

# Dialectic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

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The occasion for my article, “The German Catechism,” were the bitter polemics directed against Michael Rothberg and Jürgen Zimmerer’s work in Germany, so I was expecting a similarly petulant response to my intervention. That it would spark such an extensive international debate about German memory and the Holocaust has surprised many, however. The debate is not my invention of course. The tinder was very dry; only a spark was required to ignite the flame.

I had been warned about the tinder. The German journal that accepted “German Catechism” for its June issue decided to delay publication because the editors felt the public was unable to discuss the issues rationally. After reading my piece in the Swiss *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, which published it immediately, a German historian colleague wrote to me thus: “Die Hysterie und Überdrehtheit vieler aktueller historischer ‘Debatten’ in Deutschland ... ist unglaublich. Der Rufmord gehört inzwischen fest dazu ...” (The hysteria and over-the-topness of many current historical ‘debates’ in Germany ... is unbelievable. Character assassination is an integral part of it...) They have been proven correct. Ask the intellectual, Carolin Emcke, who conservative politicians attacked after she made perfectly reasonable links between conspiracy thinking, including antisemitism, in the past and present.

So, what is that tinder? It is the dialectic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past). Until about 2008, it was a civil-society driven process of working through the Nazi past that had served a progressive function. Over time, however, this hardened into a state-sanctioned, state-directed political religion presided over by a priestly class of politicians and journalists who try to enforce the orthodoxy on an increasingly diverse population. What started with authentic sensibilities of guilt, shame, and genuine insight has ossified into a quasi-religious righteousness that now underwrites the “project” of German democracy, German reunification, and a German-led European Union.

The reactionary function of the Catechism is evident in the effort of the state to discipline those groups—above all racialized minorities/Germans of “migration background”—who are advocating for a full reckoning with the past. Michael Rothberg put it well on Facebook in defending my article against America-based detractors ignorant of the situation in Germany today: “There’s been a monumentalization of memory as it has become part of the official self-conception of the state and this has gone along with an increasing rigidity—it has become a dogmatic consensus that no longer has the self-critical dimensions of the earlier moment.” Frank Biess said much the same in his unsparing account of his loss of faith in the Catechism: “Confessions of an Ex-Believer.”

Others exemplified the blindspots caused by fetishizing the Holocaust as a sacred object. For example, one critic wrote that Black and Jewish victims of historical injustice could not be compared because, unlike the Nazis who sought to exterminate Jews everywhere, the US authorities did not scour the world for potential slaves.

None of them addressed my points about the intimidation particularly of racialized minorities in Germany. When they engage in Africa or Palestine advocacy their status as historically oppressed minorities is consistently denied by reference to a category of absolute pure victimhood that is not the

product of history but of the mental acrobatics of the same men of Men of Reason whose righteousness depends on the existence of absolute good and absolute evil that they alone by virtue of their “reason” have the ability to discern. I missed the appreciation for, still less interest in, their daily struggles against the ceaseless aggressions, micro and macro, as Mirjam Brusius bravely shows.

The priests want a “formierte Gesellschaft” (formed society, a notion proposed by conservative West German intellectuals and politicians in the 1960s) and are simultaneously able to deny the very existence of a catechism, simply, because they are not its targets. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* editor Jürgen Kaube, for example, seems not to experience the catechism as a social reality because it cements *his* affects, intuitions, and emotions into an immutable, universal standard, against which *others* are measured, governed, and disciplined.

Instead, while priests excoriated Rothberg and Zimmerer (“academic dwarves,” wrote one non-academic critic), and now Emcke, I was supposedly out of line in the asperity of my censure. Such performative hypocrisy is to be expected from the clerisy, but it was surprising to see so many academics misjudge the situation. The polemic is a calculated intervention with which an author assails an argument that they hold to be wrongheaded or dangerous. Pointed formulations are designed to raise hackles, force public clarification, and highlight the key issues, especially when confronting the status quo. The polemic is a common genre in Great Britain, Ireland, and Australia, though it seemingly makes some delicate US and German scholars squirm at their comfortable desks. In response, these guardians of tone invoke “civility” when they feel their faith is threatened or, perhaps, so they don’t have to admit that at some level their perspective doesn’t make moral sense because their politics in the US are liberal and against racism in general.

