

The Wrath of Moses, or the Shadow Side of German Memory Culture

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In this contribution, Andrew I. Port explores both the reasons for the heated backlash against Dirk Moses's essay, as well as the rationale underlying the often emotional attachment to seemingly irrational "hierarchies of suffering." Like other fraught debates about the Holocaust and the Middle East, Port argues, the present discussion is largely about subtexts, imputed motives, and unspoken fears about undesirable consequences. Moses's needlessly polemical tone, along with a raft of vague formulations, inexact characterizations, dubious claims, and debatable suppositions, cause offense, create confusion, and seriously undermine what is otherwise an eminently reasonable set of arguments worthy of sober consideration.

The poor Germans: damned if they don't, damned if they do. Long criticized for supposedly "repressing" disagreeable memories of the Third Reich, Germans eventually became "world masters" of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*—of mastering a difficult past. When the process began, and when Germans finally earned that distinction, are matters of debate and interpretation. Still, most foreign observers rightfully laud that transformation. Susan Neiman has even made the case just recently that Americans can "learn from the Germans" when it comes to dealing with their own racist past. But now Dirk Moses comes along and throws shade on that seemingly rosy development. There is, he tells us, a dark side to German memory culture. A distinct "reading" of the Holocaust not only immures German "elites" to the suffering of other groups, but even makes them antipathetic toward those groups—as well as toward anyone who questions their "accepted truths," above all concerning the uniqueness of the Holocaust. This is a German variant of "cancel culture," but in the Federal Republic, it would seem that those who are being "cancelled" are the ones who usually do the cancelling (at least in the "English-language" online realm).

The thrust of Moses's arguments seems eminently reasonable, if my brief recapitulation is accurate. Who could disagree, for instance, that the horrors of European colonialism provide important context for understanding Nazi atrocities? Hannah Arendt already made that point in the early 1950s in her work on totalitarianism. Why, then, the heated reaction to this timely provocation? There are, I believe, three main reasons: the polemical tone of the piece, its barely concealed political subtext, and, last but not least, the bold attribution of motive—and an iron grip on public discourse—to a specific group of vaguely defined German "elites."

The early contributors to this forum have already commented on the tone of the essay, calling it "sharp" and "caustic" (Fitzpatrick), "disrespectful" and "cynical" (Gregor). Those who have worked so hard to bring the topic of the Holocaust to the forefront of public discussion in Germany deserve greater respect, Neil Gregor forcefully argues. Agreed, though we should not forget that these are individuals who have been more than adept at dishing it out themselves when lambasting those with whom they disagree. In any event, the reactions thus far remind me of the angry responses to Norman Finkelstein's past provocations—though the more positive reactions in this forum to Moses's piece suggest just how "hoffähig" (acceptable) certain claims, previously considered anathema, have become over the past two and a half decades. (So much, perhaps, for the dictatorial nature of the "new catechism"...))

It is probably no coincidence that, in both cases, the provocateurs offer critical analyses of Holocaust memory informed—sometimes more (Finkelstein), sometimes less (Moses) unambiguously—by their sympathies in the ongoing Middle East conflict. In an ideal world, polemics and politics should not matter if the general substance of one’s arguments is sound. But we do not live in an ideal world and, as a result, weighty points worth debating get lost in the shuffle when they are presented as diatribes. Honey may attract more flies than vinegar, but arch interventions tend to attract more (momentary) attention, alas, than sober reflection, careful language, and nuance. The current controversy is a case in point. Moses is right to lament it when “outrage replaces sobriety.” But I can’t help thinking: *Et tu, quoque?*

All of this reinforces an impression I first had in graduate school when reading the exchange between Saul Friedländer and Martin Broszat about the “historicization” of the Third Reich, namely, that such discussions generally have little to do with historical “facts” and interpretations. They are more about subtexts, imputed motivations, and fears about undesirable consequences. And that, in turn, leads to arguments that normally careful, rational thinkers would not make in other, less fraught contexts. After all, what human event can really be considered to be “outside history,” as Friedländer seriously suggested about the Holocaust?

