Evaluate the influence of Vergangenheitspolitik, the motives of collective memory, its effect on the post-World War II war crimes trials and judgments of the Wehrmacht and subsequent shaping of the wider historical narrative.

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Synopsis
My investigation began with the intention of simply investigating the historiography surrounding a polarised historical figure, I selected Field Marshal Albert Kesselring (supreme commander of the Mediterranean theatre) as my subject as, in my wider reading, I had formed the conclusion that this was a commander of high regard who had suffered under the prejudice of post-war Allied 'victor’s justice': a phrase popular in the popular literature surrounding Kesselring. The realities of this figure, however, connoted that an historical injustice had been done, but on a scale that far out-weighed the considerations of a single man.

I was introduced to the concept of Vergangenheitspolitik (the politics of memory) and the works of Norbert Frei through Kirsten von Lingen’s study on Kesselring and his trial. The considerations of this concept altered the nature of my inquiry within hours of its discovery: the investigation now found its base in the politics of memory and its role in the creation and miscreation of history. It then followed that Kesselring’s verdict found its place in a shift in historical thought; a move into the sphere of a Cold War Erinnerungslandschaft (remembrance landscape). The essay addresses the politics of memory in the Wehrmacht trials and considers in depth the role of memory in history, the collective versus individual and memory in war crimes trials.

The collective memory surrounding Kesselring naturally formed the myth of a ‘clean theatre’ in Italy as his exoneration from wrongdoing allowed for the facilitation of a quasi-official history that also exempted from guilt hundreds of war criminals in the Wehrmacht. Accordingly, Kesselring’s is an individual memory that created the collective. My essay therefore came to discover and evaluate the influence of Vergangenheitspolitik on the judicial system and the motives of collective memory in war crimes trials, the post-war Wehrmacht judgments and subsequent shaping of the wider historical narrative by uncovering the collective memory surrounding the Italian theatre.

Essay
Vergangenheitspolitik, translated as ‘the politics of memory,’ was a term originally coined by German historian Norbert Frei. The misinterpretation and reinterpretation of the past often can be explained by the considerations of this concept. Neglected or misconstrued facets of world history can be attributed to ‘public ambivalence’ especially when a consensus view of historical events and the creation of a ‘collective memory’ renders open debate and investigation stagnant. During the 1945-1949 Nazi war crimes trials the creation of the collective memory became governed by the study of individuals whose offenses— for one reason or another— escaped the classification of ‘war crimes.’ The reversal of the Allied politics of memory allowed for the rehabilitation of men that would otherwise have been convicted— one of these being Field Marshal Albert Kesselring— who, in the words of James Holland: “… Has been labelled one of only two truly ‘great’ German commanders of the war, but still remains neglected by historians. Such, it would seem, is his legacy.” Kesselring’s case was indicative of a dramatic shift in the Western politics of memory and his trial allowed the creation of a quasi-official history of the role of the Wehrmacht in war crimes.

The aims and purposes of history evolve over time and, thus vary in the opinions of different historians. Essential to this evolution of the historical process is
the concept of memory and its inevitable influence on the construction of history. The link between history and memory remains an important issue in history's edifice and continuing significance as a framework and interpretation of the past. Harold Pinter highlighted the centrality of memory to the purposes of history when he observed: "The past is what you remember, imagine you remember, convince yourself you remember or pretend to remember." Likewise, David Lowenthal discerned that "All awareness of the past is founded on memory." Frederick Whiting, in his essay Memory, History and the Classical Tradition, theorised that the debate surrounding the role of memory in the wider historical framework was to a degree resultant of the failure of historical scholarship to assert itself in the postmodern academic condition: "the challenge of combining the cult of the fragment with hegemonic historical narrative." As a result of this, he postulated that "the issue of representation is intimately linked with the core of the central problematique (research question) of memory studies, which on a trans-individual level boils down to question of representation and misrepresentation." Whiting's notion of an intertwining of history and memory is essential to understanding the wider implications of the historical narrative, moving it away from the static traditions of objectivity and detachment as championed by von Ranke and Elton. Again, from Whiting: "Memories... can indeed be useful as a source material category for historians; from this does not however follow a division between memory and history as two diametrically opposed categories." Due to the fact that memory as a facet of history is not in fact static, it directly contradicts Ranke's impression of the possibility of immutable history due to his erroneous assertion that a historian's subject matter is "dead reality independent of the inquiry." This, however, does not nullify the possibility of an objective historical narrative for, as G.R. Elton observed, historians may "transcend their setting," meaning that while influenced by background and creed, no human is incapable of impartiality and objective thought. To understand the influence of memory on the wider historical narrative one has to distinguish between the individual and collective memories. Scholars such as Wulf Kansteiner have conceptualised collective memory as a group phenomenon expressed in individual statements. However, the converse may also be true in that collective memory may be an essentially individual phenomenon expressed in collective statements; Thereby the individual may sprout from the collective and vice versa. For example, complex conceptualisations of identity: a sense of belonging and shared experiences often manifested in nationalist identities and political ideologies are also influenced on the individual level. Perhaps of foremost importance, the collective memory renders a certain sense of common direction. The generalizable pattern of the collective memory, then, both creates and legitimises present and anticipated future political actions in a neat and autonomous process. This conceptual development is one recognised by Susan Sontag, who argues that "all memory is individual... what is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that this is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds." However, memory is not a source entirely dependent on historical fact, but is rather selective and can even be determined by present concerns rather than by the nature of the past. As Maurice Halbwachs elucidates, collective memory is "a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present." One may see then, that political reasoning, public perceptions and the very fabric of society are both influenced and contained within the wider historical narrative, which in turn is inextricably tied to the considerations of the concept of memory, both on the individual and collective level.