Whatever the case, everyone knows that we would not be having this debate had I written a mild-mannered “on the one hand, on the other” article. It was necessary to provoke so the priests would emerge from their confessionals. Having done so, we can put polemic aside and run through the issues one by one.

## White Supremacy

The problem is German white supremacy, as Fabian Wolff says plainly. The fact and shape of this debate testifies to this unhappy fact: my advantages as a well-connected, middle-aged, white, tenured university professor enabled the rapid acceptance of my article in two mainstream journals and then its astonishingly quick reception. Yet much of what I say has been argued in different ways by Black, Palestinian, and progressive Jewish Germans in various forums, as Zoe Samudzi and Tiffany Florvil noted in their contributions to the NFS debate. Besides Wolff, such writers are not invited to contribute in the mainstream German press; only priestly sermons were printed. When a German television station asked to interview me for a story about this debate, it became apparent that it had not considered including a non-white voice among the commentators. I suggested they do, saying that it’s unacceptable for public television to have only white cultural elites talk about non-white Germans without them as interlocutors. This is how white supremacy works. Thanks to the indefatigable Jennifer Evans, at least a diversity of voices in English appeared in the NFS.

The Catechism articulates white supremacy by making Germany’s answer to the Nazi past and the Holocaust the political and cultural return to “the West”: because Nazis were barbarians, Germans must

rejoin civilization defined by Western Europe and the US, with Israel as their outpost, “the villa in the jungle” (Ehud Barak). The poisoned fruit of German Romanticism, namely toxic irrational traditions of antisemitism and ethno-nationalism are (ostensibly) rejected while the Enlightenment, which posed the Jewish question through divide and rule of the attributes of European Jewish subjectivity, is valorized. That Kaube’s book, *Hegel’s Welt*, won the Sachbuchpreis of the Humboldt Forum this week against of two shortlisted women of color—in a ceremony held next to the contested colonial collections in the Humboldt Forum of all places—indicates the direction of the World Spirit in Germany.

This narrative choice necessarily entails a positive, or at least uncritical, attitude to Western colonialism in general and German colonialism in particular. They cannot be criminalized, like the years between 1933 and 1945, because European empires engaged in civilizing missions and defeated Nazi Germany. Hence the hubris of the Humboldt Forum and its apologists; the pussy-footing around the restitution of plundered artefacts in German museums; the refusal to pay reparations to, let alone negotiate with Herero and Nama representatives; the denigration of racism as a banal prejudice against people of color while antisemitism is presented as a qualitatively different hatred. (Of course, German museums are not alone in this respect, having obtained artefacts from British ones).

According to the Catechism, practitioners of postcolonial studies and history and non-white people (those with “migration background”) are considered suspect because they threaten this narrative choice by pointing to serial colonial crimes: slavery, genocide, famine, resource exploitation. What is more, for over 70 years, Black, African, African-American and Arab intellectuals have noted links between these colonial modalities of domination and the Nazi empire. So, if “Western civilization” is the answer to the Nazi past, these links must be disavowed or played down. Believers cannot understand a postcolonial critique of the West other than as a recurrence of the Romantic irrationalism (“identity politics”) that led to Auschwitz. The ostensible rejection of German irrationalism tacitly equates it with the time-honored “premodern” irrationality of the colored colonized (who supposedly lacks reason and self-possession). Hence the reiterated sacrifice of the Jews (discussed below) always goes hand in hand with an exorcism of that alleged premodern irrational other, within and without. That is why they call postcolonial studies structurally antisemitic, the epitome of an irrational prejudice. Only a few weeks ago, the Green politician Cem Özdemir stood at an Israel rally at Brandenburger Tor to announce that “peace will come when Arabs love their children more than they hate Israel.” The fact that this racist demonization of Arabs does not cause public outcry should give us pause.

