

Mallory Noe-Payne: The Last Ride, a deep dive into a shocking unsolved mystery.

Male 1: These two young men disappear off the face of the Earth, and the last person to see them alive was this sheriff's deputy. His stories were so unbelievable.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Listen to The Last Ride podcast, part of the NPR network. Hey, I'm Mallory Noe-Payne.

Michael Paul Williams: And I'm Michael Paul Williams.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I'm a public radio reporter from Richmond, Virginia. And last year I was in Germany, studying how that society has confronted its terrible past.

Michael Paul Williams: I'm a columnist for the Richmond Times Dispatch and I'm here to ask whether America could ever do the same, confront our terrible past.

Mallory Noe-Payne: We're so glad you're joining us, but if you haven't yet, we highly recommend you listen to our prologue before continuing to listen to this episode. It'll lay out some details on what we're doing here and set you up to understand this series. It should be right there in your podcast feed. Go back, give it a listen. If you have listened, well then let's get started. It's time to take a trip to Germany.

Michael Paul Williams: And then after, we'll revisit America.

Mallory Noe-Payne: We'll do that with you, Mike, when we return.

Michael Paul Williams: Now to Germany. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: We're going to start in a backyard in Munich with three generations of German women, Hildegard, her daughter Claudia, and her granddaughter Magdalena. We won't be with them for long. I was with them for just one afternoon. But we're starting here because they taught me that coping with the past has taken decades in Germany. Generations, really.

Female 1: Sit.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yes.

Female 1: Do you want to sit in --

Mallory Noe-Payne: I want to sit --

Female 1: -- in the middle?

Mallory Noe-Payne: -- in the middle.

Female 1: Between us?

Mallory Noe-Payne: Yeah. Yeah. Hildegard Hefler [assumed spelling] is 83 years old. She was six when World War II ended, living with her family in the bombed remains of Munich. [Speaking in German] Her daughter, Claudia, was our host and translator. [Foreign Language followed by English Interpreter]

Claudia: My aunt and my mother sometimes slept in their beds with the clothes still on because when the sirens would start, they would quickly run down to the basement to be safe there. Sometimes they had to stay there for several days.

Mallory Noe-Payne: This family isn't Jewish. They're Catholic. They weren't persecuted by Nazis, but they did suffer during the war and it's clear these are traumatic memories that run deep, despite the time that's passed.

Claudia: And my mother is still afraid of going down to the cellar alone. So sometimes my son has to go down with her. I'm sorry. Normally I'm not like that. [Foreign Language followed by English Interpreter] And we all survived so there's no reason for me to cry. [Speaking in German] So during the reign of Hitler, parents didn't talk about anything with their kids because they were afraid that if they said something negative and the kids would tell it to some neighbors, they would have to face the consequences. So they were used to not talking about politics with the kids. And after the war, people didn't say anything either.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So Hildegard grew up in a muffled world. A silence that extended to the tragedies of the Holocaust as well. [Speaking in German] It wasn't talked about, Hildegard insisted repeatedly when I asked. Not at school, not at home, not on the television.

Claudia: So you really kept silent. And after the war, you didn't want to remember those bad times.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Collective silence defined that generation. Everyone's heads down, working to rebuild and survive. That changed as Claudia, Hildegard's daughter, grew up. She's now 50, and she remembers learning about the Holocaust at school, visiting Dachau.

Claudia: So I was the first one of my family to go to the concentration camp in the '80s.

Mallory Noe-Payne: For her generation, the resulting emotion was guilt, shame. Are you proud to be German?

Claudia: In my generation, you aren't really proud of being German.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Where does that come from?

Claudia: Because we still feel all that guilt, all the bad things that have happened.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Claudia's daughter, and Hildegard's granddaughter, 11 year old Magdalena, sits in her lap as we talk. She's been listening and has thoughts of her own. She says she is proud to be German. That being German is cool, because she has friends and classmates who are refugees.

Magdalena: Not everything is right but I think much is right. And so when, in other land is --

Claudia: Other European countries?

Magdalena: Other European countries is -- [foreign language].

Claudia: War.

Magdalena: The war, then some people came to us. And I think it's like, that it's special.

