

Interview – Bill Niven

Written by E-International Relations

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Bill Niven is Emeritus Professor for Contemporary German History at Nottingham Trent University in England. He is the author and editor of many books relating to Germany's efforts to come to terms with the National Socialist and GDR pasts, including *Facing the Nazi Past* (Routledge 2001), *The Buchenwald Child* (Camden House, 2009) and *Jud Süß: das lange Leben eines Propagandafilms* (Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2022). In collaboration with Dr. Amy Williams, Niven has also been researching the Kindertransport, and their joint book *Memory of the Kindertransport in National and Transnational Perspective* was published in 2023 (Camden House). They are currently writing a transnational history of the Kindertransport for Yale University Press. Niven's most recent publication is *Du bleibst da: ein abschied* (Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2024), in which he reflects on his wife's long illness with multiple sclerosis, and her death in 2022.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Memory studies – broadly speaking, the field in which I have been working over the last 30 years – has developed significantly in my lifetime. When I began researching German memory of National Socialism for my book *Facing the Nazi Past* (2001), scholars were still thinking in national terms: how did memory of a particular event or history evolve within the “container” of the nation state? But this has changed since, as we have become more aware of the interconnectedness not just of nations, but of any form of collectivity. Transnational memory, which examines memory flows across borders, and transcultural memory, which acknowledges movement across cultures more generally, have probably been the most important research developments for me personally; cosmopolitan memory, a concept introduced by Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, is particularly important in the study of Holocaust memory, because it uses the example of the transmission of that memory over borders to illustrate a process of “internal globalization”. Michael Rothberg's theory of multidirectional memory, which highlights how memories can collaborate in solidarity rather than operate antagonistically, has been crucial to recent developments in memory studies, as has the notion of “agonistic memory” (Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen), which likewise seeks to leave behind the antagonistic memory frameworks that often characterised the Cold War and replace them with approaches which acknowledge the need to remember perpetration as well as victimhood. Even more recently, as the “slow memory” project pioneered by Jenny Wüstenberg shows, issues of temporality and spatiality have become more and more central to memory studies, or to the whole issue of the role of memory in the age of the anthropocene: in looking towards the very real dangers of global extinction, in anticipating an end point, we remember the future before it has happened, an aporia, perhaps, but one we cannot ignore.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

As I think the thoughts above demonstrate, learning to think more globally when speaking and writing of memory has been a significant factor for me. Together with my colleague and friend Amy Williams, I recently published a book (*National and Transnational Memory of the Kindertransport: Exhibitions, Memorials and Commemorations*) which explores the transnational memory of the Kindertransport – in 1938 and 1939, some 10,000 refugees, mainly Jewish, were rescued to Great Britain, but many of these then moved on to the USA, Canada and Australia, and indeed in some cases went there directly. That book will be followed by a new book on the transnational history of the Kindertransport itself which we are working on for Yale University Press; too often it is assumed it was only Britain

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which took in children, but many went to Belgium, Holland, France, Scandinavia and Switzerland, or indeed transited several countries on the route to safety (if the Nazis did not catch up with them). Overall, I would say it was the work of Levy and Sznajder on cosmopolitan memory which influenced me the most, because it helped to guide me in exploring the relationship between national and transnational memory. Far from suggesting transnational memory replaces national memory, these scholars show how one interacts with the other, inflecting each other yet at the same time being inflected by each other. But have we been too optimistic? Cosmopolitan memory suggests a transnational memory that supports human rights, but currently far-right thinking is also crossing borders with the effect of mutual reinforcement. Ironically, it is the very international collaboration between sections of the European right that is encouraging racist nationalism and views of national history expunged of all that is negative.

What is the “German national identity” after Nazi rule, and how has Nazi memory affected it? Can this national identity exist outside the concept of ‘Erinnerungskultur’ (memory culture)?

I am not sure there was a German national identity after Nazi rule. After all, the German nation, as a physical entity, ceased to exist, de facto after the establishment of West and East Germany in 1949. In East Germany, identity was built on socialism, or at least in theory. This enabled East German citizens to imagine that their state had emerged not from Nazism, but from antifascism, and as a result of this, they bore limited responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi past. West Germany did not develop such a clear political identity, rather it was an economic one, based on the supposed virtues of reconstruction, and the initial nominal commitment of West Germans to democracy was as it were “bought” by the West German state’s preparedness to turn a blind eye to the sins of the past. At least that is what we often read, and at the same time West Germans, by accusing the GDR of being a totalitarian state, told themselves that Nazism had continued on the other side of the Berlin Wall in a different guise. Both states did engage critically with the Nazi past, however, as time went on, West Germany much more so than East Germany. In the 1980s, and country-wide after national reunification in 1990, German national identity did indeed become based to a significant extent on guilt and shame for the past. In its positive aspect, this meant taking responsibility as a country for remembering, and Germany can hardly be faulted on this: one only needs to look at the plethora of recent memorials, commemorative events and other forms of memory work (both grassroots and official). But there was always a danger that some Germans and particularly politicians might, inadvertently (or perhaps not), take pride in the degree to which Germany had come to terms with its past, as if the achievement in doing so far outweighed the severity of the original crime. The philosopher Hermann Lübbe referred to this as “Sündenstolz” – taking pride in sin.