At the conclusion of the trial of the major war criminals at Nuremberg and the handing down of judgement (which included a damning critique of the Wehrmacht), it was clear that further trials would take place. However, once these trials were completed, a large-scale public ambivalence set in. The war crimes issue had moved from a legal to apolitical level; a new politics of memory was taking shape. To a large degree, the construction of public memory in relation to the war in the west hinged on the results of the trials of key military figures such as Field Marshal Kesselring which were conducted in Italy between 1946 and 1948. When the vast majority of these trials ended in exoneration, the myth of a clean Italian theatre of war was fabricated. During the 1950s this image in turn led to an image of a 'clean Wehrmacht,' which laid responsibility for the shooting of hostages and the murder of Jews solely at the feet of SS troops and 'asocial elements.' According to Kirstin von Lingen, the 'legend of the clean Wehrmacht' has led to the legacy of Italy as a "forgotten theatre of war devoid of notable incidents, let alone crimes against the civilian population." It can be seen that the collective memory regarding war
crimes trials is largely influenced by the biographical-type histories and individual memories of the subject in question. There is something of an issue with this construction, however, for as von Lingen astutely surmises: “The problems posed by memoirs as historical source material are well known: after all, memory is extremely selective.” As Dutch historian Pieter Geyl noted, one must be aware of “the nature of our activity,” and so, therefore, the political rationale behind war crimes trials must always ultimately serve a purpose, whether for the benefit of the individual, society, or as a matter of wider political expediency. However, this can be somewhat problematic as the justice supposed to be handed down by a war crimes commission can be seen to be overruled by a change in the politics of memory or by a change in the collective memory brought on by conflict between national interests and those of justice. Kirsten von Lingen claims that, to discover why war crimes trials fail to bring justice, one must look “at the interplay between political and personal relationships.” It would perhaps have been more prudent, however, to observe the interplay between history and justice in discovering why war crimes trials fail and the inevitable consequences for the collective memory. A practical example of this interplay is the phenomenon of investigative offices, or courts, seeking the assistance of an historian in reconstructing an event which is subject to a judicial procedure. As yet another possibility an historian may be asked by a community to pronounce judgement on two contesting memories of the representation of a particular event, it was clear that the Western Allies needed Western Germany to rearm and thus needed the support of former enemies to achieve. After 1946, a year before his trial, Kesselring wrote studies for the Operational History (German) Section, more commonly referred to as the Historical Division. The Historical Division was a German unit working within the U.S. Army’s Army History Department whose aim was to enhance the American army’s historiography of its World War II operations. The authors of the reports that were submitted, as historian Bernd Wegner noted, had something of a self-justifying aim: hoping that their writings would constitute a lasting historiographical victory, securing them a ‘place in history.” Mandler’s conclusion was one of compromise: an historian may have a role in judicial proceedings, but “ought to go in without illusions about their place and authority there.” At a different level to Mandler, though certainly following the same cognitive thread, there is the conviction expressed by Henry Rousso. When discussing the possibility of prosecuting the leaders of the Vichy Government for crimes against humanity – specifically for their role in the Holocaust – he emphasised how the highly symbolic character of these crimes bore with them certain dangers: “this is tantamount to asking justice to formulate a condemnation of past generations, to undertake, in the strictest sense of the term, a trial of history... It’s not the job of justice to make – or remake – history.”

