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## Many Germans want their war suffering remembered

By Matthew Schofield  
KNIGHT RIDDER

**BERLIN** - When Soviet soldiers arrived in Berlin at the end of World War II, Gertraud Tietz smeared dirt on her face and hid in a musty wardrobe in the basement of a bombed-out building. She stayed there for weeks.

The 19-year-old had seen and heard enough of the rapes -- 12 of her friends were victims -- to take any chances, so she made herself look as dirty, as diseased, as invisible as possible.

"The first thing they'd do was demand watches," she recalled.

"They stole everything. Then they started taking the women away. It started slowly, but got worse. Every night, the cries were coming from all directions."

For 50 years after living through those horrific days, Tietz, now 79, couldn't bring herself to talk about the experience. It took 10 more years before people wanted to listen. Why?

"Well, when the Soviets got close to Berlin, we knew the revenge would be something terrible," she said.

"And afterwards, we figured we'd deserved it. We were Nazis, after all."

Sixty years ago this weekend, World War II ended in Berlin, more than a week after Adolf Hitler popped a cyanide pill and shot himself in a bunker beneath the heart of this city.

But while in North America the war may appear to be fading into history books and movies, in Europe, and especially in Germany, it remains a force in political and daily life.

Neo-Nazi groups have consistently spoken of their suffering during the war, but it wasn't until two years ago that prominent German historian Joerg Friedrich published "The Fire: Germany Under Bombardment," questioning the morality of the firebombing of Dresden and other Allied bombing campaigns against German cities.

Since then, the idea that Germans also suffered has become grist for mainstream discussion.

"It is important we discuss such things," he said. "It is important that we do not ignore human suffering on such a large scale."

It's a notion many find troublesome.

"If you only looked at TV these days, you'd think the Nazis were the real victims of this war," said German historian Wolfgang Wippermann, who noted that his mother had been raped at the end of the war.

"But Nazis were not victims. They were perpetrators."

Although it's a new trend, self-pity hasn't been the mainstream German reaction.

"The Germans are obsessed, still, with reliving the war," said William Paterson, a British historian and chairman of the German-British Forum, an advisory group dedicated to improving relations between the countries.

"There is no way to make good on their past, but they don't stop trying. No one could dispute that."

After the war's end, Germans paid \$50 billion in war reparations (\$14 billion to the Soviet Union) and more than \$40 billion to Holocaust survivors.

They've made a point of apologizing repeatedly for the past, and since 1965, made frequent trips pledging atonement to Israel.

A year ago, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder became the first German leader invited to D-Day celebrations, where he noted: "We Germans know we unleashed this heinous war."

Paterson says the Germans have successfully transformed themselves.

"From my perspective as an Englishman, goal one is to see that Germany develops so that it's clear the past won't be repeated," he said.

"There is no reason to lose sleep on that count."

Sofia Lichtmacher, 78, arrived in Germany for the first time as part of the Soviet invading force.

"Look, they were horrible, there is no denying that," she said. "But there's no denying this is a different country than the one we invaded 60 years ago."

Still, Sunday afternoon, more than 3,000 neo-Nazis are expected to march down Unter den Linden, through the heart of the capital, calling for what their National Democratic Party terms "an end to the cult of guilt that exists because of 60 years of lies."

But many times that number are expected to be present to protest against the neo-Nazis.

And even in a neo-Nazi march, signs exist of Germany's commitment to never repeat its past.

It's against the law for neo-Nazis to identify themselves as Nazis, use anti-Semitic language, display swastikas or give the stiff-armed Nazi salute.

Officials also note that there will be more than a dozen events highlighting Germany's criminal past during the weekend.

Even so, Germany's suffering is also on the agenda.

German historian Hubertus Knabe addressed what many see as a fine line between talking about German suffering and saying that it excuses, explains or forgives German actions.

Writing in Die Welt, he said, "In the West, the soldiers passed out chocolate. In the East, they raped about 2 million women and randomly shot tens of thousands of civilians.

"More than 3 million prisoners of war and civilians were taken to Soviet labor camps where one in three died.

"Others starved to death in the now Soviet-run former concentration camps, and 2.5 million people died in the Red Army-occupied part of Germany.

"To remember them is not an attempt to turn perpetrators into victims."