The question as to whether German national identity can exist outside of “Erinnerungskultur” (memory culture) is a good one. Figures tend to vary, but between 25% and 30% of people living in Germany today have a migrant background: they are not “bio-Germans” who bear responsibility for Germany’s national past (although they may come from countries affected by or connected to it). How then are they to connect with this past? How might they be expected to connect to it? Should German “memory culture”, if it is to act as a basis for an inclusive identity, not therefore open up to include migrant memories? Ideally, yes. But then how can these diverse and perhaps contradictory memories sit beside one another and beside “German” memory in such a way that one could speak of a “national memory”, and therefore of some kind of generic sense of identity based upon it? There is of course “Verfassungspatriotismus”, or “constitutional patriotism”, an idea introduced in Germany by Dolf Sternberger but probably most associated with Jürgen Habermas. This is more oriented towards a common core of ideas and values. But even the constitution is not without its problems. Article 116 of the Basic Law states that a German is someone who possesses German citizenship – but for a long time German citizenship was based on *ius sanguines* – “right of blood” or descendancy. Only since 2000 has it also been based on *ius soli* (“birthright citizenship”), as now set out in Article 4, Section 3 of Germany’s Nationality Law. And there are constant calls on the political right for changes to Article 16 of the Basic Law, which guarantees political asylum.

You have written multiple works on how films have depicted the Nazis. How has the media affected our perception of the Nazi movement?

That’s a big question. I have written both on films produced during the Nazi period – such as *Jud Süß* (1940), a notorious anti-Semitic film, and Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) – and on postwar films set during the Nazi period, such as *Naked among Wolves* (1958), a GDR film about the rescue of a Jewish child by communist

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prisoners at Buchenwald concentration camp. *Triumph of the Will* has fundamentally shaped our view of Nazism: its images of thousands of uniformed Germans, marching in serried ranks or listening apparently enraptured to the pronouncements of Hitler, has conveyed over the decades a lasting impression of Nazism as highly organised and of Germans as militarised automatons, whereas the reality was, how shall we say, slightly more complicated than that. *Naked among Wolves* told an uplifting tale of communism as a friend of the Jews, but in fact communist functionaries at Buchenwald were mainly concerned about protecting their own – sometimes at the cost of other prisoners. And the GDR had interrogated and detained Jews in the early 1950s in the wake of the Soviet Union's campaign against "cosmopolitanism". Over the years I have been particularly fascinated by feature films about Hitler, from Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) through to Quentin Tarantino's tongue-in-cheek *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). Given that Hitler inflicted the Second World War on Europe and oversaw the murder of 6 million Jews, it might seem extraordinary that there are so many comic and satirical portrayals, the most outlandish of which is probably Dani Levi's black comedy *My Führer – the Really Truest Truth about Adolf Hitler* (2007). Even in more serious films Hitler is often more of a caricature than a believable character. The dangers of trivialisation are considerable. One sometimes wonders if directors shy away from attempts at realism because they fear falling short of the mark, yet caricature arguably carries more risks. In the end all the Hitler films may tell us something about our incapacity to visualise Hitler, despite all the excellent biographies that might help us to do so. The very first and perhaps only film in which Hitler seems "real" is Oliver Hirschbiegel's film about Hitler's last days, *Downfall* (2004), not least thanks to Bruno Ganz's superb acting. When it came out, there was much discussion around the success of the film in "humanising" Hitler, fear of which had long also played a part in the trend towards caricature. One might say it took until 2004 for us to accept that Hitler was, like us, a human being, not some kind of alien, and that the capacity for the most heinous evil was, accordingly, a very human trait.

Is the overall rise of the AfD a product of the broader conservative European trend?