The unease can be attributed, I think, to the fact that the position of Jews changes markedly between narratives. Whereas they are the clear victim of irrational antisemitism in the one narrative, their positionality is more ambiguous in the postcolonial one. As a new article in the journal *Postcolonial Studies* by the Israeli historian Doron Avraham shows (“Reforming Identities: Jews’ Experience of German Colonial Expansion”), German Jews found themselves on both sides of the campaigns about German imperialism before, during, and after the First World War. Apart from the Pan-Germans, who regarded Jews as aliens and insufficiently pro-colonial, colonial associations welcomed middle class German Jews who assumed prominent roles, even while others criticized colonialism’s excesses. Even the critical voices, however, did not question the right of Europeans, including European Jews, to rule over Africans and Pacific Islanders.

Hannah Arendt belongs squarely in this tradition. Often misunderstood as a critic of European empire in the manner of Césaire and Fanon, she in fact approved of European empire building over the centuries,

especially the British and French ones. What she opposed was the seemingly limitless expansion of imperialism, linked to capitalist crisis, since the late nineteenth century, a notion she took from Rosa Luxemburg. Analytically inconsistent with this approach, she identified the main origins of totalitarianism with pan-Germanism and pan-Slavism, in other words, continental empires. Her postwar reservations about decolonization and the US civil rights movement are entirely in keeping with her belief that Jews are white who are settling Palestine as Europeans. In her Orientalism, she is a fitting icon, indeed a veritable saint, in the Catechism.

At the heart of the contemporary catechism, then, also lies a fundamental inability to come to terms with the fact that the Enlightenment, and its concomitant promise to convert Jews into citizens of European nation-states, entailed violence: The “civic improvement” of Jews, promising to turn them into fully human subjects, transformed Judaism into a private, voluntary, and above all apolitical “religion” along the lines of liberal Protestantism. By locating the only recognizable Jewish *political* figure in the state of Israel, the Catechism also continues Europe’s civilizing mission.

### **“Relativization” and Historicization**

Behind the fear of a “relativization” of the Holocaust and antisemitism—like “equation” (*Gleichsetzen*), an undefined noun that indicates a religious taboo—lies the priestly conviction that whereas the Holocaust was the outcome of irrational antisemitism, the regular genocides punctuating the sorry history of humanity were outcomes of racist, but limited aims. According to Dan Diner’s theory of “civilizational rupture,” the Holocaust is distinct because the Nazis killed Jews against their own material interests, and was thus irrational. By contrast, material interests limited the extent of killing in other genocides, which were to that extent rational. This is a central tenet of the Catechism, actually articulated by Arendt well before Diner, and has been repeated in many commentaries on my article. The function of this distinction is to sacralize the Holocaust as the negation of Western civilization, thereby normalizing another catastrophic violence that precisely enabled that same civilization.

It is a false distinction, I think. The security rationality that drove the Nazis is discernible in all genocides. True, the Nazi belief that Jews were colonizing Germany is remarkable in its paranoia (though Nazi thinkers reasoned about it in a calculated fashion, as we see below), but paranoia about present and future threats is discernible in many varying contexts and periods, as I show in my book, *The Problems of Genocide*. Whenever states pursued the utopian goal of permanent security, they sought to anticipate future threats by dreaming up and enacting final solutions. Of course, the Nazi one differs in important respects from previous solutions because it was perpetrated by a modern and powerful state, and because one of its targets, “the Jews,” were posited by most people as globally dispersed: the genocidal ambition was thus global. The same can’t be said of the Herero in German Southwest Africa. As I wrote eleven years ago in the *Oxford History of Holocaust Studies*:

The Holocaust was not a classical case of “colonial genocide,” that is, of a colonizer destroying the colonized. Nevertheless, the colonial experience was relevant to the fate of the Jews. German Jews were killed as colonizers who had—in the Nazi imagination—dominated Germany and led it to the brink of extinction. Eastern European Jews had to die because they provided the “breeding ground” for those colonists. Simultaneously, Hitler regarded Germans as a colonizing people. His administrators and soldiers were taught to think of eastern Jews in terms of colonial stereotypes: as dirty, lazy, and uncivilized. For that reason, they had no place in greater Germany’s future. Like

many other colonized people, these Jews were murdered or worked to death. Soviet Jews were labeled as security threats to the conquest of the east and therefore murdered pre-emptively. The Holocaust arose out of the union of imperial and colonial impulses. It was born of a frustrated imperial nation struggling against a perceived colonizer, and it fed on the compensatory fantasies of many Germans during the interwar period, fantasies of achieving invulnerability through a new empire, colonies, and the expulsion and later elimination of “enemy peoples.”

It is a commonplace now for historians to observe imperial logics in the Nazi regime’s policies. Consider Christian Gerlach’s *The Extermination of the European Jews* (2016), which argues that:

Leading Nazi politicians and organizers of destruction linked the murder of Jews to the creation of a new order in Germany’s eastern empire. As with the persecution of the Jews, whoever considers the non-Jewish victims of German and Axis violence in their entirety must also take account of imperialism. Some 300,000–350,000 of the 6–8 million non-Jews killed were German; that is, about 95% were foreigners from the German point of view. Of the 6 million Jews slain, about 165,000 were German, meaning 97% were foreign.

Slavery is part of this story as well, as Wolf Gruner showed in his books about the enslavement of Jews: *Der Geschlossene Arbeitseinsatz deutscher Juden. Zwangsarbeit als ein Element der Verfolgung 1938–1943* (1997), and *Zwangsarbeit und Verfolgung: Österreichische Juden im NS-Staat 1938–45* (2000), in English as *Jewish Forced Labor Under the Nazis* (2006).

In the anxious minds of priests, scholarly historicization like this is tantamount to “relativization” because it contaminates the sacred with the profane by accounting for the Holocaust with the same causal mechanisms as other instances of permanent security. I agree, as noted above, that the Holocaust has distinctive features. But these can be placed on a spectrum of violence and paranoia rather than into a qualitatively different category.

Contingency rather than the metaphysics of inevitability are central to this story, as well. Had the Red Army not repelled the Wehrmacht, the Nazi extermination of European Jewry might have resembled the US Trail of Tears in the murderous deportation and dumping of Jews to perish in the Russian tundra. And today—resuming defeat of the Nazis—we would also be talking about the catastrophic implementation of *Generalplan Ost* with its planned mass starvation of tens of millions of Slavs.

The German state could integrate the Holocaust in its national revival by way of its exceptionalization. The priests worry about the *Gleichsetzung* (equation) of the Holocaust and the Herero-Nama genocide, but what does that mean—equal in stature? If so, for whom? Who can deny that the both genocides were equally traumatic for both victim groups. The whole relativization-paranoia seems premised on a privileging of the perspectives of perpetrators.

This exceptionalization forbids the recruitment of antisemitism and the Holocaust for contemporary application: the constant refrain in Germany is “learning from history” and “never again Auschwitz.” But when Caroline Emcke did so, she was accused of “relativization” by political opponents, doubtless for partisan purposes, as many could see. The point, however, is not the craven opportunism, but that the Catechism’s “never again” is Israel’s interpretation of the phrase, meaning that a political standard has been erected which enables such a persecution mechanism to be triggered. Sébastien Tremblay notes in



his reconstruction of the complex intersectionality in the queer community that even some of its members could weaponize the Catechism to gain acceptance. This can apply to non-white migrants as well. As Alon Confino highlighted in his contribution, the universal values of the Holocaust stop when the right of the Palestinians are concerned. What divides German and others is not only whether the Holocaust is unique but attitudes to Israel and Palestine. Emcke's uncomfortable experience is the Catechism in action—and she is just a prominent, recent example. Witnessing this unseemly scene may perhaps jolt some skeptics into recognizing its pernicious operation.

