

# Atonement at the Expense of Another

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What does it mean to atone for a crime against humanity? And how can a nation meaningfully repent for its past if it makes another nation pay the price for this repentance? These two questions go to the heart of Germany's grappling with its genocidal past. Germany's elaborate moral calculus of historical reflection has tied the expiation of its sin to the formation and security of Israel as a Jewish state. Yet Germany and Germans have consistently overlooked the obvious fact that a Jewish state in Palestine has come at the expense of the non-Jewish Palestinian natives of that land. Palestine and the Palestinians have been the sacrificial offerings for a rebirth of postwar philoZionist liberal Western morality; in fact, they are the embodiment of the immorality of this morality.

What does it mean to atone for a crime against humanity? And how can a nation meaningfully repent for its past if it makes another nation pay the price for this repentance? These two questions go to the heart of Germany's grappling with its genocidal past. Historian Dirk Moses' provocative essay distills what he describes as a new "German Catechism" on the Holocaust. Moses delineates the main points of this catechism, which include the idea that Germany has a special loyalty to the state of Israel. Because of this loyalty, the catechism equates antizionism with antisemitism, which itself is considered a unique form of prejudice distinct from racism.

The descendants of the perpetrators of the Holocaust have expiated the sins of their ancestors by declaring a moral and material commitment to a foreign state that, in turn, claims to represent the Jewish people. In 1952, West Germany committed itself to paying reparations to Israel, which a year later commenced building its famous World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Yad Vashem. Less well-known is the fact that this Israeli museum and memorial complex is situated across the valley from the now erased village of Deir Yassin, where an infamous massacre of Palestinian villagers occurred in April 1948. What is the relationship between this unacknowledged proximity and the unacknowledged foundation of postwar German repentance? Israel, after all, was established at the expense of another people, the indigenous Palestinian population, whom it actively victimizes to this day: comprehensively, systematically, cruelly, and above all, with Western-enabled impunity.

I remain horrified by the monstrosity of the Holocaust. Having walked across the stumbling stones—the Stolpersteine—of Berlin and visited many memorials in the rebuilt capital of the former Nazi empire to mark the various locations where German Jews were deported to their deaths, I am repeatedly shocked by the extent and nature of that genocide. I also appreciate the seriousness, scale and ubiquity of the critical architecture of the commemoration of war in Berlin, even if I understand that this is as much a function of crushing wartime German defeat as it is a genuine, difficult, and dynamic German coming to terms with the past.

The dominant representation of Nazi horror is consistently, and from an American standpoint conveniently, insulated from a broader, general, and globalized Western colonial system of terror that enveloped hundreds of millions of "inferior" or "lesser" or "uncivilized" peoples. There is, after all, a United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. (and similar museums in many other U.S. cities), but no similar national museum dedicated to recalling the genocide of Native peoples in America. Although Germany's public repentance of its Nazi past has inspired debate in the United States

about its own racist history, there is still no national museum devoted to remembering the systematic calculated brutality and horror of the enslavement of Africans and their descendants for centuries, or the nuclear massacres of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One attempt by the Smithsonian Museum to acknowledge the premeditated and unprecedented U.S. annihilation of tens of thousands of children, women, and men in a single moment in August 1945 Hiroshima prompted a ferocious backlash. Some horrors can be safely denounced, while others continue to be rationalized, justified, or ignored.

And like others from worlds disfigured by Western colonialism, I have been struck by how Germany refused until very recently to address its own colonial past. Before the Holocaust, German colonialists committed the genocide of the Herrero and Nama peoples in German Southwest Africa. I still recall how an administrator at the prestigious Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin—a very nice man and brilliant scholar—once looked at me quizzically during a talk I gave on colonialism. Germany, he gently admonished me, had no colonial past. His perspective reflected not outright cynicism, but rather the conventional Eurocentric liberalism of his day. His view, in any case, is now outdated. Moses' account insists that the new catechism is able to acknowledge other genocides while still maintaining that the Holocaust is, in fact, not morally comparable to any other act of mass murder. It is the Holocaust; the rest are specific lower-case genocides.

