

A Commitment to Holocaust Remembrance Does Not Justify Denial of Equal Rights

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Dirk Moses has written a much needed and thoughtful text on the German use and abuse of Holocaust remembrance. “The German catechism,” as Moses dubbed it, has been carried by “self appointed high priests” who have maintained among other things the uniqueness of the Holocaust, antisemitism as a distinct prejudice different from other forms of racism, and anti-Zionism as antisemitism. An excellent discussion ensued from critics who added on complexity and nuance to Moses’ argument. *I would like to draw our attention to the following topic that emerges from Moses’s text, namely the relation of current German memory to the Holocaust, antisemitism, Israel, and Palestine.*

One context within which to understand Moses’ text is the debate about antisemitism. The reason this debate has become heated in the last decade or so is not so much because cases of antisemitism have spiked but because the issue of Israel and Palestine has become inextricably entangled with the issue of antisemitism itself. We talk so much about antisemitism because we deeply disagree on how to define it: how to distinguish between antisemitic speech and legitimate critique of Israel, however harsh and painful it may be for some. Pithily put, our challenge is how to juggle the tension between keeping the specific memory of the Holocaust alive and fighting antisemitism where it surfaces while maintaining the universal value that emerged from the Holocaust: that equal rights and guarantees of life free of discrimination are fundamental to all human beings—rights that are being denied to Palestinians by Israel today.

Keeping these relations in tension but without breaking is what divides Germans, Jews, and many others because it is an impossible task: no argument can justify denying a group of people equal rights—particularly not Holocaust memory. The value of Moses’ intervention in this intellectual and political moment of scholarly and public debate on antisemitism in Germany, Europe, the United States, Israel, Palestine, and beyond lies in pointing out how in Germany Holocaust memory, which we aspire to associate with values such as humanity, justice, and rights, has turned into a legitimizing shield and a justification for the discrimination of Palestinians by Israeli Jews. This, to my mind, is the most urgent and important problem of Germans’ coming to terms with the past *these days*.

Germany’s history of coming to terms with its past has moved, very broadly sketched, from one of rejection to owning its crimes in the three decades after 1945 to an impressive social, cultural and political movement from the 1970s onward that acknowledged and internalized Nazi crimes, as Helmut Walser Smith pointed out in his contribution here. It has become a model for how to own a violent national past. But in the last twenty years or so there has been in Germany another memory development related to antisemitism, which Moses identified, that sanctified the status of Israel as immune to historical and evidenced-based arguments and blind to the experience of Palestinians under occupation. It is not wrong to identify this memory trend in terms taken from the language of the sacred and the profane—because this is how its believers represent themselves.

I understand where this German sentiment comes from, namely the wish to atone for the Holocaust. It reflects on some level a German *feeling*—and feeling is the right word here—that Germans cannot quite

trust their views on Jews and therefore it is better to err on the side of total support of Israel. But this view ignores the diversity of opinions among Jews on the issue of Israel and Palestine. There is hardly a consensus on this. Many Jews in Israel and beyond oppose the Israeli policies of discrimination towards the Palestinians. Why does the German official and media viewpoint not represent or adopt this view?

This official and media approach in Germany is based on the axiom that a lesson of the Holocaust is that Jews and Israel (or more accurately, Israeli Jews) are always right. Treating any human group to be beyond moral reproach and historical accountability is a form of worship wise people should avoid. Learning from the Holocaust that all human beings deserve a life of dignity and rights apart from those who are denied those rights by Israeli Jews—this is a moral travesty. I am an Israeli Jew who lives in America. I am as wary of philosemites who think that Israel can do no wrong as I am of antisemites who think that Jews are eternally to be blamed. Beware of those who sanctify or dehumanize you. I prefer Israeli Jews to be treated as human beings who, as all human beings, should be judged by, and accountable to, their actions that necessarily commingle good and not-so-good deeds.

Those who share this restrictive view of Holocaust memory, Israel, and antisemitism have in effect suffocated any serious debate in Germany on these issues. They reflexively view Jewish Israelis as victims and hermetically silence Palestinian voices in Germany. This view is blind to the fact that between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean there are two national groups of roughly 6.8 million Jews and 6.8 million Palestinians—one group has all the rights and it denies in various ways the rights of the other (this includes systemic racism toward Palestinian citizens of Israel, occupation in the West Bank, and siege on the Gaza Strip, creating what amounts to a huge prison). More broadly, Holocaust memory in Germany continues today, to follow Frank Biess's exceptionally insightful contribution to this debate, as a pattern of excluding non-Jews, non-ethnic, and non-white Germans, who make up an increasing part of German society, from the conversation.

If there is a lesson from the Holocaust it should be that all human beings deserve equal rights and a life of dignity. Insisting on Palestinian equal rights (under whatever political arrangement) cannot be deemed antisemitic. Understanding the situation in Israel and Palestine via terms such as Apartheid and settler colonialism, the non-violent social movement BDS, and Palestinian voices of their experience and politics can be debated and opposed but they are not antisemitic. Bill Niven in his contribution criticized Moses for a lack of a balanced approach on some of these issues. This is always a wise advice. But I should point out that the issue is not one of balance but of admitting in Germany that these topics form a legitimate part of the conversation to begin with, and that, at the end of the day, being balanced—or arguing for complexity—should not be used as an argument to hide the violent reality of occupied and occupier. The Israeli human rights group B'tselem published recently a detailed report *A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This is Apartheid*, followed by a similar report of Human Rights Watch *A Threshold Crossed: Israeli Authorities and the Crimes of Apartheid and Persecution*. These expert opinions should be discussed and debated, not designated as heretic documents sent to the bonfire. Burning books, metaphorically, is not the answer; facing history is.

