Visual History Lessons Told by Der Spiegel
Picture-type Analysis of History Narratives Conveyed by the German Magazine

Horst-Alfred Heinrich and Claudia Azcuy Becquer

Abstract • This picture-type analysis of front covers of the German magazine *Der Spiegel* starts from the premise that the magazine’s front covers convey history narratives that might play an important role in history education. Pupils can learn from them which history narratives dominate public discourse or cultural memory. The article provides a quantitative overview of the frequency with which *Der Spiegel* visually or verbally frames current political events in a historical context. Knowledge of this framing process can be used to teach how the media use history events to pursue “memory politics” or “politics for the past.” Some front covers, which refer to historical events, serve to legitimate or delegitimate current policies or politicians. Others show the extent to which *Der Spiegel* is involved in coming to terms with the National Socialist past.

Keywords • collective memory, cover analysis, history narratives, memory politics, National Socialism, picture-type analysis, politics for the past, visual analysis

Textbooks are generally regarded as important support material for school lessons. However, as far as the teaching of history is concerned, the question arises as to which other sources of information can also provide young people with knowledge about the cultural memory of a society. This article analyzes visualized history contents in Germany’s weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, contributing thus with empirical evidence to research on the media with which cultural memory is created and sustained. We analyzed the content of 2,973 covers of *Der Spiegel* published over a period of over half a century from 1965 to 2021 by applying a picture-type analysis. We decided to focus on *Der Spiegel* because it is Europe’s largest weekly news publication in terms of circulation and is considered Germany’s leading news medium with a considerable influence on the agenda of German political discourse. In former decades *Der Spiegel* made a significant contribution to the way Germans worked off their National Socialist past. Furthermore, as a narrative medium, its frequently presented, history-related title stories probably have a considerable impact on German society’s history narrative. Thus, an analysis of *Der Spiegel* covers can yield important insights into German cultural memory, with implications for history teaching.
Most of German society has no personal memories of the time of National Socialism, a time most relevant in German cultural memory. In recent decades, public discourse has changed from one about individual guilt to political responsibility for what happened between 1933 and 1945. This transformation has been described as a challenge for teaching. People who did not personally live through a period of the past cannot be made to experience it, either emotionally or intellectually. Indeed, with increasing temporal distance, new generations can only access historical events via a polyphonic tradition of remembering whose substance also dissolves as time goes by. If all that school pupils get out of their history textbooks is cognitive knowledge content, official commemorative rituals might appear to them as insubstantial and moralizing routines. In this context, it has been proposed that history didactics should learn from journalism with its focus on news values. This popular form of content may well be better suited to arouse pupils’ interest in history than are textbooks. Empirical studies showing what kind of complementary materials could be used in school to reach this goal are, however, rare. This is the gap in the literature that this article addresses. We assume that it is especially the design of magazine covers as eye-catchers that might stimulate pupils’ attention to history topics. Therefore, we examine the extent to which a political magazine like Der Spiegel issued history-related cover stories from 1965 to the present day. Furthermore, we investigate to what extent this magazine entertains its readers by telling stories about the past or uses history references in order to frame present politics. In order to explore which events and aspects of history Der Spiegel put on the public agenda and to what extent it conveyed historical themes to society, we used a quantitative image analysis method. In particular, political efforts to instrumentalize the past might be important for history education as it can sensitize pupils to the different political purposes for which history can be used.