But Palestine is not southwest Africa. Palestine is not ignored just because it is non-Western. It is actively denied and repressed in a manner different from the manner in which anti-blackness and German colonial rule are elided. Palestine is utterly essential and paradoxically invisible in Germany's elaborate moral calculus of historical reflection. Because Germany has tied the expiation of its sin to Israel's formation and security as a *Jewish* state, it consistently overlooks the obvious fact that a Jewish state in Palestine has come at the expense of the non-Jewish Palestinian natives of that land. As a settler-colonial state, Israel has been built, and continues to be built deliberately, road by road, and settlement after settlement, on the ruins of Palestinian Arab society and history. Palestine and the Palestinians have been the sacrificial offerings for a rebirth of postwar philoZionist liberal Western morality; in fact, they are the embodiment of the immorality of this morality.

The central question needs to be restated thus: what kind of morality is it that comes at another people's *ongoing* expense? If Israel as a Jewish state is indeed part of postwar Germany's *Staatsräson* as Moses reminds us (and even part of its *raison d'être* as Angela Merkel suggested in 2008 by insisting that Germany has a "special historical responsibility for Israel's security" and that this responsibility "is part of why my country exists"), does that not mean that Palestinian suffering as permanent second-class non-Jewish citizens in a Jewish state is also part of a penitent Germany's *Staatsräson*? Does Germany's avowed commitment to Israel as a Jewish state mean that the oppression of Palestinians under apartheid rule that exists to maintain Jewish supremacy over non-Jews across historic Palestine is also part of Germany's *Staatsräson*? And is the inability of Palestinian exiles and refugees to exercise their legal and legitimate right to return to their homes and lands also part of Germany's *Staatsräson*?

To then be told with "moral hubris" (as Moses describes it) that to oppose this colonial Zionism makes one an anti-Semite adds insult to injury: it returns us to where this fateful moral triangle began and to the idea that some peoples, some histories, and the humanity of some, count, and others do not—at least not as much. We are back, then, not only to an insidious hierarchy of suffering, but also to an even more insidious hierarchy of humanity with all that is attendant on it. This hierarchy contributes to the eerie silence that surrounds the question of Palestine in Germany, and to a palpable awkwardness in the room

when unfettered Palestinians and other Arabs, as well as progressive anti-Zionist Jews, talk about Palestine in Germany or the West—when they are allowed to speak at all that is. Palestinian humanity and history haunt a profoundly Eurocentric philosemitism that grapples with European Nazi evil and its European Jewish victims. Palestine and Palestinians cannot enter this world except as docile mutes who submissively abide by its rules or as antisemitic fanatics if they don't. They are, in effect, specters who intrude intermittently in a moral universe that has no place for them, only to be exorcized through the now ritualized philo-Zionism.

The problem of this sanctimonious morality and myopia, in fairness, began long before the Holocaust and is not just Germany's. Zionism as a political movement emerged in nineteenth-century Europe to answer a European "Jewish Question." Racial antisemitism was a European nationalist disease that emerged during the high era of Western colonialism and racism. Zionism's leaders were all from Central or Eastern Europe—not one emerged from the ancient Jewish communities of the Ottoman, Arab, or Islamic worlds. These leaders proposed Zionism, or a Jewish nationalism in a separate Jewish state outside of Europe, as the only solution to the scourge of European antisemitism. They settled on Palestine as the location of this national home because of its important connection to Jewish faith and history.