Mallory Noe-Payne: From Hildegard to Claudia to Magdalena, three generations of German women showing me how pain and silence slowly melted into shame. Eventually giving way to a core sense of moral responsibility. How has this society pushed aside pride, instead transforming a sense of guilt for the past into a sense of responsibility for the present and future? And what? What was the foundation for that transformation? I'm Mallory Noe-Payne and this is Memory Wars, a podcast exploring how society confronts sin. [Music] When I hear the word reconstruction, I think of post-Civil War America, right? That time period where the South is occupied by the victorious union. But reconstructions have happened all over the world at different times. A reconstruction is a structural thing, a set of policies backed by military and legal enforcement, all with this goal of establishing a new government. That was true in the American South at the end of the Civil War, but it was also true in Germany after World War II. The German state was utterly defeated. The allies, including America, split the country up and took over, and today we often call that the occupation period of Germany. But, in truth, it was a reconstruction. One that America helped lead, at least in West Germany. Just like America had led a reconstruction of the South. So how did these reconstructions turn out so differently? [Speaking in German] To start to answer that question, I met up with a couple of folks in a beer garden in a small town in central Germany. I had talked to historians about the policies of German reconstruction, but I wanted to hear about the life experience and worldview those policies helped shape.

Gisela: Yes. My name is Gisela Burna [assumed spelling].

Wolfgang: My name is Wolfgang Rose [assumed spelling].

Mallory Noe-Payne: Gisela and Wolfgang are retired teachers and former colleagues who both lived through the American led occupation of West Germany. And who wants to describe where we are right now.

Wolfgang: We are in a little village called [foreign language]. It's near a bigger town called [foreign language] in a --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Wolfgang was born not far from here in 1948, just after the end of the war. His father had served on a German submarine.

Wolfgang: His submarine was, yeah, destroyed. It sank and he was, these are things he told me, 14 or 15 hours swimming on the Atlantic with his colleagues, and there was someone who came by and just took them on board. In the end he came to --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Serving during the war changed Wolfgang's father. Wolfgang remembers how his dad would always keep his handkerchiefs folded and flat, constantly concerned for space. Haunted by the memories of living on a submarine, decades after.

Wolfgang: He woke up in the night crying, 'Opened the pump.' 'Be careful' and --

Mallory Noe-Payne: 'Open the pump.' 'Be careful.' He would shout in his sleep.

Wolfgang: At the end of his life, he became more and more -- What's the opposite of talkative? Silent. Mute, yeah. More or less.

Mallory Noe-Payne: About half of German men fought under Hitler's command, the vast majority not by choice. It's not like people came home bragging about what had just happened. I read multiple accounts of medals or memorabilia stashed away in attics. Gisela, she also has her own memories.

Gisela: Well, all of our fathers, I think, were in the war. I don't know anybody who has a -- whose father wasn't. I mean, this was normal. There were two types, those who talked about it. His father was one who talked, only some aspects. My father never said a word. Never, ever.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Gisela didn't know that her father had been a driving instructor in the army and drove around Nazi generals. Or that later, he was stationed in Africa.

Gisela: And that's where he was a tank driver. And no longer generals, but tanks.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Her family only learned these things because they found

photo albums after he died.

Gisela: On a picture where he fried eggs on the tank because it was so hot and stuff like that. And, you know, naked bodybuilding pose and so on. And all these photos, we had no idea they existed and --

Mallory Noe-Payne: Honestly, I'm a bit surprised that she could go her whole life and not have known these things about her father until he died. But she really isn't.

Gisela: I'm sure that the experiences weren't all pleasant. I mean, I think comradeship is okay, but seeing all your comrades die or seeing the enemy die and I'm sure he saw terrible things.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Gisela says after the war, her parents wanted to let the past be the past. To forget things. But she was part of a generation that didn't let that happen, and questioned their fathers.

Gisela: Dad, what have you done in the war? What did you do in the war? And he just said, 'This is nothing you want to know' and that's it.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So some family history remains a mystery. But some doesn't. Gisela recalls another family photo album she inherited, that had been tucked away, perhaps in shame. This album had pictures of one of her aunts, who Gisela says was an ardent follower of Hitler. In the photos, her aunt is a young woman posing brazenly in a fencing outfit. A Swastika on it.

