

Refusing the Extended Hand

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In German memory culture, conviction doesn't merely trump substance, it can actively fight it. The adherents of the catechism obscure radical traditions from the past—and the reasons they often failed—and today. All the more reason to revive them, without repeating mistakes: the stakes couldn't be higher.

Allow me some genuine modesty: I come to you not as an historian but just as an unspecified writer—albeit one obsessed with history, and History. A historian by temperament, I'd like to think. So I'm not able to share something as incisive and substantial as the contributions by Zoé Samudzi, Mirjam Brusius, Sébastien Tremblay and Tiffany N. Florvil, for example. What I can offer are some autobiographical and anecdotal musings by someone who knows the “German Catechism” that Dirk Moses outlines inside and out and who has struggled with it through various identity markers, personal and familial: Jew, Communist, German.

The catechism Moses describes is of course a *West* German one. East Germany had its own doctrine—one that synthesized the perspective of both (some) survivors and (some) conquerors. The central figure was the liberated Buchenwald inmate—maybe Jewish, maybe not, but definitely antifascist, definitely a Communist, definitely a fighter. His (pretty much always his) solemn oath to socialist values was nationally universal, collective, certainly not tribalistic, and thus a useful story to be told to and adopted by East Germans who had sworn oaths of a different sort just a few years earlier.

Still, as late as the 1980's the Party officials who imprinted (another word for “enforced”) that oath onto the collective did in fact have moral legitimacy to understand themselves to have been, in the Antifascist struggle at least, on the right side, be it as veterans of the Spanish Civil War, resistance fighters in Germany and France or (and this is where it gets quite grey zone-y) as organizers of those struggles in their calamitous Soviet exile. Some, (or many, depending on who you ask) were Jews, and thus also knew about “*rassistische Verfolgung*”—racial persecution—in the parlance of the East German honorary pension system.

It's that doctrine that I grew up with, maybe even was raised in, augmented by attempts at personal de-Stalinization. It for the most part accurately reflected my family's histories. The part of Berlin I grew up in in the 1990s was filled with spectres and ghosts and History; as a young boy I shook the hands of people who had been peripherally involved with the Red Orchestra. When I turned 18 I had never met a Jew who also wasn't a Communist, in fact those two things seemed all but identical to me.

But I was surrounded by West Germany. While the new openness was appreciated, even gratefully, Germany remained the *Feindesland*, the land of the enemy, to slightly misapprehend Fritz Bauer's phrase—the land of old and new Nazis, a straight line from Luther to Hitler and beyond. The *East* Germany I heard about in anecdotes was antifascist, *solidarisch*, cosmopolitan and antiracist, through encounters with Angela Davis and visitors from Angola, Korea, Libya, and not just as exploited workers either.

Identifying with those values came naturally; Germany itself held no interest for me. It was only after spending real time with people who genuinely weren't German and trying to explain to them anything

from 1848 to the RAF that it dawned on me that German history was in fact *interesting*, and also something I had an emotional and intellectual connection to. I learned my German history not from Winkler and Wehler but from the Sterns, Fritz and Selma, Peter Gay, George Mosse, Sander Gilman.

The fact that those historians were all Jewish was comforting, reassuring—I wouldn't have to be afraid of suddenly stumbling into, I dunno, a comparison of Anne Frank and Ulrike Meinhof, or of the Jewish industrialist and the Nazi camp commandant, the way that could happen with even the most insightful German self-interrogators like Fassbinder.

Those historians' visions of Germany had something to offer, something alive, dare I say something warm. Something not as robotic and sterilely evil as the leftist quasi-antideutsche self-hatred. "*Aber hier leben? Nein danke*" (But living here? No thank you) went a popular slogan of those years, uttered by people who, I had already realized, actually didn't know anything other than Germany and Germanness, whose senses of self were inseparably tied to it.

Still, something connected me to those Germans, or so I thought. One, they were showing an intense desire to understand the Holocaust, a desire that at times even came close to understanding. Two, their rhetorical anti-Germanness was appealing. After all I spent most of my days trying to escape the fact that I was in fact living here. So what if they were goyim, so what if they talked a little too much about Israel for my liking.

I don't know when the rupture occurred but I think it was reading a piece in *taz* that accused Timothy Snyder of trivializing the Holocaust, through contextualizing it. His book *Bloodlands* is obviously not just controversial but debatable, maybe a bit too neat in its geographical focus and narrative shaping (I say not just as an Ehrenburg apologist). But Snyder's sense of empathy and suffering in his books *Bloodlands* and *Black Earth* are real, palpable. At no point did I think that Snyder was *gleichstellend* (equating) or *relativierend* (relativizing). But that was just what the *taz* writer accused him of: Snyder's big transgression was questioning the Holocaust's singularity.

The uneasiness of the *taz* writer (who is Jewish, which I think complicates matters only a tiny bit) was also real, maybe even understandable. He tried to counter Snyder's work with Lanzmann's distinctly metaphysical conception of the Holocaust, which is one that denies the validity of all metaphysics. Which is all good and well, I thought, but not really the point of historical scholarship?

It was around this time that I stopped caring about the question of "singularity". It's not that I disagree with that position, I just don't think it matters all that much. It doesn't—or shouldn't—matter in making a case for the safety of Jews, for fighting Fascism, for remembering the dead and their lives and worlds.

Germany's insistence on numbers—one number, really, six million—increasingly struck me as inhumane. I grew sick of the rote phrases of German memory culture (*Erinnerungskultur*). Take "industrial destruction" (*industrielle Vernichtung*), for example. It's not just the coldness, nor the inaccuracy, the way it erases victims of more chaotic shooting actions and disease in ghettos. I'm not feeling polemical enough to claim that there's a secret kind of pride behind it, but I do know this: it's a maximalist statement that is constantly seeking to affirm its own maximalism.