But European Zionists could imagine implementing their nationalist ideology in a non-European land precisely because they belonged to a European world that, by the late nineteenth century, had displaced, removed, annihilated, or, paradoxically, claimed to civilize, tutor, and uplift native peoples around the world. Western colonizers approached these people "without history" as anthropologist Eric Wolff once put it, and sought to either "elevate" them into meaningful history or permanently remove them from it. It is not a coincidence that the fantasy to transform Palestine into a nationalist Jewish state and to see it as a "land without a people for a people without a land" coincided with European depravities in colonized Africa, and specifically with the German annihilation of black peoples in colonized southwest Africa, the U.S. extermination of Native peoples, and the institutionalization of racial segregation in the U.S. South. Theodor Herzl wrote in 1896 that "We should there [in Palestine] form a portion of a rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism."

Colonial Zionism set out to build an exclusive ethnoreligious state in a multireligious land. When the Palestinian Arab natives protested that a Jewish state would inevitably come at their expense, they were dismissed, deported, and violently pacified by British colonial forces. After 1917, Britain put into place the military, political, and legal structures to realize Zionist political ambitions in Palestine, pretending all the while that the drive to create a Jewish state could somehow be reconciled with the "civil and religious" rights of the majority population. For the European Zionist colonizers and for their British imperial protectors, democracy was out of the question in Palestine. The Palestinian Arabs were both the native and majority population, and the Europeans knew this. The Russian-born Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann confessed in 1918 to Arthur Balfour that the "brutal numbers operate against us."

The British Peel Commission of 1937 first suggested partition of Mandate Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. The commission recognized that any partition plan would be grotesquely unfair to the Arab majority, since Arabs owned most of the land and constituted the overwhelming majority of the population, and it was Arab lands and homes that were to be turned over to create a Jewish state. After having been reassured for two decades that their civil and religious rights would be protected, Palestinians were to be coerced into making way for a Jewish state. This state would be populated

primarily by European Jews, many of whom had arrived after the rise of Nazism, at a time when neither the United States nor Britain were willing to open their own sovereign doors to the mass of desperate Jewish refugees.

In their conclusion to their report recommending partition, the Peel Commission explained its rationale for this manifest injustice against Palestinians. It stated that “Considering what the possibility of finding a refuge in Palestine means to many thousands of suffering Jews, we cannot believe that the ‘distress’ occasioned by Partition, great as it would be, is more than Arab generosity can bear. And in this, as in so much else connected with Palestine, it is not only the peoples of that country that have to be considered. The Jewish problem is not the least of the many problems which are disturbing international relations at this critical time and obstructing the path to peace and prosperity. If the Arabs, at some sacrifice, could help to solve that problem, they would earn the gratitude, not of the Jews alone, but of all the Western World.”

This extraordinary reasoning predates Kristallnacht and the Holocaust. Yet it also anticipates the post-Holocaust “German catechism” that Dirk Moses explores. Like the authors of the new German catechism, the colonialists of the Peel Commission invoked the moral imperative of the suffering of Jews to justify the oppression of colonized non-Jews *outside of Europe*, women and men who were neither the authors of Jewish suffering nor responsible for the Western world’s “Jewish problem.” But unlike the authors of the new German catechism, they at least acknowledged that Arabs were going to suffer to expiate the sins of the Western world. To this insidious colonial logic of morality, as well as to that of the postcolonial new German catechism, the best answer has already been given. In 1938, George Antonius concluded his ode to Arab history and humanity with the following words:

The treatment meted out to the Jews in Germany and other European countries is a disgrace to its authors and to modern civilisation; but posterity will not exonerate any country that fails to bear its proper share of the sacrifices needed to alleviate Jewish suffering and distress. To place the brunt of the burden upon Arab Palestine is a miserable evasion of the duty that lies upon the whole of the civilised world. It is also morally outrageous. No code of morals can justify the persecution of one people in an attempt to relieve the persecution of another.

His words ring as true today as they did nearly a century ago. They might yet form the basis of a new secular catechism of repentance tied to accountability, one that is fully denationalized and truly universalized—and one that values and relates the equal humanity, history, and dignity of all the oppressed, everywhere.

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