It is very much part of a broader conservative European movement, one to which it has strong links. Only recently, Alice Weidel, co-leader of the AfD, took part in the Conservative Political Action (CPAC) conference in Hungary, where she praised Viktor Orban of Hungary's national-conservative Fidesz Party as a "beacon of freedom." In fact the continual attempts by Germany's traditional parties to keep the AfD from power is encouraging the AfD to seek support from the European far-right. It shares many of the same obsessions about the dangers of migration – calling as Weidel did in January of this year for the "remigration" of immigrants to Germany – and about the need for pride in national history. The Law and Justice Party in Poland (PiS) has been carrying on a campaign against historians exploring the involvement of Polish citizens in the Holocaust and has even introduced legal measures to protect Poland against allegations of complicity in crimes of the Third Reich. In 2018, the then leader of the AfD dismissed the Nazi era as little more than "bird shit" in 1,000 years of successful German history. Most notoriously, Björn Höcke, head of the AfD in Thuringia, said in 2018 that the Germans were the only people in the world who had planted a memorial of shame at the heart of their capital – a reference to the Holocaust memorial near Germany's parliament in Berlin. The AfD is not in power, but even now it is trying to influence national memory politics in Germany, for instance through efforts to hinder the memory work at the concentration camp site of Buchenwald (also in Thuringia). Of course the history of the AfD needs to be seen in the context of the history of far-right parties in Germany, but none of these has attained the level of popularity currently enjoyed by the AfD – except, of course, Nazism itself, which is why over the last year or so there have been concerned questions in Germany about whether Germany might be lurching towards a fascist renaissance.

Why is it that the AfD has been so much stronger in eastern Germany than in other regions?

I think we do need to qualify this a little, as the AfD has been making inroads in the west of Germany, too. In fact, in the 2025 national elections, the increase in AfD votes in percentage terms in some of the western Länder was not much less alarming than the increase in the eastern Länder, where the AfD was already well established. To take one example: in Lower Saxony, a western region, the AfD increased its share of the vote from 7% in 2021 to 18% in 2025; in Saxony-Anhalt in the east of Germany, the percentage of the AfD vote increased from 20% in 2021 to 37% in 2025. But yes, overall the AfD is stronger in the east, and of course many theories have been adduced for this. The most frequent one, unsurprisingly, is that East Germans – at least the older generations – were socialised in a state which, while not exactly a one-party state, was dominated by the SED (Socialist Unity Party), and so they are used to

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a more authoritarian style of rule, and the AfD is perceived as “strong”. The trouble with this explanation is that more young people voted for the AfD than members of older generations. Other reasons often pointed to include anger at migration politics, with the traditional parties being seen as far too “soft” on immigration, whereas the AfD presents itself as an essentially anti-immigration party which voters believe would stop the “influx” of migrants. Hostility to immigration is fuelled by racism. Many in eastern Germany, which is still economically weaker than the west of the country despite partial improvements, believe that government money is being spent on supporting immigrants which should be spent on them instead. But this idea is also strong in the west. I’ve spent quite a lot of time in east Germany, and through talking to people there I learnt that the AfD is also liked because it is seen as pro-Russian. Attempts by the traditional parties to keep the AfD out of any share of power despite its electoral successes do not go down well in the east either; this is interpreted as yet another form of western exclusion of east Germans from any political influence. It remains to be seen how much of the success of the AfD can be put down to protest voting, and whether the party’s popularity will decline. But if it declines because the Christian and Social Democrats move further to the right, on immigration say (as seems to be happening), then that decline, welcome as it is, may come at a cost.

How does Germany’s perceived debt to the Jews affect its relationship to its Muslim populations and its stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

I will start with the second half of this question. Germany’s commitment to Israel’s security is one of its top priorities. Traditionally, Germany has been, after the USA, the country that exports the most weapons and weapons-related technology to Israel. After 7 October 2023, it supported Israel’s war against Hamas in Gaza. But one should not make the mistake, as some critics of Germany have done, of imagining that Germany simply never criticises Israel. That was certainly not the case before 7 October. In 2020, for instance, Germany endorsed most of the 17 United Nations resolutions condemning aspects of Israel’s conduct. And the longer the war has gone on in Gaza, the more reluctant quite a number of German politicians have become to offer unequivocal support to Netanyahu’s government. In March 2024, Germany stopped supplying weapons to Israel. It turned out that Green Party politicians, Annalena Baerbock (the then Foreign Minister) and Robert Habeck (the then Economics Minister) had blocked export permissions at meetings of Germany’s Federal Security Council. They were insisting that exports be made dependent on an assurance from Netanyahu and his cabinet that the weapons not be used for purposes of genocide. Weapons exports from Germany to Israel did resume, but the newly appointed German chancellor, Friedrich Merz, has just suspended them – this barely two months after having praised Israel for its attack on Iran, claiming Israel was doing the “dirty work for all of us”. There are those who believe that Germany’s guilt for the Holocaust is blocking criticism of Israel, but the picture is more complicated.