Gisela: So it was obvious. Yes. And I think after the war, you can always say in '45 there were two sides. Those who felt they had lost and those who felt they had gained or won. And I am sure my aunt felt that she had lost.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Some Germans had resisted the Nazi regime but, for the many more who had supported it, the end of the war represented great loss. The loss of the twisted German pride Nazism had embodied. A loss of the Volksgemeinschaft vision. This vision of a racially pure, harmonious, Aryan society. Alongside military defeat, came moral defeat.

Gisela: Now, they felt they have lost, but they were also showed it. And I don't think they liked it, being shown that you have lost.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And that was life growing up after the war in Germany. Defeat. Shame. Silence. Not openly spoken about, but known. And this, this is where reconstruction comes in. Because Germans like Gisela's aunt were shown they had lost by an occupying power. American troops and government officials took over and had a physical presence, making it abundantly clear that Germans had not been superior, that there was nothing to be proud of. That, in fact, the reality of creating this pure Aryan society have been horrific, had been genocide. [Music] [Music] This is the English translation of a film

called 'Death Mills'.

Male 2: Twenty million corpses, the product of 300 concentration camps all over Germany and in occupied territories.

Mallory Noe-Payne: It's about 20 minutes of disturbing footage from concentration camps. I could not sit through the whole thing. But many Germans were made to at the end of the war, as part of this idea of Kollektivschuld, or collective guilt.

Male 2: But these Germans, the ones who said they didn't know, were responsible too. They have put --

Mallory Noe-Payne: The Americans made and ran this film briefly at the end of the war. In some places Germans had to watch it in order to get their food stamps. And in the summer of 1945, the Americans also made posters showing Nazi concentration camps alongside the phrase 'these atrocities', 'Eure Schuld'. Your fault. Many Germans might have first learned the full extent of the Nazis' atrocious crimes because of American led efforts to make it visible. American occupation, this reconstruction was initially shaped by this kind of confrontational politics.

Norbert Frei: All of this kind of delegitimized Nazi ideology and Nazi reality in those four years before a new German federal government came into being.

Mallory Noe-Payne: German historian Norbert Frei is an expert on this time period, which he says was all about making a clean break with the past by labeling the Nazi government as amoral and defeated. Frei says the Americans set the tone for that.

Norbert Frei: And this is why things happened, like that the people at the Buchenwald concentration camp, close to the camp, there is the small city of Weimar.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Many Germans would claim ignorance, but Americans wouldn't allow that.

Norbert Frei: And the Weimar people, they were guided through the concentration camp to see the corpses. Actually everywhere where concentration camps were liberated, there was a policy of showing what was going on in these camps to the ordinary Germans.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Germans balked at this, largely rejecting the idea of everyone being guilty. In fact, Americans conducted a survey on German reactions to the film 'Death Mills' and they found that even after seeing the film, quote 'Almost no one would admit that the majority of the German people were responsible.' So, although the collective guilt campaign did set an initial foundation, the approach didn't last long. Soon the occupying powers switched

to individually assessing guilt. Every German had to fill out this extensive questionnaire, accounting for their actions during the war.

Norbert Frei: They had to fill out this Fragebogen, this form with hundreds and more questions about their behavior, and their party membership, and their membership of Nazi -- in Nazi organizations. So there was this political purge, if you will.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Germans were shuffled into categories from exonerated to major offender. Gisela remembers this. Her father-in-law went through the process Entnazifizierung, or denazification

Gisela: During the Entnazifizierung process, he was qualified as mitlaufer, and then we saw the certificate which said [foreign language].

Mallory Noe-Payne: A mitlaufer, it means a follower. If you break down the word, it translates to something like to run with, like a sheep following the herd. The classification wasn't severe enough to earn Gisela's father-in-law jail time or hard labor. But he wasn't off the hook either.

Gisela: Mitlaufer, and he was not allowed to work for two years just because this was the -- In the process very difficult to bring up a family without a job so [inaudible 00:18:45].

Mallory Noe-Payne: Many Germans would say the process was flawed. That if you had the right connections, you could work the system and exonerate yourself. But it did make open espousal of Nazi ideology impossible. It made it clear, being a Nazi was not something to be openly proud about after the war was over.