Our article starts with a brief review of Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory, focusing especially on the media that maintain and communicate this type of memory. Subsequently, we will discuss the theory of visual framing before reviewing the concepts of “memory politics” and “politics for the past” that inform the category scheme we use in our analysis. The methods section explains the approach we took in analyzing Der Spiegel’s covers, including our selection procedure as well as the methods of image type and content analysis. The last part of the article focuses on the results of this preliminary empirical investigation and provides an outlook for its further development.
Cultural Memory and Its Media

According to Dieter Fuchs, historical knowledge, mediated through state socialization institutions, has an impact on the political culture of a society, promoting and supporting the existing political system.\textsuperscript{14} Since the central concern in all these disputes is to protect certain ideas about past events from being erased from public memory or to place forgotten events back at the center of attention, school pupils should be sensitized to the processes of creating history narratives. The latter function as part of a society’s cultural memory that has to be “kept alive through the sequence of generations.”\textsuperscript{15} Consequently, pupils should not only learn what is told in their textbooks. They should also be acquainted with the public discourse within which these narratives emerge and with the ways in which the media frame them. Then, pupils will be able to understand how cultural memory is tied to media that provide society members with written or pictorial information about history. These generally accessible objectifications in which the relevant past manifests itself ultimately shape cultural memory.\textsuperscript{16}

In general, socialization institutions serve to transmit to individuals the relevant norms and values for the formation of political culture.\textsuperscript{17} Within the framework of socialization, the contents of cultural memory are drawn upon when it comes to people’s self-identification with historically evolved values and norms that are authoritative for the collective and that serve the self-understanding of a society.\textsuperscript{18}

Textbooks are indispensable for conveying the contents of cultural memory, particularly during the socialization of young people. However, their relevance for teaching is assessed differently by teachers and pupils.\textsuperscript{19} It thus makes sense to ask about the role of other media, such as political or history magazines. They are probably helpful devices in the promotion of pupils’ interest in history since they not only provide information but are also designed with the aim of entertaining. In Germany, \textit{Der Spiegel} stands out as a flagship medium in terms of reach and influence,\textsuperscript{20} making, as we assume here, a considerable contribution to public discourses on the content of cultural memory.

Visual Framing

Since the mid-1960s, \textit{Der Spiegel} has usually laid out its cover with artistically designed photomontages or drawings. Due to their multimodality, both forms of design almost always deliver a complex variety of intertwined information. The theory of visual framing offers a way to categorize the different covers.
Frames provide a specific perspective on an issue or a social situation and thereby promote a certain understanding among recipients.²¹ Because this view of things within a society is usually shared by many of its members, not only is interpersonal communication guaranteed but the senders of information may also trust that their message will be understood. Framing as a research tool can be applied in order to investigate different types of effects resulting from the use of frames.²² In the present case, we are interested in visual images and/or verbal propositions used by Der Spiegel to activate specific knowledge and evaluation schemes in the recipient. This framing type is relevant as it can be assumed that certain partial information that is made salient by text and image design is the first to be taken in and processed by the recipient, thus influencing further comprehension. These key visual and/or verbal stimuli prompt specific frames that are already known, thus establishing a framework of understanding for the interpretation of an issue.²³

Frames also control the assessment of the facts described or shown. By framing a political issue, certain interpretations are emphasized, while others are pushed out of view. As a result, without deeper reflection on the content, the assessment of the message suggested by the medium seems obvious. Especially under conditions of time scarcity or lack of additional information, the evaluative tendency of a message is adopted.²⁴ Political magazines use framing strategies to create a willingness to act at the newsstand, namely, to buy the magazine.²⁵ The goal is primarily achieved by means of attracting attention.²⁶ Our study focuses both on visual and textual frames deployed on Der Spiegel covers. The multimodality of the magazine’s covers is examined here from the point of view of image expression and is assumed to lead to different interpretations. The combined analysis of text and image is therefore necessary, as the symbols or allegories used by the magazine can hardly be deciphered without recourse to the textual message.²⁷

The Use of History in Political Discourse

There seems to be consent among scholars on the fact that young people should be taught about what happened in the past. Perhaps the strongest reason supporting history teaching lies in the premise that commemorating the past forges a nation’s and a group’s identities.²⁸ Teachers as well as historians claim that their pupils should learn historical facts and acquire an understanding of causalities. But they should also be able to reflect the different narratives about one and the same past event stemming from the interests of those disseminating their perspective on history.²⁹ Studying the ways in which a political magazine’s covers deal with history does not allow us to draw any conclusions about whether these visualizations
fulfill such aims. However, quantitative analysis of visual as well as verbal messages presented on the magazine covers should give an answer to the question of the extent to which Der Spiegel tells what happened in the past and what history events seem to be relevant for German society.30