The trial, judgement, repeal and subsequent release of Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, at least in the opinion of Kirsten von Lingen, was a triumph of collective memory over justice. In the summer of 1952, German Liberal MP Erich Mende, addressing the Bundestag, stated that Kesselring was serving his sentence “on behalf of us all.” This is a statement indicative of a trial heavily influenced by a shift in public memory but also by the politics of coming to terms with the past, or Vergangenheitsbewältigung. In the post-war, post-Holocaust scenario, Aleida Assmann argues that the past is replaced with an ‘abstract idealism,’ an historical point of reference in an emerging post-Cold War ‘remembrance landscape’ or Erinnerungslandschaft. During the late 1940s and early 1950s with the threat of Soviet power well within the public consciousness, it was clear that the Western Allies needed Western Germany to rearm and thus needed the support of the Wehrmacht High Command. Hence the shaping of the collective memory became a fundamental component of the West’s early Cold War remembrance landscape, a goal they were only too happy to enlist former enemies to achieve. As von Lingen has noted, Kesselring’s trial constituted a legal assignment of guilt rather than a historical or political assessment.
of the conduct of the war. Accordingly, although it ended in his conviction, the trial itself propagated the myth of Kesselring's innocence and was thus a major component of the rehabilitation strategy pursued in the Cold War remembrance landscape. Since the mid-1990s, historians—notably prominent Italian Scholar Claudio Pavone—have placed an emphasis on researching and the Wehrmacht's participation in war crimes against the civilian population of Occupied Europe. The clearer the evidence for such crimes on the Eastern Front has also led to a closer examination of conduct in other theatres. Despite this extensive historical investigation, it is evident that the collective memory on Kesselring still holds sway over the current historical model. This was perhaps exemplified by noted historian Kenneth Macksey who wrote that Kesselring's crimes had been 'committed by default rather than premeditation.'

Popular history—such as Macksey's view—has dominated the writings on Kesselring to date and there previously has existed dearth of historical debate on the war crimes of the Italian campaign. This stagnation of active engagement with this issue may be explained by the following from David Lowenthal: "Only when conflicting evidence or innate improbability arouse serious doubts do we subject memorial knowledge to historical criticism." Kesselring's case symbolised a great deal more than an example of post-1945 war crimes policy: it has become a major component of historiographical engagement with the Wehrmacht. Thus, the campaign for Kesselring's release was not merely an individual memory in a single biography; it was an event that influenced public discourse and the collective memory as a whole. Kesselring's trial has led to an historical obfuscating of the actions of the Wehrmacht in Italy—a fact von Lingen discovered in her investigation of the life of Kesselring: "It has led to an historical obfuscating of the actions of the Wehrmacht in Italy—" as von Lingen discovered in her investigation of the life of Kesselring: "It has led to an historical obfuscating of the actions of the Wehrmacht in Italy—"

The misinterpretation and reinterpretation of the past finds—at its core—the concept of Vergangenheitspolitik. Frei's concept of memory as a political entity entails that the whole construction of history can and will often be constructed by the generalizable pattern of collective memory, which itself both creates and legitimises present and anticipated future political actions. The collective memory often stagnates historiographical debate and investigation while misconstruing facets of world history to suit its own historical construct. Taken further, the interplay between history and justice in war crimes trials can lead to a perversion of justice where political expedience is adopted at the expense of historical truths. During the 1945–1949 Nazi war crimes trials the judicial precedent became set by individuals whose offenses—for one reason or another—escaped the classification of 'war crimes.' Officers such as Albert Kesselring were rehabilitated due mostly to the manipulation of historical fact by various bodies at a time when national interests were considered more vital than the practice of justice. Kesselring's trial was endemic of a dramatic shift in the Western politics of memory and allowed for the creation of a quasi-official history of the role of the Wehrmacht in war crimes and a manipulation of the wider historical tapestry, effectively allowing for the judicial and historical exoneration of hundreds of Nazi war criminals. As James Holland illuminated in his foreword to Kesselring's memoirs:

He died in 1960, still professing his innocence, and in many ways his legacy, although often overshadowed, has also been protected. It is largely because of this, I suspect, that he is widely perceived to have been a 'good' Nazi, a worthy opponent, and the military man he always claimed to be.

Endnotes
3. Ibid
4. Marnie Hughes-Warrington. (2000). Fifty Key Thinkers on History, USA and Canada: Routledge, P256-261 and


8. See Kantsteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory.”

9. See Whiting, “Memory, history and the classical tradition.”

10. Ibid


15. Ibid, p6

16. Ibid, p2


23. Ibid


25. Ibid


27. Ibid. Quoted from Lingen from statement made by Erich Mende, as recorded in the Bundestag.

28. Best rendered in English as “struggle to come to terms with the past”. The German term Geschichtsaufarbeitung (literally “processing of history”) depicts similar processes, but is less commonly used.

29. Assmann also reminds us that we do not react to historical facts but to the way they are represented, interpreted and evaluated. Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit*, p272–3.


32. BA-MA, C32, study prepared by the Historical Division in 1951 entitled “The Army Program in the European Theatre and Command, 8 May 1943-31 December 1950,” p82.


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