Norbert Frei: The Germans, very soon, were prepared to distance themselves from this Nazi regime, which they, just a minute ago, they still had supported.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Historian Norbert Frei again. He says that even though many were left off the hook, the reconstruction policies also forced people to distance themselves from their Nazi past.

Norbert Frei: They knew well, I was tempted, I was corrupted by the Nazis. But now I don't want to be a Nazi anymore. This is important and helpful to create something new.

Mallory Noe-Payne: To create a clear statement.

Norbert Frei: It's a statement.

Mallory Noe-Payne: At least we've created a normative statement --

Norbert Frei: Exactly.

Mallory Noe-Payne: -- about what's right and wrong.

Norbert Frei: Exactly. This is the point.

Mallory Noe-Payne: In addition to denazification, there was the much more straightforward policy of physical occupation. Americans and the other occupying forces invested time and troops for years. And as Germans in the West formed a new government, they knew the rest of the world was looking over their shoulders. It was under that pressure they sought to make it clear that the new Germany would be different.

Norbert Frei: And the federal Grundgesetz, the German basic law, is, I mean, it pours out of each of its paragraph that it's the contradiction of the Nazi past. Yeah? The first sentence [foreign language]. The dignity of man is untouchable. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: I too grew up in a place that had been shaped by an American military occupation. The American South. The more I learned about this reconstruction, the more I thought about American reconstruction. I was struck by the hypocrisy. Of the willingness of the American government to tell someone else they were guilty in a way we had never done to ourselves at the end of the Civil War. I mean, it makes sense. It's a lot easier to point out someone else's flaws than acknowledge your own. But I was still curious how had this reconstruction in Germany created a foundation for Germans to first feel shame, and eventually responsibility. Whereas the reconstruction in the American South had not. Had instead left behind a willful pride, an arrogance. I know that there are cultural and historical differences that make comparisons like this tough. And not all historians buy that it is a valuable exercise. But I think it is. And I found others who do too.

Jeffrey Herf: My name is Jeffrey Herf. I am a professor of European history at the University of Maryland.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Herf's father was a German Jewish refugee. And now Herf is an expert in German history and he, like many historians, thinks American reconstruction ultimately ended in failure, while German reconstruction did not. Herf says that at the start, US reconstruction [inaudible 00:22:29] governments did help create multiracial democracy. But, as many have pointed out, that effort was destroyed by White politicians from the South and the North, who chose to prioritize White reconciliation. In Germany, a lot of bureaucrats who had worked in the Nazi government, were allowed to stay and work in the new government. But Nazism itself and the political force of antisemitism did not return to power. Herf says there are two big reasons why.

Jeffrey Herf: The presence of the allies plus past German traditions. Those two taken together precluded a Nazi revival. And that is very different than the revival of the, if not slavery, of Jim Crow and institutionalized apartheid and

segregation.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Okay, let's look at each of these reasons in turn. First, the presence of the allies. We've already been through the type of confrontational policies that set the tone at the end of the war. But the occupying powers also led an effort to keep Nazi ideology out of power in the new West German government.

Jeffrey Herf: Anyone who wanted a political career at the national level in Germany, West Germany, had to make clear that they were opposed to Nazism and are not going to tell lies about what happened during the Nazi period.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Here's an example. At 1.8 years after the end of the war, British intelligence caught wind of Neo-Nazis infiltrating politics. And they stepped in to shut down an attempted coup. The occupying forces also put pressure on the media, shutting down any attempts to revive Nazism and setting a standard that persisted past occupation.

Jeffrey Herf: A film like 'Gone with the Wind' or even worse, much worse, 'The Birth of a Nation', that kind of a film would not have been made in the 1950s in West Germany. It would just have been seen as Nazi propaganda and it would not have been tolerated.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So that's Herf's first reason reconstruction worked in Germany, because of the committed presence of the occupying force. The second reason is past German traditions. The Nazis had been in power for 12 years. America had relied on chattel slavery for more than 200. A racist caste system that was the economic foundation of the country.

Jeffrey Herf: The forces within the South, within the White South, that would envisage a different kind of South, or a post-racist, or a post-slavery South were far weaker in the 1870s than those who wanted a post-Nazi democratic Germany in the 1950s.