Furthermore, in the sense of argumentation analysis,31 allusions to history depicted on Der Spiegel covers might also be interpreted in terms of the support they lend to assumptions or assertions about present-day circumstances. Here we need to distinguish between two dimensions, each one of them oriented toward different political goals. “Memory politics” works with history-related connotations as a strategy of legitimizing or delegitimizing certain political actions, be they one’s own or those of an opposing party.32 The cover of Der Spiegel SP 28/2015 is a striking example. It legitimizes Chancellor Angela Merkel’s policy in the Euro debt crisis. It displays her sitting on remains of ancient columns with a trusting facial expression. In the background one can see the Acropolis. The visual frame elicits the idea of a politician who is capable of handling the Greek budget problems. This message is underlined by the headline which reads “Die Trümmerfrau,” a term used after the Second World War to describe women who helped clear debris. The visually established synonymy between Mrs. Merkel and the heroic German women who built up a new society makes readers of Der Spiegel believe in the chancellor’s competence. Here, the purpose of the history frame is to shed a positive light on a present policy and the politician behind it.

Der Spiegel’s cover SP 34/2017 portrays US President Donald Trump. In front of a black background, one can only see the black top of a suit with a white shirt and a red tie. The president’s head is covered with a Spanish capirote hood—a typical part of Ku Klux Klan members’ costumes. The visualized proximity between the president and the Klan tends to elicit negative associations. This frame is completed by the headline. It reads “Das wahre Gesicht des Donald Trump” (“The true face of Donald Trump”). In contrast to the previous example, here Der Spiegel seems to delegitimate a political figure by framing him as racist.

Following Norbert Frei’s definition, “politics for the past”33 characterizes political action as a reaction to an event in the history of a society that aims to atone for an injustice, compensate victims, hold perpetrators accountable or pardon them, or reach a balance between victims and perpetrators. Frey’s concept was tailored to German reality after the Second World War. Here, its scope is extended beyond attempts to handle the legacy of National Socialism. We also inquire into Der Spiegel’s interest in German and other societies’ efforts to deal with negatively valued past events such as the integration of Stasi (secret service) informers in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) after German reunification; the process of coming to terms with the assaults by the left-wing terrorist organization Red Army Faction in the 1970s and 1980s or the judicial
atonement for the My Lai massacre in South Vietnam. The issue SP 18/1985 refers to “politics for the past.” But it also uses aesthetic means and visual symbols to support the message. The magazine addresses US President Ronald Reagan’s visit to Germany. He and German chancellor Helmut Kohl jointly visited a military cemetery with graves of soldiers from the Second World War as a sign of reconciliation. There was a scandal when media discovered that not only Wehrmacht soldiers but also members of the SS were buried at Bitburg cemetery. The cover shows two cross-shaped gravestones together with name plaques and a tiny US flag placed in the lawn. The frame is set by the gravestones, which cast a shadow in the shape of the SS runes. The difficulty of handling the National Socialist past is underlined by the text message informing readers about the shadows of Bitburg and a controversial discussion about this part of Germany’s history.

Methodological Approach

By indexing the historiographic contents of the magazine covers, we followed an explorative approach. First, we recorded the type of history reference on the covers of all 2,973 issues of Der Spiegel published from 1965 until the end of 2021. The data provide the basis for a detailed analysis of three distinct categories. These include covers as references to narrations of particular history events; covers as a tool for “memory politics,” and covers as an instrument supporting “politics for the past.” In the second step, our aim was to capture, on the one hand, the historical period or event being referenced and, on the other hand, the present-day context through which the cover story is framed by means of reference to history. The application of this category design should provide us with an understanding of the usefulness of magazine covers as supportive educational material in history lessons. Furthermore, the results should reveal which history events were featured on Spiegel covers and provide insight into the ways in which history is used as an instrument in the political discourse.

