



Public outrage over the crimes committed by the Nazis is widespread (seen here is the family of Hitler's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop) – but in private, many families long avoided confronting their own history.  
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Z+ Nazi Party Membership Registry

## A Belated Reckoning

DIE ZEIT has developed a search engine for sifting through millions of Nazi party membership cards. Why are so many Germans only now looking into their family histories?

Von Christian Staas

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[Lesen Sie diesen Text auf Deutsch](https://www.zeit.de/2026/16/nsdap-mitgliederkartei-bundesarchiv-national-archives-zeit-familie) [<https://www.zeit.de/2026/16/nsdap-mitgliederkartei-bundesarchiv-national-archives-zeit-familie>]

*»I found my father, who became a member at 18. Having been born in 1926, he was completely indoctrinated as he grew up.«*

*»No big surprise: My grandfather on my father's side was a member of the NSDAP. I always suspected as much. Now, I have the truth in black and white.«*

*»I've already found two close relatives – contrary to the family myth that nobody was involved. Having to change your perspective at 71 is a bitter shock.«*

*(Three reactions from more than a thousand received from our readers.)*

These stories were never supposed to have been told. In April 1945, with Hitler's Reich lying in ruins, trucks pulled up to the Brown House in Munich, the headquarters of the National Socialist German Workers' Party. Now that there was nothing left to save, it was time to get rid of the evidence. Tons of paper were loaded onto the trucks, index cards in green and blue – twin sets of NSDAP membership cards, one set ordered alphabetically, the other geographically by Gau, as the regions of Nazi Germany were called. Millions of index cards, hurriedly thrown together. And then off they went through the bombed-out city of Munich.

In the mountain of paper on one of the trucks was the membership card belonging to Wilhelm Steinert, born on January 14, 1912, in Schweinfurt; membership number: 5,899,925; date of enrollment: May 1, 1937. One of 10.2 million Germans who became a member of the NSDAP between 1925 and 1945. Earlier this month, his grandson sent an email to the DIE ZEIT newsroom. He had found his grandfather's membership card, 81 years after the index cards had been taken away from the Brown House, with the help of the document search engine that has been available on the DIE ZEIT website since April 2.

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Z+ **NSDAP Membership Records**

## Search the Nazi Party Membership Records of Your Family

[<https://www.zeit.de/wissen/2026-04/nazi-party-search-engine-membership-records-ancestors-english>]

DIE ZEIT has processed the Nazi Party membership index. Our tool lets you search millions of documents. Search by your family name.

[<https://www.zeit.de/wissen/2026-04/nazi-party-search-engine-membership-records-ancestors-english>]

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After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Stefan Steinert writes, he traveled through East Germany with his grandfather. »I was in my mid-20s at the time, he was in his late 70s or early 80s. We also went to Buchenwald.« But the grandson ended up visiting the concentration camp memorial on his own. »My grandfather stayed back in the hotel,» he writes.

When Steinert returned, clearly shaken, a conversation began between the two of a kind they had never had before. »It became clear that my grandfather had supported the ideology and was also a member of the party, which I have now been able to confirm.« At the time, Steinert was surprised »that I was clearly the first one in the family to have considered what role grandfather had played in the Nazi period. None of his three children knew anything about what I had learned.« That, though, Stefan Steinert assumes, is »an extremely normal German postwar phenomenon.«

For most German families, coming to terms with their own history is, in fact, a difficult proposition – and tens of thousands of them are only now confronting that past. The index card belonging to Stefan Steinert’s grandfather traveled a no less remarkable path: Loaded onto the back of a truck in Munich in 1945, it can now be found – as a digital copy of a microfilm reproduction from the U.S. – on the website of a German weekly newspaper, made legible with the help of artificial intelligence.

The trucks that headed off from the Brown House in 1945 made their way to the paper mill belonging to Josef Wirth in the Munich district of Freimann. The entire registry was to be pulped. But paper mill operator Hanns Huber put a stop to the destruction of the documents after a short time. On April 30, Adolf Hitler committed suicide in Berlin and the Americans marched into Munich that same day. Huber hid the rest of the index cards under wastepaper and

reported his discovery to the Americans. Some time passed before anyone responded to Huber's report, but ultimately, the trove of data was recovered and brought to the Berlin Document Center in early 1946.

