observations	801	186
Year FE	✓	✓
County FE	✓	✓

Notes: The table shows the results from OLS estimations of two difference-in-differences models. We use county-level election results from 1994 and 1998. We code all counties where the exhibition was shown prior to the 1998 election as treated. Standard errors clustered at the county level in parenthesis. * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

E.5 Scope condition test contemporary survey

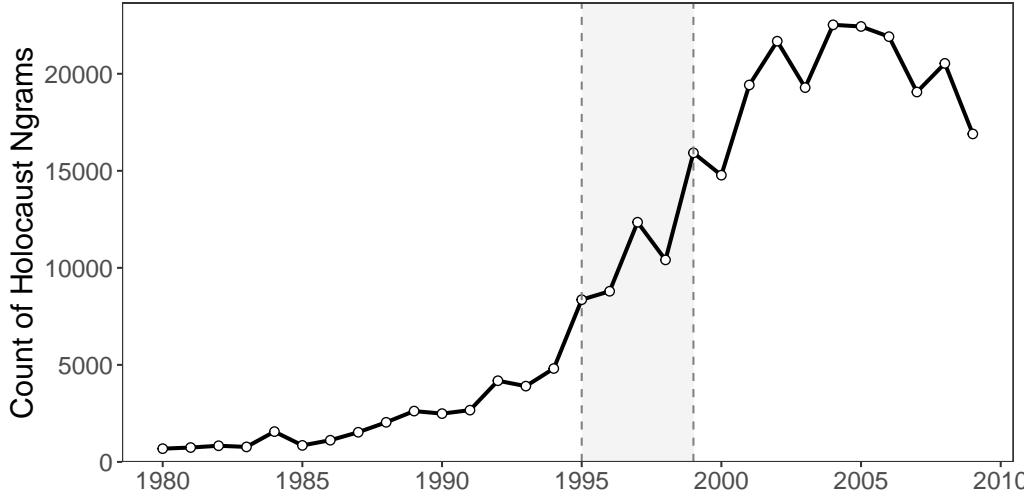
Table E.12: Collective memory and voting

DV:	Vote other party (1)
Father served in WWII	0.2937* (0.1626)
Father killed in WWII	0.4761* (0.2785)
R ²	0.062
Observations	1,125

Notes: The table presents the results of an OLS regression of the item asking respondents if the position of the CDU regarding the recognition of Wehrmacht members would lead them to vote for another party. We control for year of birth, education, religious affiliation, and state. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

E.6 References to the Holocaust in Google Ngrams

Figure E.17: References to the Holocaust in German-language books

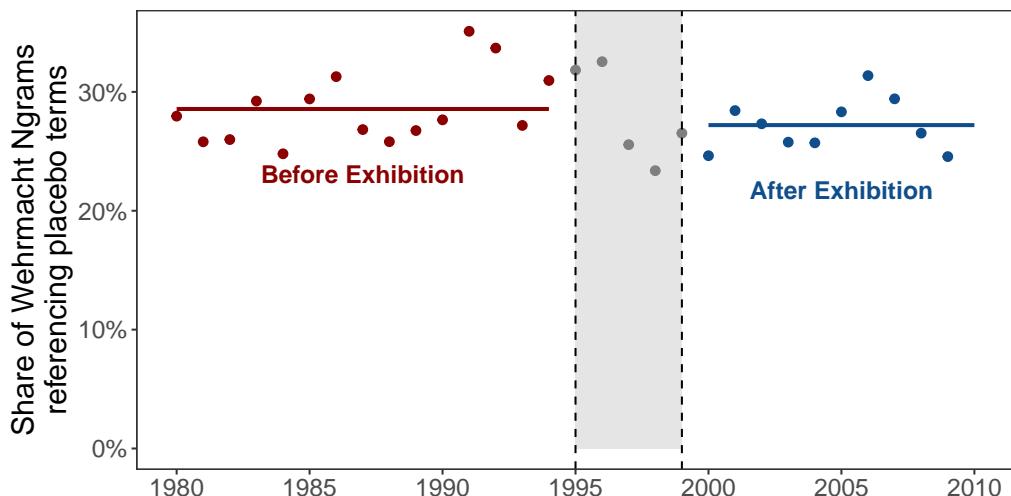


Note: The y-axis shows the yearly count of Google Ngrams referencing the Holocaust. The light grey area marks the exhibition period (1995–1999). See SI Section B.4 for additional details on data processing.