All covers were manually coded independently by both authors using image type analysis in a multi-stage procedure. In the first stage, a coding scheme was used which differentiates between the functions of history presentation (see Table 1). In addition to the pictorial representations, we also considered headlines and subheadings in the coding process, since variations in font size, type, and color also contain messages. This is exemplified by cover SP 36/2018, which features only the name of the federal state of Saxony (Sachsen), printed in large letters together with a small subtitle against a completely black background. The subheading refers to the quest for
power by the right-wing extremist party *Alternative for Germany* (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD). To emphasize the political position, the lettering “Saxony” changes color from white to brown, from left to right. In addition, the last three letters are set in Gothic type (Fraktur) font. Since both typeface and brown color are iconographic symbols of National Socialism, the presentation of the cover alludes to German history between 1933 and 1945. Accordingly, we coded the cover under the category characterizing “memory politics.”

The results from the two ratings were merged and discrepancies between the two coders were discussed with a third rater. The covers grouped within category 1 (narration) and 2 (“memory politics”) were then further divided into the following subcategories: 1a (simple narration), 1b (biography), 1c (obituary), and 2a (legitimation), 2b (delegitimation), 2c (inconclusive). Finally, all covers were subjected to a second image type analysis. The aspect of history depicted in each of them was assigned to a timeline (see Table 2).

Together with knowledge of the date of publication, this classification allows us to show which historical periods were relevant for the magazine at particular points in time. This in turn can be used to show which aspects of history are used to connote current politics. Finally, all data were imported into the Stata software package and analyzed statistically.

### Table 1. The coding scheme according to historical references.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>The cover includes no references to history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The cover references to a historical narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The cover legitimizes/delegitimates present-day politics by referring to a historical frame.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The cover refers to the ways in which politics deal with the past.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. The coding scheme according to historical periods.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Ancient and medieval history (prior to 1520)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Early modern period (from 1520 to 1789)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>The long nineteenth century (from 1789 to 1914)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>The First World War and interwar years (excluding Fascism, National Socialism, and the early years of the Soviet Union)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Fascism, National Socialism, and the Second World War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Communism and the Soviet Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>The West from 1945 to 1989</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>The fall of the Iron Curtain and the years since 1990</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
History as a Theme on Der Spiegel Covers

Since its foundation, Der Spiegel has uncovered not only sociopolitical but also history-related scandals, thereby making a considerable contribution to Germany’s efforts to come to terms both with its National Socialist past and the Stasi past of the GDR. Yet social science research has so far hardly addressed this publication. None of the existing studies analyze the magazine’s approach to history via a visual analysis of its covers. This article therefore limits itself to offering a first descriptive overview of this approach. Relying on a quantitative analysis of all covers published by Der Spiegel over the last fifty-six years, we show to what extent the magazine featured lead stories related to history topics on its cover. Furthermore, the data collected provides insights into the events and historical periods referenced in the stories presented, as well as to the specific functions performed by the historical reference on the cover page of the magazine in each case.

The Relevance of History in Der Spiegel

The first step of our methodological process consisted in identifying whether a particular cover contains any history-related information. We distinguish between direct history references (intended to convey knowledge about historical events) and indirect ones (intended to frame the meaning of contemporary political issues by referring to past events). Following this twofold understanding, a cover is taken to feature history references when the text and/or image are composed in a way that is intended to represent or allude to events or elements of the past, regardless of the function of this representation.

Examining all 2,973 covers according to this grid, we identified 532 issues (17.9 percent) as containing a history reference. This means that, on average, about nine covers per year of this weekly magazine deal with topics related to historical events. We then further analyzed the 532 relevant covers to determine the specific role that history played in each case. Table 3 shows the number of covers referencing specific events of the past as well as the total frequency of covers that resorted to history as means to (re)frame present-day events and give them a particular meaning. The total here is 533 because one cover was assigned to two categories.