Some 4.5 million cards survive from the so-called Central Card Index while around 8.2 million are left from the Gau Card Index. Originally, each index held over 10 million cards. Together, some 90 percent of all NSDAP members can be found in the remaining documents, according to an estimate by Jürgen Falter, who examined the data trove for his study »Hitler's Party Comrades.«

Without these documents, the postwar denazification effort would have been impossible (leaving aside, for a moment, the fact that most Germans who had been removed from their positions by the Allies were able to continue their careers after 1949, even advancing into the top echelons of the state in some cases). And without these documents, it would be much harder today to find an answer to the question: Were my ancestors members of the NSDAP?

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Z+ **NSDAP-Mitgliederkartei**

## Recherchieren Sie hier die NSDAP-Vergangenheit Ihrer Familie

[<https://www.zeit.de/wissen/2026-04/nsdap-mitgliederkartei-karteikarten-familienmitglieder-suche>]

Die ZEIT hat die Mitgliederkartei der NSDAP aufbereitet. Mit unserem Tool lassen sich Millionen Dokumente einsehen. Suchen Sie nach Ihrem Familiennamen.

[<https://www.zeit.de/wissen/2026-04/nsdap-mitgliederkartei-karteikarten-familienmitglieder-suche>]

**Suchen**

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In contrast to the conversation between Stefan Steinert and his grandfather following the Buchenwald visit, many families went decades without any such reckoning. In many, there was complete silence. In others, the younger generations made do with vague recollections. Why cast doubt on the family narrative? Why risk a falling-out?

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Related Articles

## Nazi Party Membership Records

Z+ **NSDAP Membership Records**

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Z+ **Family Past in the NSDAP**

### »Grandpa Joined the Nazi Party in 1937. What Would I Have Done?«

[<https://www.zeit.de/wissen/geschichte/2026-04/nazi-party-nsdap-past-family-national-socialism-silence-english>]

Z+ **Nazi Past**

### The Evidence Is Now Open to All

[<https://www.zeit.de/wissen/geschichte/2026-04/nazi-past-nsdap-membership-card-index-nsdap-family-culture-of-remembrance-english>]

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As a result, many families let the chance slip by to critically question the wartime generation, avoiding the kind of dilemma Stefan Steinert found himself facing after his grandfather told him he had also been in the SA: »I considered cutting off contact," he writes, »especially since my partner was French and her family had suffered under the Nazis. In the end, though, I decided against it.«

The NSDAP membership registry remained in American hands in the Berlin Document Center for almost half a century before the original index cards were transferred to the German Federal Archives in 1994 and the microfilm copies made their way to the U.S. National Archives in Washington, D.C.

They were turbulent decades when it came to Germany's reckoning with its past. We should, demanded West Germany's first postwar chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, in the early 1950s, »bring this sniffing out of Nazis to an end« – despite the fact that he had personally suffered under Nazi rule. East Germans, meanwhile, were living under state-mandated anti-fascism, an ideology that turned into an excuse to transform the entire country into a prison in 1961.

The Germans saw Adolf Eichmann dragged into court in Jerusalem and they read about [the Auschwitz trials in Frankfurt](https://www.zeit.de/zeit-geschichte/2025/01/frankfurter-auschwitz-prozess-nationalsozialismus-holocaust) [https://www.zeit.de/zeit-geschichte/2025/01/frankfurter-auschwitz-prozess-nationalsozialismus-holocaust]. They witnessed Beate Klarsfeld slap Chancellor Kurt Georg Kiesinger in 1968, a man who had joined the NSDAP in 1933. They were shaken by the American television series »Holocaust« and by the film »Schindler's List.« They argued for years over the construction of a Holocaust memorial in Berlin and the Wehrmacht exhibition. They were dismayed to learn that icons such as Walter Jens, Siegfried Lenz,

Dieter Hildebrandt and Siegfried Unseld had joined the NSDAP as young men. Yet they expended remarkably little effort on looking into their own family histories.