The point has been made that most “serious” scholars now tend to eschew “uniqueness” claims about the Holocaust. That the German “high priests” imprecisely identified by Moses are not *au courant* with the latest historiography (especially the English-language literature) is not surprising. But what if we—and they—were all to agree that the Holocaust was not “unique,” that it was not *the* worst crime in human history (the two claims seem to go hand-in-hand)? Would that somehow diminish the horror and significance of the Holocaust? Does placing the Final Solution in the context of European colonialism do that? Hardly. But there seems to be an unspoken fear that this not only would do so, but, even worse, that that is the malevolent intent of those who make such claims, and that this will have dangerous consequences down the road. Therein lies the rationale for the vehement attachment to irrational “hierarchies of suffering.”

I can certainly appreciate such apprehensions. Since the personal *is* often political, let me lay my cards out on the table, as Frank Biess has done so impressively—and as I wish more of us would do in these debates. As a young boy attending Sunday School at my local synagogue in Brooklyn in the 1970s, I learned that the only thing standing between us Jews and another Holocaust was the State of Israel. A decade earlier, the Israeli foreign minister Abba Eban had famously invoked the image of “Auschwitz borders” in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. That the Holocaust enjoined us to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the Jewish state, come what may, became an accepted truth—a religious dogma of sorts, to stick with Moses’s religious terminology—for many, if not most, in my milieu. Jews, we swore, would never again go like lambs to the slaughter, a conviction that often led to a knee-jerk defense of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. In (yet another) discussion of Middle East politics during my final year at college, a fellow student informed me that the “best thing” that had ever happened to the Jews was the Holocaust because of the way they used it to justify their treatment of the Palestinians. The comment struck me as outrageous at the time, and I still find the language off-putting and extremely tasteless, to say the least. Some would label it antisemitic. But it was the first time I was exposed to such arguments, and it initiated a difficult process of self-reflection and soul-searching on my part, one that continues today.

What, if anything, does this have to do with German memory and the “high priests” who have brought down upon themselves the wrath of Moses? It behooves us, I think, to reflect on *their* motivations—despite the perils of such an undertaking, especially when conjecture about presumed motives overshadows actual arguments. Moses suggests that, for German elites, the “sacrosanct” treatment of the Holocaust is a matter of “national redemption.” Perhaps, but it is difficult to say, not least because he never really tells us who “they” are precisely, apart from some vague formulations (“many leftist and liberal Germans”) and a couple of stray examples. And therein lies a major source of confusion in his essay and some of the responses I have read thus far. Moses’s target seems to be some (vague) group of talking heads and public intellectuals who, to his mind, determine the limits of acceptable discourse in the Federal Republic, at least when it comes to memory of the Holocaust. Moses seems to be aiming, in the main, at the “sixty-eighters” and their progeny—more specifically, at those who have recently condemned authors such as Achille Mbembe and Jürgen Zimmerer. Johannes von Moltke’s contribution makes all of this much clearer.

The suggestion that this is, for them, all about “national redemption” and the (selfish?) instrumentalization of the Holocaust to that end strikes me as a woefully inexact characterization. It may hold true for some of the so-called high priests, whoever they may be...—just as accusations of antisemitism may hold true for *some* critics of Israel and Zionism. But surely, other motivations are at play. To state the most obvious one: a laudable desire to prevent a resurgence of beliefs and behavior that resulted in unspeakable atrocities in the past. That is why, I think, the “high priests” find themselves in a particular pickle at the moment. Most are no doubt sympathetic to the plight of the most recent immigrants from the Middle East, but they are understandably put off by attitudes and actions inimical to Israel, which they often construe, rightly or wrongly, as blatantly antisemitic. This is not only offensive to them, in light of Germany’s history, but also worrisome—not least, I imagine, because of fears about the potentially undesirable effects this may have one day on homegrown *German* discourse and behavior.

That brings me back to my earlier point. This debate and similar ones are primarily about subtexts and fears about (intended or unintended) consequences. One colleague has written to me that the far right is “full of praise” for Moses’s arguments. I heard similar claims about Finkelstein’s interventions years ago. That is highly regrettable, of course. But it does not *in itself* undermine the validity of their arguments. Then again, there is no need: Moses offers enough ammunition for that himself, at least when it comes to some of his claims. For one, his sensible comments about the “democratic anarchy” of the internet and his allusion to a recent German initiative calling for “freedom of expression and the right to criticize Israeli policy”—reminiscent of the “Letter on Justice and Open Debate” published this past summer in *Harper’s* and signed by more than 150 American scholars and public intellectuals—undermine his own arguments about the hold of the “high priests” on German discourse. (Then again, the fact that the signatories felt the need to launch such an “initiative” speaks volumes.) Matt Fitzpatrick writes in his contribution to this forum that the German public sphere is not “monolithic” and “lively debate is still possible...” I agree, and Moses acknowledges as much when he submits that the “priestly censors cannot control the conversation like [they did] in the 1980s and 1990s.” (I’m not sure they did back then, either.) So why is his intervention necessary, if not to preach to a choir that already exists? If his intent is to persuade the “high priests,” whoever they may be, he should have taken a much different tack.