There have also been concerns expressed that Germany, in the interest of protecting Israel from criticism, has been silencing Palestinian voices, or pro-Palestinian voices – mainly by withdrawing invitations, cancelling events or through indefinite postponements. Without wishing to go into detail on any of the individual cases where such concerns have been voiced, I think it fair to say that, while some of these concerns are justified, in general the cancellations derive from a mixture of motives: these include empathy for the victims of October 7th, fear of appearing to relativise the horror of that event, security issues, legitimate sensitivity towards the danger of antisemitism, and the refusal to offer a platform to anyone who has collaborated with the BDS (the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement) following a resolution by the German government of 2019. One also needs to be aware that many events involving a more pro-Israel perspective have had to be cancelled for one reason or another, and Palestinians in Germany who openly criticise Hamas or Islamism face death threats. In a recent study, *Subcontractors of Guilt* (2023), the scholar Esra Özyürek argues that, when it comes to teaching Muslims about the Holocaust, Germans have a tendency to pass on guilt or at least responsibility for antisemitism to immigrants, along the lines of: we have learnt from the past, now it’s your turn. Passing the buck is of course a well-established tradition. More to the point, though: while German memory culture can at times be arrogant, neurotic and hypervigilant, its overwatchfulness is also the result of decades of striving to overcome stubborn, constantly shape-shifting resistance to accepting responsibility for the Holocaust. And certainly vigilance is necessary in a climate of intensifying antisemitism in Germany and elsewhere since October 7th. Much of that antisemitism comes from Germany’s far right, but as Germany’s Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution report makes clear, Islamist antisemitism is also a very real problem. In a recent report it claims that, since 7 October 2023 and the ensuing war in Gaza, there has been an increase in Germany of antisemitic/anti-Israeli criminal acts, mainly from

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what it calls the “extremist Palestinian spectrum”.

How has the memory of the Holocaust reflected German-Israeli relations throughout Israel’s existence?

German-Israeli relations have always been shaped by memory of the Holocaust, but this was not the only factor. The GDR, very much echoing the Soviet stance, regarded Israel as a colony of American capitalism and imperialism, and supported Arab states in their struggle against what the GDR regarded as “fascist” Zionism. If East Germany took next to no official responsibility for remembering the murder of 6 million Jews by the Nazis, then this was not just because of the belief that the GDR had emerged from antifascism and that all the important former Nazis were living and reasserting themselves in West Germany. It was an attitude also bolstered by the belief that the Israelis were the new fascists, and that being the case they had as it were forfeited the right to empathy for Jewish suffering in the Holocaust. It was not until after the peaceful revolution in East Germany that the newly elected People’s Chamber in the GDR issued a statement acknowledging the co-responsibility of GDR citizens for the “humiliation, expulsion and murder of Jewish women, men and children”. The identification of Israel as essentially a fascist state was not unique of course to the GDR; the West German student movement of the 1960s and 1970s is often quite rightly seen as having prompted a more open reckoning with the Nazi past in the Federal Republic, yet sections of that movement were vigorously opposed to Israel which they saw as a colonial state, and sympathised more with the Palestinians. Overall though, and certainly at the level of high politics, West Germany did seek to cultivate positive relations to Israel on the basis of an acknowledgement of German culpability for the Holocaust. This process began with the Luxemburg Agreement of 1952, a reparations agreement according to which West Germany agreed to pay Israel compensation, developed into full diplomatic relations in 1965, and reached a kind of symbolic high point in March 2008, when the then Chancellor Angela Merkel gave a much-quoted speech in front of the Knesset where she referred to Germany’s special historical responsibility for Israel’s security, describing this responsibility as “part of the reason of state of my country” (the German word is “Staatsräson”). This term was also invoked by Olaf Scholz, Chancellor at the time, after the attack by Hamas on 7 October. But while Germany’s support for Israel’s right to exist is robustly unconditional, this does not mean it does not criticise Israel – as I indicated above.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

The current conflict in Gaza has led to fissures the likes of which I have certainly never seen in my lifetime. Colleagues and friends have fallen out over divergent views on the events of 7 October 2023, and Israel’s war against Hamas. Often, there tends to be a “them” and “us” mentality: you are expected to declare your allegiance to a “pro-Palestinian” or “pro-Israeli” stance and camp, even though we could argue infinitely as to what “pro-Israeli” or “pro-Palestinian” might actually mean. This results in pressures for younger colleagues, pressures they have to negotiate. Depending on their own views and the views of the senior colleagues they work with or under, they may feel they have to stay silent, or say what those senior colleagues want to hear. This is an unfortunate state of affairs to say the least, and we, those senior colleagues, bear much responsibility for the development of a sclerotic climate of intolerance within the academy, rather than one which fosters dialogue and discourse. I would ask younger colleagues, who will be aware of these problems, not to allow themselves to take on a view simply because it appears to be the accepted one, the one which acts in a given situation as a passport. Instead, I would ask them to seek ways of finding, preserving but also developing their own personal truth – even in the face of possible conflict. This is not advice I would give to international relations’ scholars alone, but it certainly most definitely applies to them too!