## Philosemitism

Anti-antisemitism is claimed as a central part of the Catechism. And anti-antisemitism has morphed into a philosemitic identification with Israel to the extent that it is effectively part of German political space. I am not the first to note the strangeness of German and Austrian government buildings flying the Israel flag during the recent Gaza war. The Israeli-German director of the Anne Frank Institute, Meron Mendel, is suspicious of this identification, which he thinks indicates “the attempt of certain social groups to right the wrongs of history, and this time to stand on the right side of history.” What they don't realize in doing so, he adds, is that they supported Netanyahu's nationalistic and rightwing policies. He is also suspicious of Germany's much-discussed inclusion of Israel's security in its *Staatsraison*, which he thinks more than anything benefits the German armament industry that supplies Israel with submarines.

In fact, the relationship may now flow in the other direction: we could be witnessing the Israelification of Germany in the demonization of Muslims as the inner enemy, with the consequent police harassment of protestors, in the parliamentary BDS-Resolution, and in what I call the “affective colonization” of migrant Germans by requiring that they accept the Israeli understanding of its war of independence in 1948 (and thus denial of the Nakba), as Felix Klein declared. In other words, for Palestinian refugees in Germany to feel like those Germans whose ancestors perpetrated the Holocaust they must feel Israeli in this respect. Infuriatingly for priests, as the anthropologist Esra Ozyürek shows in her fieldwork on educational visits to German camps by German Muslims, many Muslims identify with the murdered Jews rather than the German perpetrators.

In its current modality, Holocaust memory has become an instrument to govern and exclude “foreigners”/ Muslims/migrants. The anthropologist Anna-Esther Younes finds what she coins a (European) “War on Antisemitism” emerging around the year 2000 jointly with the “Global War on Terror.” The German technique to manage its non-white population whilst pacifying its own experiences of racism is to appropriate “anti-racism” discourses for (preventive) re-/education programs directed towards Muslims, who are already framed as inassimilable.

The disciplining takes place in other ways, as Younes notes elsewhere, “People have been threatened with eviction from Germany, in the case of African and Arab refugees from their antisemitic ‘breeding grounds,’ or when it comes to political speakers and activist with non-European or non-German citizenship. Effectively, there is already a Berufsverbot in Germany for those violating those loosely defined boundaries of German sensibilities.” Too many contributors to this debate have regarded it as a parlor game, and mistake the existence of undeniable pluralism in the German public sphere to deny the existence of the Catechism. Stuck in their ivory towers of whiteness, they miss how the Catechism is weaponized to discipline a diverse population, and how it impacts real people in concrete and painful ways. They celebrated the German “apology” for the Herero and Nama genocide as sweet fruit of their

vaunted *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* before waiting to see what the Herero and Nama people think of it: not much, it turns out. It's a good idea to listen to the victims of the German state, as Matthew Fitzpatrick reminds them.

It is time to ask whether Germany's relationship to Jews has moved beyond the structures of identification that enabled the Holocaust: the positing of "the Semite" as Other in the nineteenth century was contingent upon "the Aryan." Later on, the Nazis sought to exterminate the Semite Jew. Now the denazified German qua Aryan is sorry that his Nazi grandparents treated Semites as a dangerously Asiatic people who (they felt) had tried to colonize them as *Sippenforscher* Heinrich Banniza von Bazan (1904–1950) analyzed in his book, *Das deutsche Blut im deutschen Raum: Sippenkundliche Grundzüge des deutschen Bevölkerungswandels in der Neuzeit* (1937). Jews, he determined, had infiltrated the ruling strata by intermarriage: "It looks like a planned dividing up of all German cultural areas. Four sons enter the four university faculties, another becomes an artist, while the daughter disports herself as the wife of the pastor." This integration did not bode well for Germany, he thought.