E.7 Google Ngrams Placebo test

To validate that the increase in references linking the Wehrmacht to war crimes was due to the Wehrmacht exhibition and not a result of idiosyncratic trends, we also conduct a placebo test. Specifically, we repeat our analysis using a set of neutral terms commonly associated with the Wehrmacht: “waffen” (weapons), “eingezogen” (drafted), “Kapitulation” (capitulation), “deutsche/n” (German), and “Soldaten” (soldiers). We identified all 5-grams containing the term “Wehrmacht” along with any of these placebo terms while again excluding n-grams that directly relate to the exhibition itself (see above). As shown in Figure E.18, the share of these neutral terms remains stable over time, showing no substantial change after the exhibition.

Figure E.18: Ngram placebo test



Note: The y-axis shows the yearly share of Google Ngrams referencing selected placebo terms associated with the *Wehrmacht*. This share is calculated by filtering for Ngrams mentioning the Wehrmacht and identifying those that also include placebo terms (“waffen”, “eingezogen”, “kapitulation”, “deutsche”, “deutschen”, “soldaten”). Analogous to Figure 6, Ngrams referencing the exhibition (e.g., “Ausstellung”) are excluded. The light grey area represents the exhibition period (1995–1999), and the blue and red horizontal lines indicate the average shares before and after the exhibition.

E.8 Gendered effects of the Wehrmacht exhibition

In addition to the analyses of treatment effect heterogeneity across birth cohorts, we also examine variation between men and women. Table E.13 shows average treatment effect estimates from staggered difference-in-differences specifications estimated in male and female subsets of our data. The model specification is equivalent to our main results presented in Table 2. While we find significant treatment effects in both subsets for most specifications of the control group, effect sizes are close to twice as large for men than for women. This pattern is consistent with the results of descriptive analyses of our letters to the editor sample (see Section B.2). These analyses likewise indicate higher levels of politicization and backlash against the exhibition among men. Men submit the vast majority of letters to the editor concerning the exhibition (84.5%). Additionally, there is a higher proportion of negative letters opposing the exhibition among men compared to women.

Table E.13: Treatment effect heterogeneity by gender

	DV: SPD voting intention					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ATT	-0.094*** (0.024)	-0.054* (0.028)	-0.105*** (0.032)	-0.059* (0.032)	-0.088** (0.036)	-0.047 (0.041)
N	144,159	179,521	94,381	118,620	68,433	86,302
Sample	Men Never-treated applicant counties	Women Never-treated applicant city counties	Men Never-treated applicant city counties	Women Never-treated applicant city counties	Men Not-yet-treated counties	Women Not-yet-treated counties
Control group						

Note: The table shows the effect of the Wehrmacht exhibition on SPD support in federal-level elections split by gender. We report estimates for the first month after the exhibition's opening. Standard errors are clustered at the county level. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

We can only speculate about the reasons for these gendered effects. One potential explanation that would be in line with the socio-psychological foundations of our main argument is related to the specific character of the self-serving myths of German perpetrators in WWII. Cynthia Enloe has argued that “nationalism has typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation, and masculinized hope.” (Enloe 2014, 45). Similarly, positive narratives of war and violence tend to emphasize masculine cultural themes, such as honor, patriotism, bravery, and duty (Nagel 2019). This gendered character of self-serving memories of WWII soldiers may explain why (1) the respective narratives played a less prominent role in “mnemonic socializers” interactions with female family members and why (2) these memories played a less prominent role in women’s self-identification. As a consequence, challenges of these norms would have constituted a less pronounced identity threat for women, inducing less defensive reactions.

To further investigate the gendered effects of the Wehrmacht exhibition, we utilize data from our original survey. Specifically, we examine two types of survey items to determine (1) whether female respondents encountered family narratives about the war less frequently and/or (2) whether the idealized portrayal of their fathers as “ideal” soldiers (i.e., brave and heroic) holds less significance for them compared to male respondents.