Mallory Noe-Payne: There were people at the helm of the new West German democracy who had resisted Nazism and who had been part of democracy in Germany pre-Third Reich. They would go on to build a government distanced from the Nazi regime. A government that enforced criminal prosecution of hate speech. And that would, one day, outright criminalize Holocaust denial. At first, Herf says, it was an elite few, journalists, academics, who spoke truthfully and openly about the Holocaust. But that tradition, over decades, took root and seeped in.

Jeffrey Herf: And the notion that telling the truth about slavery or telling the truth about Jim Crow somehow is humiliating, or a source of shame, or unpatriotic is just -- from the perspective of the Europeans and the Germans is stupid. If you want the future to be different, you need to focus on the truth about the past. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: So reconstruction in Germany began with this harsh confrontation with the truth. Photos of dead bodies plastered around towns. It progressed to individual confrontations of truth. What had you done during the war? And it settled on a grand coalition of truth. The government and others cannot deny the Holocaust. This transformation in Germany from silence to guilt to responsibility, it happened through mechanism and structure. But here in America, so many truths have been blurred for so long. I mean, my parents grew up at a time and in a place where it was taught the Civil War was about states' rights, not slavery. I can't help but wonder where we'd be today if Americans had, instead, had truth-telling drilled into our consciousness, if it was built into our institutions and systems in the same way. Would more Americans have a sense of shame for what our country has done? Would our relationship to the past and present, would it be more like Gisela's and Wolfgang's? Okay. I asked them what I asked so many Germans. Are you proud to be German?

Gisela: It's difficult because proud is not, it's a foreign concept for me, being proud.

Wolfgang: May we correct you?

Mallory Noe-Payne: Absolutely.

Wolfgang: Are you glad you are in Germany?

Gisela: Yes.

Wolfgang: Yes.

Gisela: Yes, [inaudible 00:28:14].

Wolfgang: Yes.

Gisela: Yes. As I said, I wouldn't like to be something else, but it's not a question of proud -- pride.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Mm.

Wolfgang: I am proud --

Gisela: You start.

Wolfgang: I am proud to be a German has got something to do with right-wing ideology in Germany.

Gisela: Yeah and --

Wolfgang: -- and wording, and with the past.

Gisela: Yes, yes.

Wolfgang: And that's why I think I would never use the word --

Gisela: Yeah.

Wolfgang: -- I am proud of --

Gisela: Yeah.

Wolfgang: because proud --

Mallory Noe-Payne: What is it in German?

Wolfgang: Stolz.

Gisela: Stolz.

Wolfgang: Strides. Ich bin stolz ein deutscher zu sein. This is the phrase that went with the rightists.

Gisela: This Nazi.

Wolfgang: This Nazi speak. And this is something I wouldn't say. And, by the way, I can't be proud of something which I have so [inaudible 00:29:01] little influenced.

Gisela: Yes and --

Wolfgang: It's not our merit.

Gisela: Yeah.

Mallory Noe-Payne: It's what?

Wolfgang: Hm?

Mallory Noe-Payne: What did you just say?

Wolfgang: It's not our merit.

Gisela: Yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Wolfgang doesn't feel like he can be proud of an identity. For him, pride is something you earn, not something you are.

Wolfgang: Identity. I don't think I want another one. I'm happy with being German and I think we have managed, so far, quite well to overcome what the past had for us. All the vergangenheitsbewältigung. I don't think we did badly. But we could have done more, perhaps yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Vergangenheitsbewältigung. I've waited until now to introduce this word because frankly, it's an overwhelming word. But when I tell Germans what I've been researching and working on, this is what I say, Vergangenheitsbewältigung, in a classically German way, it is a single word defining what I've spent half hour trying to explain. The word means coping with the past, working through the past. And the Germans approach it as an ongoing project with a sense of collective responsibility, intellectual honesty, and self-critical analysis. And while that comes from a long history of German values, what I learned in exploring reconstructions was that it also was a process kickstarted by Americans. Seventy-seven years ago it was us that created your guilt posters. We held up a mirror to the German people and set the foundation for their path forward. Can looking at their history possibly do the same for us today? [Music] Okay. Mike, let's talk. I'm eager for your first impressions here.