Now, by contrast, Semites are welcome in Germany, which, as Hannah Tzuberi puts it, is "reforesting" the country with Jews to compensate for the Holocaust. However *willkommen* they are now, the Semite remains another tribe, re-membered by asserting their dis-memberment from German society. In other words, they are viewed as Jews in Germany (*Juden in Deutschland*), not as German Jews or Jewish Germans. This philo-Semitic stance implies that Germans are of ethno-racial distinction – the Aryan is the twin sibling of the Semite.

Not for nothing do the philosopher Susan Neiman and Younes in the *Journal of Genocide Research* (disclaimer: I am the editor) focus on philosemitism as the problem. Neiman states that she experiences "philosemitism as an extremely creepy form of discrimination," while Younes posits it as a form of racism. The German Catechism has redrawn the racial-historical map as follows: while Nazis did not regard Jews as white, the postwar German political class projected onto Jews their hope for a "post-national" post-racial future, with imaginary Jews as model-citizens (Jürgen Habermas wrote in 1961 that "we are now forced into the historical irony of taking up the Jewish question without the Jews").

Thus, it is no wonder that the philosemitic attitudes witnessed today are justified by invoking the "reforesting" of actual Jews in Germany. Despite shying away from direct ethno-national language, this philosemitism can be well understood as a form of "inverted postnationalism," which recycles white supremacy in the guise of Judeo-Christian particularism. Jews' occasional deviance from white civilization—for example, in practicing circumcision—is tolerated as an exception to the norm, but does not protect all those—i.e., Muslims—whose practices and political claims do not fall under the rubric of "special responsibility." The vulnerability and "protection-worthiness" of non-white, non-Jewish Germans, refugees, and migrants hinges on whether their protection simultaneously includes Jews. Their political claims, if antagonistic to the Catechism, are demonized as "imported antisemitism," while Jews are appreciated as conditionally white. The Western civilizational ideology of white supremacy became Judeo-Christian as the distinctive German-Nazi tradition of antisemitism is projected onto Muslims.

### Misreadings and Misunderstandings

There are good reasons to think that my article was misread to avoid confronting these facts. That is a risk of the polemic genre: it can evoke an emotionalized response that leads to willed or unwilling

misunderstandings. For instance, the priests have said my supposed invocation of “*Schuldskult*” has given succor to the far right. Branding people in this way is a typical rhetorical priestly move to excommunicate people who expose the operations of their discursive power: “you argue like Ernst Nolte” or are “*Sieferle von Links*.” It is true that the “identitarian” Martin Sellner praised aspects of my article, but only to reject its conclusions, as Johannes von Moltke reminded people, because Sellner wants more white supremacy while my writings aim to confront it.

It is also important to remember that Nolte and company sought to compare (and relativize) Nazi crimes at a time when the previous priestly class—many of whom still remembered or had participated in the Third Reich—refused to accept much less internalize German responsibility for Auschwitz. Holocaust and Jewish studies, for that matter, had yet to become acceptable or mainstream subjects in German universities—marginalized in much the same way that postcolonial and subaltern studies are today. For those reasons, Habermas and colleagues represented the forces of progress in the Historians’ Dispute 1980s. But the (geo)political and academic context is now quite different, notably in the (unhealthy) centrality that the Holocaust now plays in German academic and public discourse. To pretend that the context and therefore the stakes of the debate has not changed is simply disingenuous. Besides, you can’t let the far right set the agenda in this way. Just because it talks about elites, does not mean we can’t talk about elites. That would be absurd, yet this reasoning is what priests entreat.