In general terms, the numbers illustrate the extent to which Der Spiegel tells (stories about) history. In almost half of all cases, references to the past appear to serve the purpose of providing knowledge or entertainment. Yet at other times the magazine engages in “memory politics.” In one third of the cases, it offers a certain interpretation of political action in the present resulting from an understanding of earlier events.
This is achieved by linking the content to visual and/or textual features that evoke associations with history. Finally, a little less than one fifth of all history covers (about 18 percent) place themselves in the service of “politics for the past.” In these cases, Der Spiegel’s covers report on how Germans, but also other societies, deal with or react to a past that usually has negative connotations.

Further disaggregation also reveals different emphases in the magazine’s reporting depending on who occupied the post of editor-in-chief. After Stefan Aust took over this position in 1994, the narrative/reporting form clearly began to prevail in the magazine’s treatment of historical topics. More than half of the covers with a reference to the past fall under this category. The results for the period since 1995 show the function that history has had for the magazine. To a large extent, the magazine uses history to entertain or to attract attention by choosing exotic topics, be it the history of the Aztecs (SP 22/2003) or the Middle Ages (SP 44/2005). In these cases, the covers might arouse interest by presenting visualizations of an alien or exceptional world.

Under the aegis of Aust’s predecessor Rudolf Augstein a stronger emphasis on the “politics for the past” prevailed on the covers of the magazine. In contrast, the proportion of covers referring to historiographic narration was considerably lower under Augstein than in the time since. Overall, it can be said that “politics for the past” forms a focal point of history covers in the Augstein years. But there is also a general trend to be observed. Over time, and regardless of editor-in-chief, Der Spiegel has become less and less involved in addressing “politics for the past” on its covers.

### History as a Narrative

The great importance attached to history topics as entertainment is also evident when we break down the categories of historiographical
Horst-Alfred Heinrich and Claudia Azcuy Becquer

narrative, “memory politics” and “politics for the past” further. In order to assess the character of the cover stories corresponding to narratives, we carried out a supplementary content analysis. As can be seen in Table 4, reports on historical events can be separated into three categories. These include narratives about concrete events or descriptions of what happened at certain times in the past, biographies of famous personalities, and obituaries of well-known people who died shortly before the issue was published.

It is particularly relevant to note that almost 60 percent of the covers belonging to the main category provide narratives of events such as the flight of Germans from the former eastern territories of Germany as well as from other parts of eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War (SP 13/2002) or eras such as the 1950s (SP 48/2005). In contrast, anniversaries (the life stories of public figures and obituaries) are secondary.

**Der Spiegel as an Actor of “Memory Politics” and “Politics for the Past”**

When *Der Spiegel* resorts to “memory politics”, it usually does so either to legitimize or to delegitimize political measures or positions that are in the spotlight of public debate at the time of publication. In our analysis, however, we found that there are some doubtful cases that defy clear classification. In these cases, a cover can be interpreted as either supporting or opposing a measure, depending on the political position of the addressee. A total of twelve cases were assigned to a third subcategory, “inconclusive.”

As Table 5 shows, in less than two cases out of ten, cover designs feature historical objects that aim to legitimize the present. When engaging in “memory politics,” *Der Spiegel* usually follows its image as a critical voice in the public discourse. History is strikingly more often used to

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**Table 4. Der Spiegel’s references to historical narratives broken down into subcategories, by editor.**

<table>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narration of history</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>100.0*</td>
<td></td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100.0*</td>
<td></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Simple narration</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>51.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Biography</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td></td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Obituary</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The relative totals not equal to 100 result from rounding differences.*
delegitimize present-day policies or politicians. This finding is consistent over time, regardless of editor-in-chief.\textsuperscript{48}

The data collected also show when and to what extent Der Spiegel engaged in “politics for the past.” We found one hundred covers (18.8 percent of all covers dealing with history) with a reference to the public discourse about how societies should handle their historical legacies. However, as mentioned above, the further back the issues go in time, the more likely it is that the covers deal with negatively connoted past events, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{49} We now turn to a more detailed explanation of recurring topics appearing on the title pages and relating to a “politics for the past.”