Michael Paul Williams: Mind blown about the you are guilty posters. Can you imagine how that would go over here? I mean, just the idea of White guilt strikes me as pejorative or perceived as pejorative. You are guilty. I mean, a collective you are guilty imposed upon Germans by Americans, who would never impose that sort of idea on its White American citizens.

Mallory Noe-Payne: I think that was one of, like, the small details that when I first learned about it, just stuck with me. I mean, could you ever imagine something similar spread throughout Southern towns at the end of the Civil War?

Michael Paul Williams: No, no. That'd have kickstarted the war all over again. We're just not a nation that does guilt. Why can't we deal with guilt? What is it about guilt?

Mallory Noe-Payne: It's shameful and it's uncomfortable.

Michael Paul Williams: But what else is it?

Mallory Noe-Payne: To deal with guilt means to admit that you did something wrong.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes, exactly. We're not even at that point. Where's the national apology for the enslavement of my ancestors? The power of the individual, that narrative, in the American story is a myth that's extremely damaging, in my view. We can accomplish a lot more collectively than we can individually, but we are suspicious of collective action. And so, if we were to deal with guilt in America, it would play out with a bunch of little tiny 'You are guilty' posters assigning guilt to each individual or particular individuals.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Well, okay. But in many ways, maybe we sort of see that unfolding today, but in many ways we didn't even enforce individual guilt --

Michael Paul Williams: No.

Mallory Noe-Payne: -- at the end of the war. Take, for example, Alexander Stephens, vice president of the Confederacy. Someone you'd think should have been punished as a traitor to the United States. Jailed.

Michael Paul Williams: The author of the Cornerstone speech.

Mallory Noe-Payne: The Cornerstone speech. I don't know what that is.

Michael Paul Williams: This laid out what the war was about. Slavery, slavery, slavery. The man kept hammering home that this is about slavery. And people don't -- He said the quiet part out loud. It wasn't even the quiet part but, for the lost cause folks, it's the quiet part.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Okay, so maybe one of the easiest people to say, look, dude, you are guilty.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: He goes on to become a US congressman.

Michael Paul Williams: Congress is populated with a bunch of Alexander Stephens today. I mean, let's be real about it. We -- A century and a half later, it's a culture that is like Dracula. You just can't kill it in America. Not to say that people in Congress are pushing enslavement, but they are pushing White supremacy. These adherents to, what I would say is, a philosophy that lives on a century and a half after the Civil War in our public policy.

Mallory Noe-Payne: In part because we did not have a successful reconstruction.

Michael Paul Williams: We had the makings of a successful reconstruction. When I look at it, when I look at what was achieved, when I look at people who were enslaved populating Congress, people born in the slavery starting banks, all sorts of commerce populating state governments. It's unfathomable. Just think about what pre-dated that, this idea that Black people were so utterly inferior that they could not be trusted to inhabit any agency. And here they are, immediately after emancipation, doing incredible things because they were preparing to do those things and covertly doing those things before emancipation.

Mallory Noe-Payne: But then, of course, we have the resurgence of Jim Crow laws. The KKK. Violent suppression of that active Black life, right?

Michael Paul Williams: Yes, because America union, North and South, valued reconciliation of White people over Black lives.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So, for me, that's one of the really big lessons in looking at Germany. Is in terms of what needs to happen for successful reconstruction is that, of course, there will be a backlash of resistance. It's not like Germans were happy with being told, 'It's your fault'. They didn't sit down and say, 'Oh yes, we are to blame'. They felt like they were victims. But what's important to remember is that that victimhood backlash wasn't given power. > Michael Paul Williams: Mm-hm. It wasn't empowered by the new government. People couldn't stand up and say, 'Oh, Hitler hadn't been that bad.'

Michael Paul Williams: Mm-hm.

Mallory Noe-Payne: That wasn't allowed.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah.

Mallory Noe-Payne: And, I mean in one instance, there's this resurgent Nazi political party and the new government declares the party unconstitutional because they're Nazis. The party is dissolved. The money seized by the state and redistributed. And so I think a successful reconstruction here involves readjusting our idea of who gets power. And accepting, to some extent, a willingness to strip power from people, from groups that we deem to be antithetical to certain values that we all agree on.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah, that's tough. It needs to be on the table that we re-examine amendments like the First Amendment and the Second Amendment, which -- Especially the First. People would argue that's what makes America great. But the First Amendment has been weaponized for ill. The idea that we have speech that could easily qualify as hateful and demonstrably false, but it so influences our body politic and even our public policy, is destructive.

