

# Rethinking contemporary German history

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**Visiting scholar Mikko Immanen discusses his stay at FBK-ISIG and his research on Jewish intellectuals' responses to post-Nazi Germany. He reflects on his recent book on Adorno, outlines the 2026 workshop he will host in Trento, and considers how current events are reshaping debates on memory and European history.**

**1) You've come to Trento for an extended period as a visiting scholar at ISIG. What do you expect from this experience, and why did you choose FBK as the research institution where to spend your study period?**

I expect a fruitful working environment where I am surrounded by many colleagues working on similar themes in contemporary history (and sunnier weather of course!). I chose to come here because there are indeed many researchers working on related issues and thus the possibility to exchange ideas is good. And of course ISIG has an excellent research library which makes things much easier. In the past years, I have built connections to scholars in the United States. I thought that it was about time to do the same in Europe, especially as my studies revolve largely around German history. FBK-ISIG is a brilliant place because it allows me to get closer both to Italian and German scholars at once.

**2) Your research project in Finland focuses on the relationship between Jewish intellectuals and post-Nazi Germany. Could you describe the main issues at the center of your project?**

Gladly! My project is called "Probing the House of the Hangman: Jewish Intellectuals and Post-Nazi Germany." Its goal is to examine émigré perceptions of post-Hitler Germany, different ways that Jewish émigrés judged Germany's democratic and cosmopolitan potential after the collapse of Nazi Germany and end of World War II. Germany's postwar democratization has received much scholarly attention, but émigré views – both their hopes and disillusionments – as well as émigré contributions to this process, much less so. A central aspect of my project is that it does not concentrate merely on such legendary names like Theodor W. Adorno and Hannah Arendt, but

equally on more marginal ones, especially women. It aspires to be something like a “collective biography,” to the extent such a thing is possible.

**3) You recently published an important volume with Cornell University Press, in which you address the work of Theodor W. Adorno – one of the key figures of Germany’s intellectual life in the second half of the twentieth century – from a new perspective. In particular, you have reflected on his debt to thinkers of the radical conservative tradition, such as Ludwig Klages and Oswald Spengler. What new perspectives has your research opened on the understanding of Adorno’s intellectual life?**

As you can see, in the past I, too, have been guilty of focusing my attention on these famous figures (laughing). Adorno’s thought is usually seen as a mix of Marxism, Freudianism, aesthetic modernism, and Jewish tradition. In my book, I argue that there was yet another component, namely the 1920s “conservative revolution,” an intellectual current very much in vogue in Weimar Germany when Adorno came of age. I am *not* claiming that Adorno was a closet-conservative, or that he endorsed such wild theorems as Spengler’s “cultural morphology.” What I argue is that Adorno’s critical confrontation with such ideas, from Weimar era through exile years to postwar West Germany, shaped key concerns of his own thought, such as his critique of “instrumental reason” and his worry over frailty of democracy. As a result of the recent global wave of authoritarian politics there has been a renewed interest in Adorno’s concerns. I think that this is a good thing. My book shows, however, that Adorno’s critical virtues have a more complex background than previously realized.

**4) Your stay in Trento will also be an opportunity to organize a scientific event, which you are currently working on. Could you tell us something about the initiative you plan to bring to Trento?**

Yes, I am organizing a one-day workshop on April 16, 2026, with the title “Critical Questions in Contemporary German History.” The aim of the workshop is to explore two pressing questions in post-World War II German history, questions that all have considerable implications for the present: 1) problems and blind spots related to Holocaust remembrance in Germany and 2) the deep experience of injustice fueling support for the far right in former East Germany. These are themes of such a general nature that they should, I hope, be of interest not only to historians of Germany but also to others concerned with contemporary European and world politics.

**5) We live in a time in which the issue of the weight of the Nazi genocide in the construction of the collective memory of the German people is taking on new nuances. The “never again” around which European consciousness has been built over the last 80 years seems to be dramatically contradicted today. How much weight do today’s events have in your way of looking at the past? Do you think that the dramatic evolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could have even indirect consequences in your field of study and in the cultural paradigms that have inspired it?**

The latest stage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has certainly had an impact on the way I look at the history, and the present state, of the Federal Republic of Germany. No doubt, the October 2023 terroristic attack by Hamas was in its brutality and cruelty simply beyond words. But what has taken place since, the genocidal dimensions of the war in Gaza, and the way Israel's actions have been justified by Germany as self-defense (in the spirit of "never again"), has been unbearable to witness. So my perception of modern Germany — and I believe that this goes for a great part of the profession — has indeed changed. Of course, this change did not start with the war in Gaza. The latter was another stage in a longer development that has pushed scholars to revisit their view of the Federal Republic's memory culture and pay attention to not just to the Holocaust, but also to Germany's genocidal actions in South-West Africa in the early twentieth century and their links to the wider context of European imperialism and colonialism.

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