## »Painful« – A Word Used Over and Over Again

In recent years, the number of information requests sent to the German Federal Archives has been rising, even as the last witnesses from the Nazi era are dying. In 2021, the Archives received around 42,000 requests for information about specific individuals related to the Nazi era; by 2024, that number had risen to 75,000. Then, in late 2025, the U.S. National Archives began making their copy of the NSDAP registry available online. When the availability was announced in March, DIE ZEIT's data team downloaded the documents with the intention of making them easily searchable.

What happened after the search machine was published is unprecedented in this newspaper's history. The page has been visited millions of times, and thousands of people have shared it. We have received an overwhelming number of emails from our readers, many of them beginning with the sentence: »I always suspected that ...« Some are relieved to finally have certainty; others are shocked by what they have found. »Painful« – that word is used over and over again.

*»I just found out that my father was a member of the party. I'm struggling to process this realization.«*

*»For more than 40 years, I have wondered whether my great-great-grandfather, [...], who would always fly into a rage whenever anyone asked him about ›the war,‹ had been a member. Question answered. Thank you! Even though it is extremely painful.«*

*»My grandfather, of whom it was always said that he voted SPD, became a member on May 1, 1933. [...] That's difficult to swallow.«*

*»A family legend about an alleged fellow traveler just went up in smoke.«*

*»Extremely revealing – especially when you realize that you've been lied to for decades.«*

When the Allies passed out questionnaires after the war as part of the denazification effort, the first question after the personal details was: »Were you ever a member of the NSDAP?« Today, that question is returning with a vengeance.

This also sheds some light on Germany's much-praised culture of remembrance.

Did Germans move from shameful silence to an acknowledgement of guilt and responsibility only in the public realm – but not within their own families?

Did the great achievements of the country's culture of collective remembrance, particularly the commitment to commemorating the victims of the Holocaust, result in the history of the perpetrators fading from view?

Or is there a broad discrepancy between what people think they know about the country's Nazi history and what they actually know? Between the misleading feeling of having covered the National Socialist era over and over again in school and the factual lack of knowledge of one's own family history?

Whatever the reasons might be: The fact that so many people are now digging into their family's past is remarkable. And it is a hopeful sign at a time when a growing element of the population is of the opinion that these stories have been told often enough. Those who search for more information about their family's connections to the NSDAP clearly demonstrate that simply drawing a line under the past is not an option.

For most, in fact, the NSDAP membership registry will be a starting point, because the membership cards include only very basic information (name, date of birth, place of birth, place of residence, occupation). And, of course, the date they joined the party, which offers some clues to the motivation behind membership. Prior to 1933, it was the true believers who joined, while after that date, there were plenty of opportunists. Not everyone in the party was a convinced Nazi, just as not every Nazi, every perpetrator or every profiteer was in the party. As a general rule, nobody was forced to join. Furthermore, applications were only valid with a personal signature, and nobody was enrolled – as many sought to claim later – without their knowledge and involvement.

Every single member helped prop up the regime. But who joined in order to advance their career? Who felt pressured into it? Who enthusiastically supported the party? Who believed in the »final victory« and was a convinced anti-Semite? Who, beyond membership on paper, participated in the crimes committed by the Nazis?

Additional research is necessary to find answers to those questions. Very few will be able to ask their fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers. Indeed, the result of conducting such a search at this late date reveals a paradox: The fact that the person in question has likely passed away makes it easier for families to begin asking questions – and also makes it more difficult to find answers to those questions.

Now, only the sources can speak. And the enormous response to DIE ZEIT's search tool shows that sometimes, tracking down the truth is a question of

technology. Sometimes, all it takes is the right opportunity to come to grips with the past. An easy path to a difficult truth.

The paper mill operator Hanns Huber saved much of the NSDAP membership registry at the end of the war. Today, it is up to the computer scientists to ensure that the archival records of National Socialism do not gather dust on archive shelves but are made digitally accessible to anyone wishing to see them. The need to protect the privacy of individuals has largely dissipated, and the public interest is there. And so, in 2026, the reckoning with the Nazi era returns – by means of the latest technology – to where it began: primary historical sources.

*Translated by Charles Hawley*