### Which History Is Reflected in Der Spiegel?

Precisely because Der Spiegel sees itself decidedly as a political opinion leader in Germany and is recognized by the people, the magazine’s cover images can be used by teachers to arouse interest in history, but also to work out how history can be and is instrumentalized in social discourse. To get an impression of which aspects of history were conveyed to the readers and how past events were linked to those of the present, we carried out another coding step in which we classified recognizable references to the past by historical period (see Table 2 for the coding scheme). Table 6 shows their relative frequency.

It is not surprising that National Socialism has played a dominant role on the magazine’s covers. Our quantitative analysis confirms Lutz Hachmeister’s observation that Der Spiegel is well-known for its investigations about the former National Socialist career of politicians who were in office after 1945.\textsuperscript{50} Nearly 30 percent of all covers dealing with history have a focus on the years between 1933 and 1945, on Germany’s racist dictatorship and its responsibility for war and the Shoah.\textsuperscript{51}

Following the results presented in Table 6, almost every fourth cover out of those dealing with the past has a focus on events that happened in Western countries between 1945 and 1989. One example is the cover SP 38/1996, which presents a shoulder close-up of Ché Guevara, whose head

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### Table 5. Der Spiegel’s references to “memory politics.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical reference</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Memory politics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Legitimation</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Delegitimation</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inconclusive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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\textsuperscript{48}\textsuperscript{49} Spring 2023
is surrounded by a halo together with the verbal promise to tell a story about the myth of “the last revolutionary.” Other topics worth a front cover were events from the long nineteenth century\textsuperscript{52} (see, for example, SP 1/1989, which references the bicentennial celebration of the French Revolution by depicting the skewered heads of Louis XVI, Danton and Robespierre next to a detail of a painting of Napoleon) or from the period from 1989 up to the very recent past (see SP 38/2014 on the commemoration of the fall of the Berlin Wall). These two periods appeared on every seventh historically themed cover.

One typical example suitable for use in a history class is a Spiegel cover about the conflict in the Middle East (SP 15/2002). It presents a lot of details from historical paintings and photographs depicting events from the Crusades until the Second Intifada. Taking up current events, this cover frames the present situation by referring to a broad spectrum of past events which eventually led to the military conflict. Furthermore, pupils can learn about framing because the title (“An eye for an eye”) as well as the subtitle (“The biblical war”) convey the message of an endless sequence of wars with a religious background without reference either to the colonial powers or to the role of National Socialism.

Table 6 also reveals that, during the last fifty-six years, Der Spiegel provided its readers with a considerable number of issues that addressed ancient or medieval history as their main story. The broad range of historical events depicted on the magazine’s cover confirms the heterogeneity of subjects that caught Der Spiegel’s attention (see, for example, SP 22/1996 on the historical Jesus Christ or SP 7/1979 on the framing of Iranian society under Ayatollah Khomeini as a return to medieval times). Early modern history is also portrayed on the covers of Der Spiegel (see SP 49/1967, which depicts Prime Minister Harold Wilson as a savior following in Admiral Nelson’s footsteps). Finally, a little bit more than 10 percent of all covers presenting history-related topics refer to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Fascism, National Socialism, and the Second World War</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Western world from 1945 to 1989</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>The long nineteenth century (from 1789 to 1914)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>The fall of the Iron Curtain and the years since 1990</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Ancient and medieval history</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Communism and the Soviet Union</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Early modern history</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>First World War and interwar years (excluding Fascism, National Socialism, and the early years of the USSR)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
USSR and other communist countries or movements (SP 52/1979 or SP 40/2005).