Mallory Noe-Payne: What you're talking about is sort of radical, because what you're suggesting is that we need to rethink some of our foundational documents and the way they support a system that isn't working.

Michael Paul Williams: We need to interrogate them, yes. And, mind you, I'm not talking about a major overhaul of our founding documents. They, in many ways, have served us for good and are what -- part of what makes America America. But we can't pretend that they haven't had their downside.

Mallory Noe-Payne: We have to be willing to be self-critical.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: We can't be overly proud.

Michael Paul Williams: Yeah, self-analytical.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Self Analytical, mm-hm.

Michael Paul Williams: Yes.

Mallory Noe-Payne: One tidbit that I think is interesting and I almost immediately noticed traveling around Germany, is that you don't see German flags anywhere. Germans don't hang German flags because it's along the same lines of saying, I am proud to be German. It's kind of impolite society, not an okay thing to do. You're maybe betraying that you are right-wing nationalists. The only time it's acceptable to fly the German flag is when the football, the soccer team is winning. Germans would tell me about, like, pulling the flag down from the attic or the basement and hanging it up when the team wins. But then immediately putting it back away.

Michael Paul Williams: That's fascinating to me. And, I'm sure, anathema to many of our listeners who just would totally reject the idea that there's anything wrong with flying our flag. My father is a World War II veteran, was a World War II veteran. And when he died, I got his flag.

Mallory Noe-Payne: Mm.

Michael Paul Williams: His triangle, folded up triangle of a flag that I keep in my office at home. And I'm proud of that flag because of what it represents. My father fought for this country when it was treating him like a second-class citizen. Don't ever tell me the Black man doesn't love America. You could argue he loves it more. You could argue that we have spent our entire lives, through the generations, trying to make America real. But I'd feel funny about flying that flag in front of my house. And some of my neighbors do. And I haven't really explored why, but yet there's something about what it can suggest that gives me a bit of pause. I like the humility, at least, that Germany is practicing here. And I think our pride can be excessive.

Mallory Noe-Payne: So do you think that a successful reconstruction can still happen in America? Do you think that's something that we can achieve today? Is it too late?

Michael Paul Williams: Let me say this. It can't be too late because if we don't act, it will be too late for America as we know it. [Music]

Mallory Noe-Payne: Next time on Memory Wars, we take a look at what it's like to live in Germany today if your family were a victim of Nazi Germany. Why would someone choose to return and live in a place of such trauma? And what can a society do to welcome those who've been victimized?

Female 2: But German friends are like, 'Yeah, yeah, you're German. Okay, sure.' You know, 'Yeah sure, you have your passport but, you know, you're not a real German.' and I'm like, 'Yeah, okay.' Honestly, it doesn't offend me. I wanted to receive that citizenship as more of a way of reclaiming that heritage

and as a way to be able to get here and spend time here, more so than needing to feel accepted.

Mallory Noe-Payne: That's on the next episode of Memory Wars. Memory Wars is a production of Radio IQ distributed by PRX. This research and the resulting podcast were made possible in part by a grant from the German-American Fulbright Commission. I'm Mallory Noe-Payne, and you also heard from Michael Paul Williams. Oluwakemi Aladesuyi is our story editor, additional editing from Caitlin Pierce. Our music is by Sun Rain. With sound design and mixing by Chad Skinner and Dani Ramez of Half Moon Audio. Ruth Tam designed our logo and feature image on our website. And we recorded this episode at the studio of Virginia Video Network. Special thanks to Andreas Atkiss [assumed spelling] for his guidance on this episode. You can find out more about the show and a link to suggested reading at radioiq.org. This podcast is supported by Radio IQ and the listeners who donate to that member station. If you appreciate innovative reporting like this, you can join those listeners by going to radioiq.org and there's a donate button in the upper right-hand corner. Thanks for listening and we'll be back in two weeks with the next episode. [Music] [Music]

Male 3: PRX.