There are other aspects of the essay I find troubling. For one, I’m not sure that the “catechism” is as widespread among *nonacademic* elites and opinion-makers in the Federal Republic as Moses suggests.

The idea that antisemitism is a “distinctly German” prejudice (the fourth “element” of the catechism) is not a talking point I’m familiar with—at least not since Daniel J. Goldhagen made the argument a quarter century ago and met with a great deal of criticism *in Germany* because of it. Careless phrasing does not help Moses’s case either. Take the second “element” of the catechism, which suggests that the very nature of the Holocaust made it a “civilizational rupture” and thus the “moral foundation of the nation.” Surely, he means (less offensively) that, in the eyes of the “high priests,” the *reaction* to the Holocaust decades after the end of World War II was the “moral foundation” of the Federal Republic—a debatable supposition. I would argue that the “moral foundation” came much earlier, when Germans on both sides of the Iron Curtain set about the institutional task of creating states that would, at least in theory, never again represent a threat to their neighbors or their own citizens. Coping with the past must not be limited to or equated with a reckoning with the Holocaust.

But that is perhaps beside the point. The issue at hand is not whether the individual elements of the “catechism” are “true” or how accurately Moses describes them. (To stick with the religious motif, I would have chosen a different one that is certainly widespread across most segments of mainstream German society: “Thou shalt not relativize the Holocaust.”) What *is* important is their effect on public discourse in Germany and elsewhere. And this is where I find myself largely agreeing with the thrust of the essay, even if I can think of worse things than “redemptive philosemitism,” especially in a place like Germany. As admirable as German efforts have been to “come to terms” with a difficult past, it is highly regrettable if, as a result, it leads certain opinion-makers to downplay, “blend out,” or even defend other instances of mass suffering and brutality. Rita Chin has similarly suggested elsewhere, if I read her work correctly, that the preoccupation with earlier atrocities against the Jews has made Germans less sensitive, as a rule, to issues of race and everyday racism against *other* groups living in today’s Germany.

These are important points worthy of serious reflection, though I am not sure they are entirely accurate. Even if we leave aside the (admittedly extreme) example of the German hijackers involved in the 1976 hijacking of the Air France flight to Entebbe, it is simply disingenuous to suggest that German leftists are, as a rule, insensitive to the plight of Palestinians and other downtrodden groups. While researching my forthcoming book on German reactions to genocides in other lands since the Holocaust, I have been struck repeatedly by the outpouring of humanitarian assistance provided by Germans from all walks of life and from across the entire political spectrum. Their motivations vary, but the burden of the Nazi past, especially the Holocaust, has often played a role. This holds true for those who participate in candlelight vigils following xenophobic attacks against non-Jews, to those who take in or otherwise provide assistance to foreigners from the so-called developing world. Let us not forget that the Federal Republic welcomed more Muslim refugees from Bosnia in the early 1990s than all the other members of the European Union put together. It is sadly true that the xenophobic far-right has enjoyed a political resurgence of late. But let us also not forget that this came in the wake of Angela Merkel’s laudable decision to welcome more than a million refugees from Africa and the Middle East.

That said, I am stunned again and again by the subtle (and not so subtle) racist—and sexist—comments made *en passant* by Germans who would never dream of making such statements about Jews (at least in public). In 2007, former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt asked me during a private conversation if I thought that the United States would remain a major power if demographic trends continued and non-whites one day became a majority... The point is that things are “complicated,” as they always are, and if Dirk Moses had been more circumspect about making blanket assertions, if he had given more credit where credit is due, the ire aroused by his essay might have been less fierce. He

would surely agree that it is entirely understandable that many Germans feel uncomfortable criticizing Israel. To my mind, it is also extremely admirable, in light of their country's history—just as it is admirable that someone like Norman Finkelstein, the son of Holocaust survivors, expresses solidarity with the Palestinians. Then again, my sympathies have always lain with those who champion the side of the Other.

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