**Conclusion and Outlook**

The background to our study is the question, to what extent might history teachers use the covers of *Der Spiegel*, Germany’s most relevant political magazine, in class? We assume that school pupils will benefit from this type of teaching material because political magazines are adept not only at imparting knowledge but also at entertaining their readers. Therefore, the study explores both the visual and textual messages presented on *Der Spiegel*’s covers. Our aim was twofold. We wanted to know about the extent to which history is a topic on these covers and to explore how history is used as a tool of political communication.

Applying a four-category scheme, we analyzed visualized history contents on more than 2,970 covers of *Der Spiegel* published between 1965 and 2021. The empirical results demonstrate the role that history has played in the magazine’s coverage over time and under different editors. In general, historical events and characters have played a prominent role in this publication over the past fifty years, irrespective of the magazine’s editorial outlook in each period.

Following our double definition of the term “history reference” (as a means of conveying knowledge about historical events and as an attempt to frame the meaning of contemporary political issues by referring to past events), we determined, in a second stage of the analysis, the function that such front-page references serve. For this purpose, we distinguish between covers that resort to a simple narration of what happened in the past and covers where this resource acts as a frame. Whereas narratives provide insight into events of the past that are (still) relevant in the public discourse, frames refer to present politics addressed or reflected upon via past events. These frames can take two forms. While some covers use historical events or characters to connote a sense of legitimization or delegitimization by linking them to current policies at the time (“memory politics”), others characterize ways of dealing with the past, especially a past seen as negative or uncomfortable (“politics for the past”).

Over time, the magazine resorted more frequently to narrating history as a subject of general interest and/or entertainment. However, we were able to identify different emphases depending on the editor-in-chief. Between 1965 and 1994, for example, history served primarily a “memory politics” function, while historical narratives were secondary. On the other hand, covers where the magazine visually addresses the ways in which German or other Western societies deal with a negatively judged past occupy the lowest percentage in the three editorial periods analyzed.
Finally, our research identified different historical periods addressed by Der Spiegel on its covers as well as their relative frequency. The results of this analysis show that themes related to the Second World War, the Shoah, and National Socialist ideology have been predominant in the coverage of this periodical. The reality of Western societies between 1945 and the fall of the Berlin Wall occupy the second place in the list of historical periods that the magazine refers to on its covers. In third place, the time of the greatest scientific, technological, and industrial flourishing in the long nineteenth century was also frequently referenced.

Despite its exploratory nature, our analysis allows us to identify the relevance, function and themes that the presence of history has had in Der Spiegel’s coverage, thus contributing to empirical research on the different ways in which cultural memory is underpinned by the media or in which history is instrumentalized by them. Future research might shed light on the specific function of history in each of the historical periods analyzed here.

As a final result we can conclude that the title covers of a political magazine like Der Spiegel might serve as teaching materials, with the caveat that this magazine referred only to a particular selection of historical events and periods. Nevertheless, as National Socialism is a history topic often put on Der Spiegel’s front page, this material probably arouses pupils’ interest in the topic in a better way compared to textbooks, because the covers present such a sensitive but important subject in an entertaining manner. Furthermore, beyond arousing interest in the periods addressed, the Spiegel covers can give school pupils insight into the different ways history can be used in public discourse by delegitimizing or legitimizing specific political aims.

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Notes


3. We refer to the print version of the weekly news magazine published in Hamburg since 1947. The covers are available online at https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/index-1965.html.


5. Catherine C. Fraser and Dierk O. Hoffmann, Pop Culture Germany! Media, Arts, and Lifestyle (Santa Barbara: Abc-Clio, 2006); Wolfram Schrag, Medienlandschaft Deutschland [Media landscape Germany] (Konstanz: UVK, 2007), 162–168.


9. Ibid., 28


11. Pilarczyk and Mietzner, Das reflektierte Bild [The reflected image].


13. Marion G. Müller, “‘You Cannot Unsee a Picture!’ Der Visual-Framing-Ansatz in Theorie und Empirie,” [The visual framing approach in theory and


17. Fuchs, “Das Konzept der politischen Kultur” [The concept of political culture], 33.


25. In 2014, *Der Spiegel* sold more than eight hundred thousand copies of which two thirds were sold via subscription (see: Informationsgemeinschaft zur Feststellung der Verbreitung von Werbeträgern, *Auflagenliste 4/2014* [Berlin, 2015], here 182). Although subscribers do not decide to buy an issue every week, covers remain a powerful medium to attract their attention to the week’s issue and to maintain their interest in the magazine.