In Table E.8, we first analyze the correlation between respondents' gender and their answers to a survey item that asked if their fathers received decorations during the war. Our findings indicate that male respondents are significantly more likely to report that their fathers were awarded medals for their wartime behavior. Given that the gender of the soldiers' children is independent of their fathers' actions during the war, we interpret this result as evidence that male respondents were either more exposed to this information or that it holds greater relevance for them, thereby increasing their likelihood of remembering it.

Additionally, we asked respondents to identify three attributes that they believe best characterize their fathers through open-ended responses. We then compared these characteristics to elements of the ideal German Wehrmacht soldier as depicted in public discourse—e.g., “brave,” “loyal,” and “disciplined.” For each respondent, we counted the number of adjectives reflecting these Wehrmacht ideals. In the second column of Table E.8, we compare the frequency of these attributes across genders. Again, we find support for the notion that the portrayal of fathers as ideal Wehrmacht soldiers is more pronounced in the socialization of male respondents compared to their female counterparts.

Table E.14: Gender differences in mentions of father decorations and Wehrmacht ideals

DV:	Father decorated (0/1)	No. of Wehrmacht adjectives
	(1)	(2)
Male	0.0449*** (0.0161)	0.1041* (0.0612)
R ²	0.052	0.044
Observations	1,294	1,294

Notes: The table presents the results from OLS regressions of two different variables on an indicator for male respondents: (1) a binary variable indicating whether respondents reported that their father was decorated during WWII, and (2) the number of adjectives used to describe their father, reflecting Wehrmacht ideals. Both models control for year of birth, education, religious affiliation, and state. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. Signif. Codes: ***: 0.01, **: 0.05, *: 0.1.

F Qualitative evidence: interviews with opening speakers and contemporaries

To assess the plausibility of some of our assumptions, we conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with public figures who spoke at the Wehrmacht exhibition throughout Germany (as well as one speechwriter), drawn from the HIS archival record of opening ceremonies. We asked about the exhibition organization, the positions of political parties, the degree to which the SPD was identified as the main party proponent of the exhibition, local and national debates surrounding the exhibition, and the nature of the societal and electoral backlash against the exhibition.

We split these interviews into three parts: *First*, we asked open-ended questions about how they were contacted about speaking, why they decided to do so, and their recollections about public debates at the time and the opening itself. *Second*, we asked about the party politics surrounding the exhibition, both regarding the specific opening in question and at the national level from 1995 to 1999. We then shared our finding that about three-quarters of openings had speakers who were SPD officials (recall Figure 1 in the main text), while all other parties were far less represented. We then asked the interviewees why this might have been the case and whether they had any memories of how this was seen by the public. *Third* and finally, we summarized some of our key results, including the -8 percentage point loss for the SPD on average and the 1928–1945 birth cohort driving this effect. We then asked our interview partners for their thoughts and reactions to this finding. We saved this third step for last so as not to prime the interviewees.

Table F.15 lists our interview partners, which openings they spoke at, and contains short biographies and how they were billed at the respective opening ceremony.

Table F.15: Interviews with opening speakers and contemporaries

Interviewee	Interview date	Opening	Opening date	Short bio and/or organizational billing at the time
Michael Burkert	28 November 2024	Saarbrücken	21 February 1999	Opening speaker. President of the city-district of Saarbrücken.
Michel Friedman	04 December 2024	Bremen	28 May 1997	Opening speaker. Author, lawyer, talk show host.
		Münster	21 August 1998	Functionary, Central Council of Jews in Germany.
Elisabeth Abendroth	05 December 2024	Frankfurt	13 April 1997	Speechwriter to Hans Eichel (opening speaker), Minister President of Hesse.
Armin Lang	17 December 2024	Saarbrücken	21 February 1999	Opening speaker. Chair of the host institution, state MP and deputy chair, SPD parliamentary group.
Reinhard Klimmt	14 January 2025	Saarbrücken	21 February 1999	Opening speaker. Minister President of Saarland, patron/sponsor of the Saarbrücken exhibition.

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