Noteworthy for me is the Islamophobic consensus from the far right through the middle of German politics to the bizarre cult of the antideutsche. The latter are part of a new “ethno-national international” stretching from Le Pen via the AfD and Orban to the US Republicans and serial Israeli governments. Its consolidation in Germany includes the same leftist proponents of the Catechism in a veritable “Querfront.” They are at one in opposing BDS and in their love of Israel.

As it happens, I did not invoke “*Schuldskult*.” In my book, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (2007) and article “Stigma and Sacrifice” (2007), which was footnoted in “The German Catechism,” I argue that notions like inherited collective guilt are nonsensical. Instead, I suggested, the more useful concept to understand postwar West German political emotions is “stigma”: the collective identity crippled or damaged by the Holocaust in the eyes of the world.

My theological or religious analysis struck many as strange. They mustn’t have read my book, which I was merely updating. There they would find that the terms in which Germans talk about the past—“inherited sin,” “collective guilt,” “the mark of Cain,” “redemption,” and so forth—indicate the “exhaustion of secular vocabulary.” I argued that we needed to acknowledge the “subterranean biblical themes flowing beneath the surface froth of events” (21), already discernible in Karl Jaspers’, *The Question of German Guilt*. Given the emphatically Christian horizon of Protestant wrestling with the guilt question, the recourse to Biblical themes is hardly surprising.

The intense German identification with Jews with religious overtones has been studied by others, too, of course, like Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider in *Gefühlte Opfer: Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (2010). And more recently a colleague has pointed out to me that talk of “high priests” and civil religion was invoked by the journalist Stephan Detjen in his analysis of the Mbembe debate last year.

Germans, I determined, needed to convert the stigma of the perpetrator nation to stigmata by the unstable



combined pursuit of philosemitism and human rights (“*Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar*”). “For the Non-German Germans,” I wrote, “the Berlin memorial thus works as stigmata, the divine sign of grace and of Jesus’s sacrifice, rather than as a stigma, a source of shame.” Germany is thus a “sinful but repentant community” that “needs to keep resacramenting the Jews in regular, national rituals in the same way as Christians regularly celebrate the Eucharist. The memory of the murdered Jews thereby serves as a permanent resource for collective regeneration.”

I ended my book in 2007 on an optimistic note. The Bible taught that the sins of the father are not visited on successive generations in perpetuity, only for three or four generations. “Younger Germans are no longer vulnerable to such attempts to revive German stigma in the service of partisan geopolitics [i.e., supporting the ‘Global War on Terror’]. People living in Germany continue to negotiate their identity dilemmas around the axes of ethnicity and immigration—just like any other country.” I was wrong. The next year, German chancellor Angela Merkel declared Germany’s *Staatsraison* to encompass Israel’s security, thus making the continuing oppression of Palestinians a central German mission, as Ussama Makdisi observes in his contribution to this debate. He explains why “Palestinian” has become a *Schimpfwort* (swear word) in Germany, the victim of the victims bearing the burden of the German collective psychodrama.

As for collective psychology, it must surely be clear that I am operating in the tradition of Norbert Elias’s *The Germans* and the Mitscherliches’ *The Inability to Mourn*. Political theology is also a venerable German intellectual tradition, I thought, but many readers seem to be unaware of this except the Germanist von Moltke.

To be sure, whether my historical reconstruction in “The German Catechism” was a functional analysis or normative manifesto could have been clearer. It is both. I briefly explained how and why it came into being, how and why it was damaging people of color, and how and why cultural and demographic trends would lead to change. The shrillness of the priests can be accounted for, I think, by their realization that time is against them, that their generational achievement in the 1980s and 1990s is being challenged by forces beyond their control.