I started to do little experiments. How much did the Germans around me actually know—especially

those who always talked about how deeply “*angefasst*”, touched, they were when they had toured a camp memorial site in high school or read one of the countless (and nameless) books about “this unimaginable horror”. They knew about Nazis, to be sure, but not about the lives of Jews in Lyon, Brody, Thessaloniki, Czernowitz who were murdered. In fact most of the six million Jews magically became German in their mind: the sort of educated and friendly, even patriotic, Jewish neighbour they so longed for. I started to avoid most Germans whenever I could, finding home and belonging in a sphere of Germany’s undesirables.

A few weeks ago I wrote an essay about the limits of what Jews can say in Germany, about their own history, about Israel. Those limits are asserted not just through admonishment and hostility—Germans denouncing antizionist Jews as antisemitic and self-hating and the like—but also through paternalistic concern. Sure, it’s fine for Jews in Israel and the US to think and say certain things, the refrain goes, but not in Germany, not with its history, not among Germans.

I’m not unsympathetic to that concern, especially when it comes from other Jews who were raised on some variation of “not in front of the gentiles”. I’m less convinced that the people who make that argument really do think that it’s “fine”—it seems to me that they are also troubled by a critique of Israel when it comes from, for example, American Jews in the US. It’s just easier for them to ignore there. This, if you permit me this bit of jargon, locational epistemology, is of course absurd and goes against everything being Jewish as part of a collective stands for. Even the people who indulge in it should recognize that but often don’t. I still remember the hand-wringing admission of a firm believer in the IHRA definition on Twitter that it’s okay for a Jew in New York to call for a boycott of Israel, but if that Jew gets on a plane and does the same in Berlin it’d be antisemitic. (The joke, if you want to call it that, is that according to the IHRA definition it’d in fact be antisemitic anywhere.)

I had little use for the German branch of “Antisemitism research and combating” (*Antisemitismusforschung und -bekämpfung*) that’s based on the IHRA definition and some unseemly brew of Critical Theory, pseudo-leftist self-loathing and parochial whiteness before; I have even less use for it now. Just as I don’t know how you can separate the discourse around fighting antisemitism from the perspectives and needs of actual Jews—all Jews—I don’t quite understand how at times frantic concern for antisemitic undertones of Israel debates can be divorced from the realities of the region.

But that is apparently what is happening. People—in this case Jews and Germans in Germany—who usually greet every instance of antizionism with a level of alarm as if the unspeakable is once again around the corner suddenly got real quiet precisely at the moment when it became very hard to make any kind of moral case for the IDF’s actions. They only raised their voices again when there were clear examples of antisemitism in Germany to denounce. The reason to me is clear: they don’t actually care what is happening in Israel and Palestine, which would be perfectly okay if they weren’t constantly policing how others, most of all Palestinians and Israelis, are speaking about a conflict that’s directly impacting their lives.

This policing—as policing is liable to do—does not make life safer for Jews, on the contrary. It stands in the way of mutual understanding and constantly threatens the seeds of Israeli-Palestinian dialogue that could blossom in Germany, that unlikeliest of exiles for both parties.

It also threatens antiracist struggles. We are in some ways in the first stages of a genuine racial

reckoning, ushered in by BIPOC activists, writers and academics and some white allies, who are themselves standing on the shoulders of generations of thinkers who were silenced, marginalized and persecuted by Germany. Against all odds there's a growing awareness of German colonial crimes and genocide, and of structural racism. But something very ominous and potentially lethal is taking shape in German culture: a whiteness backlash. The alleged "structural antisemitism" of intersectional thought and BlackLivesMatter, to name just two right-wing scares, are decried not just in conservative rags but self-declared Leftist publications in Germany.

This wounded whiteness now wants to use, abuse, the memory of the Holocaust to defend itself.

Honest, even noble attempts to deepen our understanding of the Holocaust, through contextualizing it in the history of colonialism or anti-Blackness for example, are greeted in Germany with hostility and hypocrisy. That scares and sickens me, both as a Jew who wants to fight racism, and as a Jew intent on understanding and remembering the Holocaust. In the end this country's memory culture is designed to just serve the country, not memory or culture. There's a Celan quote I sometimes think of, about the German's "reversal" in their attitude towards the Jew: only they who "with their very own pain have been with the hook-nosed and tattling and crooked dead of Auschwitz and Treblinka and other places will meet the eye and its almond".

The Germans, on the whole, have thoroughly refused to accept that challenge, or invitation. It was never truly about the Jews, never truly about the victims. I'd like to rescue the term "antideutsch" because it strikes me as a worthwhile endeavour. I really don't trust German self-satisfaction, not the extended hand, not the pointed finger. All the rote phrases, the harping on the industrial nature of the killing, the numbers, but also the stereotyped, distorted image of the victims, the Germanification of European Jews: I have come to believe that these are ploys that Germans, well-meaning and not so well-meaning, use to trick themselves into caring.

Where does that leave those who truly care about the pain and the suffering, who want to be there with the dead, who want to fight for justice, and who also recognize the nature of Celan's "other places"? Not in a great spot, admittedly. Embattled, surrounded, *im Feindesland* once again. As a Jew in Germany I pledge not to give up, and as a Jew in Germany I plead: please don't give up. These Germans are desperate. The contradictions are becoming too grand to ignore, the chasm between their stated ideals and the reality of their intellectual engagement too wide. Stating basic truths and facts over and over again is a thankless task, and in many ways a distraction from real historical scholarship, but it's necessary, lest Germans truly relapse into barbarism again.

And if all of this makes me sound like a reeducation officer stationed in postwar Germany then so be it. I mean: nice work if you can get it.

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