Germans who uphold this view have the brazen nerve to blame Jews, Israelis, and others who disagree with them as antisemites. They share a knee-jerk reaction to equate anti-Zionism with antisemitism. We ought to separate out the fight against antisemitism from the arguments over Zionism and anti-Zionism and over Israeli policies. Antisemitism, which is a form of racism or discrimination, is never acceptable. Zionism, similar to any form of nationalism, is always debatable. The right principle is to support equal

rights to all the inhabitants living between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean. How these inhabitants decide to apportion politically these rights—in one state, two states, confederation, or any other political arrangements—is for them to decide. A broad historical perspective is useful here. Jews have been divided over the issue of Jewish self-determination for a long time. Are we to consider as a legacy of the Holocaust Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, and Judah Magnes antisemites because they envisioned a Jewish homeland not as an exclusive Jewish state but as a binational one?

These restrictive German views on antisemitism, Israel, and Palestine have influenced government policy on the federal and local levels. The German government supports the 2016 IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) document on antisemitism that regardless of its framers' original intentions has since become a weapon to silence criticism of Israel. The Bundestag passed a resolution describing the BDS movement as antisemitic. A uniformity of voice is demanded. A German colleague wrote me a few weeks ago during the recent violence in Israel and Gaza that “This is a new stage in the history of our democracy; the media all speak with one voice, but they don't seem to do this under strong constraints from above, but because when it comes to fighting antisemitism in Germany, everyone wants to surpass and outdo the other.”

There has been pushback. In December 2020, German cultural institutions issued the *Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit* for freedom of opinion in the arts and sciences, including those who may support a boycott of Israel. The Jerusalem Declaration of Antisemitism published in March 2021, I was among its framers, provided guidelines to distinguish between antisemitic speech and legitimate critique of Israel. Its more than 300 signatories, distinguished names in the fields of Holocaust, Nazi, antisemitism, Jewish, and Israel studies, share a commitment to fighting antisemitism, protecting freedom of expression, and calling for equal rights for all the inhabitants of the Holy Land. Some reactions to this initiative in Germany were beyond the pale, targeting particularly German colleagues. Frankfurt Mayor Uwe Becker, who is the head of the Deutsch-Israelische Gesellschaft and the antisemitism czar for the state of Hessen, recently published a piece in which he blamed the JDA signatories for supporting Israel's destruction. We are in the realm of violent phantasies. One is uncomfortably reminded of erstwhile antisemitic phantasies; in this case here again the Jews, this time those on the left, are almighty and responsible for evil.

We need a different German memory of the Holocaust, antisemitism, Israel, and Palestine—for Germans, Jews, and Palestinians. Germany announced several days ago that it acknowledges the genocide it committed in Namibia in the early 1900s and plans to pay reparation. This places one of Moses' elements of catechism—on the uniqueness of the Holocaust—in a different light. As Udi Greenberg noted in his contribution the acknowledgment of the genocide in Namibia did not require backtracking on German views of the Holocaust's special role in making German national identity. Germans should bring this sort of historical and moral sophistication to the topic at hand. The Holocaust has entrusted Germans with an abiding moral obligation to remember it and fight antisemitism. At the same time, the history of antisemitism has become more, not less, complicated with the foundation of the State of Israel. The condition of diasporic Jewish communities as a minority in their given states is not identical to the existence of Jews as a sovereign majority in the State of Israel. Jews are attacked by antisemites as a minority in states around the world, while Israel has inflicted injustices on the Palestinians in the past and in the present. Jews can be both victims and victimizers. This complexity should be acknowledged.

Germans should search for a way to fight antisemitism and cherish the memory of the Holocaust as well

as acknowledge criticism of Israel for denying equal rights to Palestinians as a legitimate part of the conversation. This acknowledgment does not signal an agreement with these critical views. It is a first step toward a serious public discussion on how to find the right words to juggle a commitment to Holocaust remembrance and criticism of Israel for denying equal rights to the Palestinians. This is a delicate, difficult challenge but not impossible if the moral, historical, and civil courage is there. If there is a lesson to draw from the Holocaust, then this seems a worthy one.

The line between scholarly pursuit and political engagement in this debate is often blurred, much as it has been blurred in the *Historikerstreit* in the mid-1980s about the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the Third Reich. Scholars of Germany should raise their voice; government officials and media persons should listen to scholars and to the work of local activists. A reservoir of such local, popular goodwill from below is described in the book of Sa'ed Atshan and Katharine Galor, *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians* (Duke University Press, 2020). They portray this conflicted terrain in Berlin and seek spaces of activism and solidarity among Germans, Israelis, and Palestinians that can help create mutual recognition and restorative justice.

In scholarship, the fields of Holocaust, Israel, and Palestine studies have moved in the direction of integrative history. A first port of call is the pathbreaking co-edited book of Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History* (Columbia University Press, 2018), which was the subject of scholars' forums in the *Journal of Genocide Research* and *Central European History*. Debates over the topic are fruitful and continue. My view is that the question is not whether to explore the two events in tandem, but how to do so insightfully. The two events are completely different in their magnitude and historical character; the point is not to compare but to outline their meaningful relations in history and memory, not least because contemporaries then and later viewed them as related in different ways. Important scholarship has pulled together various strands of the relations among Europe, Germany, Israel, and Palestine, beyond binary and moralizing understanding, such as the recent book edited by Bashir Bashir and Leila Farsakh, *The Arab and the Jewish Questions: Geographies of Engagement in Palestine and Beyond* (Columbia University Press, 2020).

Official German memory of the Holocaust, antisemitism, Israel, and Palestine as it appears today is on the road to nowhere. It lacks in humanity for victims, regardless of who they are. There can be no justification in our world for denying equal rights to a given group of people. To justify implicitly or explicitly the denial of these rights via Holocaust memory is a screeching dissonance.

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