## Conclusion

It may be time for the baby boomer male priests to relinquish control so that a memory regime can emerge that treats the victims of the German state equally, that accords equal respect to all its citizens, that recognizes that antisemitism and other racisms are a problem running straight through German society and state-institutions, with global and local white supremacist networks posing a long-disavowed threat. If they don’t want German Muslims protesting against Israel, German politicians should just stop identifying Germany with Israel (“an attack against Israel is an attack against Germany”) because Germany just really is not Israel, and because this identification disables political equality for Palestinians and all those who identify with their cause. Udi Greenberg asks “Does the Holocaust Still Matter?” Of course it does. The task is to integrate it into the continuum of German and European imperial history along with the history of racism and antisemitism. It is also about taking seriously the proposition that we need to learn from history, a process that has been blocked by the Catechism. One lesson, taught by Christiane Wilke in her contribution, is that the total number of deaths at the Berlin Wall pale by comparison with migrant deaths at Europe’s borders *each week*, and that these borders and the causes of migration are a result of Western imperialism.

If anything good has come of this current debate, it is the recognition that the Catechism is exhausted. The German newspaper columns and some NFS essays just repeated its timeworn and tiresome articles. The grassroots need to be heard, as Kate Davison rightly declares in her contribution. To repeat: what once had an emancipatory effect has morphed into an institutionalized set of beliefs and rituals that tries to contain cultural pluralism with exclusive civilizationism, now a virulent strain of cancel culture. A true reckoning with the past would confront this white supremacy, which inheres in the systematic denigration of Black and Middle Eastern experiences in German, in Africa, and in Palestine-Israel, as the contributors mentioned here make clear. These are the groups that are now driving *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, but the dialectic is frozen by the Catechism. It's time for a German Perestroika.

Unfortunately, there is a long way to go. The #IchBinHanna thread on Twitter shows how younger, particularly female and minority academics depend on the priests for permanent employment. Adherence to the Catechism is expected. Brusius was the only German scholar working in a German institution on a fixed-term post who dared to contribute to the NFS; four other Germans in Germany declined to participate. Why? Is it for fear of priestly censure? Disappointingly, none of the German professors working in the US and UK who contributed to the NFS took up the issue of racism and precarity in German academia, which could have laid bare the continuous silence from senior academics in Germany itself, even if a small number, like Jürgen Zimmerer, publicly challenges the colonial aspects of the Catechism. The two should go hand in hand. What happened to *Zivilcourage*, that apparent lesson of the Nazi past?

Christiane Wilke and Fabian Wolff rightly took me to task for ignoring the GDR experience. Susan Neiman is often quoted in relation to her book, *Learning from the Germans*, about the relative success of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. She has changed her mind on some points. Notwithstanding the post-unification violence against migrants in Eastern Germany, in that book she argues that East Germany's anti-racism and internationalism can inspire Germans today, not the Catechism.

I leave the last word to Zoe Samudzi who on Twitter summed up the thinking of many:

What I appreciate about @JenniferVEvans' curation of posts around @dirkmoses #GermanCatechism provocation is that the memory debate has been wrested out of the hands of white scholars deliberately misdescribing & limiting its scope and expanding into all these different corners. It is not \*simply\* about singularity of recognition because it has never been. Because the debate is essentially about racial citizenship & legitimate victimhood, the debate has always already been about post-colonial Namibia, migrants, Afro-Germans...queer histories, the Potsdam Agreement AND reunification, Roma & Sinti peoples, Jewish belonging, education, denialisms, political indebtedness & the acceptability of Palestinian disenfranchisement. The national memory debate has always been about these things, but The Debate has never voluntarily engaged many of these topics or communities because its white interlocutors have tellingly decided that they do not exist within the purview of German history, memory, or futurity. It's heartening to see and learn from so many brilliant people (whether in this specific iteration of the debate or not) rejecting memory as this carefully managed arena of German nationalism and embracing chaotic and sometimes contradictory interconnection and expansiveness. I'm very grateful for what's come out of this series and the invitation to participate, and I feel more empowered to simply ignore manipulated political premises that do not move us closer to

disentangling ourselves from the intellectual shackles of empire.

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