29. Susanne Popp and Jutta Schumann, “Geschichtsmagazine und Wissensvermittlung—eine geschichtsdidaktische Perspektive” [History magazines and knowledge transfer], here 27f.

30. Future research could, for example, investigate not only the covers but also the content of the respective title story.


34. For a global review of different phenomena associated with exercising “politics for the past” see Mischa Gabowitsch, ed., Replicating Atonement: Foreign Models in the Commemoration of Atrocities (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017). We do not adopt the notion of “working-off-the-past” introduced by Susan Neiman in her Learning from the Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil (London: Allen Lane, 2019), 29, because what we are referring to does not necessarily have to be about a critical reflection on history. Here, “politics for the past” includes all political measures in connection with a history deemed negative. This can also include demands for amnesty for perpetrators.


36. We refrained from including Der Spiegel’s covers published before 1965 since in those earlier issues the covers almost exclusively featured photographs portraying a single politician or other leaders in society.

37. Between 2012 and 2021, Der Spiegel sometimes used cover variations or series for the same edition. Since these multiple covers never differed from each other in terms of topic or framing, they were coded only once in order not to weight any of the categories in the quantitative evaluation. However, we added the special edition published on September 25, 2013, for the federal (Bundestag) election, and we coded one cover (dated May 11, 1981) twice because it encompasses both “politics for the past” and “memory politics.”

39. The result of the ratings will be documented in Claudia Azcuy Becquer and Horst-Alfred Heinrich, *Data Documentation on History Visualizations by All Issues of Der Spiegel between 1965 and 2021* (forthcoming 2023). The documentation will be published online via the German National Library: https://portal.dnb.de/opac.htm.

40. StataCorp, *Stata Release 15: Statistical software* (College Station: StataCorp LLC, 2017).


42. A search in the catalogues of the German National Library as well as several state libraries reveals only five extensive content analyses of *Der Spiegel* with a focus on text, in addition to a handful of student theses, which also deal with text.

43. See endnote 37.

44. Gehrs describes Aust’s choice of topics as a mixture of National Socialism, terrorism, security agencies and other historiographic cross-references. See Gehrs, *Der Spiegel-Komplex* [The Spiegel complex], 194.

45. The chi² test, which compares the eras of Augstein and those of subsequent editors, reveals considerable inconsistencies between empirical and expected frequencies: \(X^2 = 29.557\) with df = 2 and \(p = .000\). There is no difference between the Aust era and subsequent editors \(X^2 = 1.520\) with df = 2 and \(p = .562\).

46. Pearson’s \(r = -.129\) with \(p = .003\).

47. See the title “What is Conservative Today?” (SP 9/2000). The additional text refers to an internal dispute in Germany’s conservative party, the Christian Democratic Union (Christlich Demokratische Union, CDU), over the direction it should take. The message is underscored with photographs of ten conservative politicians active in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, each representing contrasting viewpoints on what might be understood as conservative. Therefore, those politicians struggling over their party’s orientation may be legitimimized or delegitimimized by one of their political forefathers depicted.

48. As the conditions of the chi² test (80 percent of all expected frequencies must be greater than 5) are not fulfilled, the few cases coded as “inconclusive” were omitted from the test. The result for “legitimization” and “delegitimation” is not significant: \(X^2 = 1.918\) with df = 2, \(p = .383\) with \(f_{exp} = 8.3\).

49. See endnote 46.

50. Hachmeister, *Ein deutsches Nachrichtenmagazin* [A German news magazine], 118.

51. Only two covers refer to Italian Fascism (SP 52/1982 and SP 30/1983).