

Stones Can Talk Back: *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* Revisited

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Memory formations require a radical rethinking. This response to Dirk Moses' essay will take up two points. First, the missed opportunity of the catechism to keep up with social realities that ethnic minorities in post-war (west) Germany were facing, and its lack of visions for moving forward. Secondly, the necessity to complicate national pasts, which were entangled histories. For a more inclusive history to be successful, however, it also matters who is granted access to write it. Does Germany defy the logic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* if both history itself, and those who write it, refuse to embrace approaches that reflect the country's multiculturalism, perpetuating a discriminatory mechanism instead?

The German Catechism, as laid out in Dirk Moses' essay, was not always as binding as it now seems. Not long ago, in 2017, Benjamin Netanyahu cancelled talks with Sigmar Gabriel, then German foreign secretary, after insisting to meet Israeli human rights groups, including B'Tselem. Today, this seems remote and unconceivable. In light of the contested Bundestag resolution, Germany would probably designate B'Tselem's recent 'Apartheid report', as Alon Confino painfully observed on this blog, as a "heretic document sent to the bonfire." The "desperate" Germans (as German-Palestinian Sami Khatib put it recently) had not even covered the report. A disillusioned Jewish friend laid bare the irony: if Jews can be victimizers, it turns them into normal human beings. Seeing Germans criticize Israel would finally make him feel alive, unlike their suffocating philosemitism.

If this blog series were a support group for former members of an extremist religious community, and you would ask me when I started thinking of stepping away I would say: precisely when I recognized these ironies. History and Germanness are both complicated, and not remotely compatible with a political religion. Yet anxiety about pushing against my own professional instinct as I write this piece means that I must have somehow internalized the catechism in my DNA.

In a recent video for the cathartic project *Menschen mit Nazihintergrund*, I laid out these complications in their historical entanglements. It was liberating. Informed by the many worlds in which I have lived, the monolithic categories fixed in postwar Germany will not get me very far. The white Germany that is often assumed never existed. Forced and unforced migration means the norm has long shifted: we are already and formidably multicultural, multilingual, multireligious, and many of us ethnically mixed. It is just that we were wrongly presented a version of history that seems clear-cut where it really is not. That is why we need an inclusive narrative fitting also those who are forcefully and yet tranquilly demanding it, most recently Maryam Aras in her sagacious essay on the forgotten contributions of immigrants to the 1968 civil uprisings. How else can we, rather than retreat into irrelevance, understand Germany's place in this world today: its exploitative relations with the Middle East, the lack of healing in former African colonies, as well as the ways in which discrimination is still perpetuated inside the country today.

The grand missed opportunity of the catechism is that it has not kept up with social realities, and lacks visions for moving forward. Take No. 4: "Antisemitism is a distinct prejudice—and was a distinctly German one. It should not be confused with racism." No. We need to understand what exactly the historical differences and similarities are and unlearn respective biases to forge the necessary solidarities

against structures of dehumanization. Or No. 3: “Germany has a special responsibility to Jews in Germany, and a special loyalty to Israel.” *Therefore*, our responsibility extends to discriminatory practices in this region that were sparked as a result of this loyalty, an acknowledgment of the wrongdoings of European imperialism, and a commitment to make space for the heterogenous views of Jews in Germany, and beyond.

Rather than fighting against structures of dehumanization, however, the self-centred catechism came to deflect and delegitimize the plight of Germany’s Black and Middle Eastern inhabitants, which it wrongly assumes cannot *also* be Jewish. If anything about West German *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* left me flabbergasted, it is this blindness: that lighting candles for racist murders of inhabitants of refugee homes (East and West), and the ritualized commemoration of *Kristallnacht* never went hand in hand with an anti-bullying scheme against ethnic minority schoolchildren, which could have prevented these ongoing murders. It also failed to present Jews as living humans, often also migrants, who may or may not have shown an interest in a visit to the local synagogue, Israel, or Holocaust commemoration. Fast forward a quarter of a century and the prevailing idea cited by Moses that “instead of murdering Jews, Germans should be nice and welcoming” seemed to apply to Jews but not to others. Having grown up with the idea that being mortally attacked by Molotov cocktails was normal,* I perceived the reactions to the arrival of refugees in 2015 as a bizarre *Übersprungshandlung* (act of displacement). White Germans awkwardly hugging brown people whom they had never met, at railway stations, nappies and wet wipes squeezed under their arms: this was part of an important political act. But it also looked like a hysterical attempt at absolution.

I was not surprised when the mood quickly changed as soon as it became clear that ‘assimilation’ was not necessarily the norm to which all immigrants aspired. The catechism was part of this assimilation process, but since it gave cover to racism and islamophobia, it was also a deadly trap. Perhaps earlier generations of immigrants should have resisted the idea that it was the only means of survival, given that the place many thought to be their home responded with barriers and violence anyway: the now fatefully inseparable names of Hanau and Halle will always be fresh in our minds. It further strengthened intersectional alliances between various discriminated groups, which as Tiffany Florvil showed, have a long history.

Carnival celebrations went ahead after the massacre in Hanau, while a vigil to mourn the deaths could not. Antisemites were still allowed to march in the streets. Some can even stand for election. Taking stock of these asymmetries, to say nothing of the endless secretiveness around the NSU murders, the surreal Mbembe debate, or the fact that being left-wing and Jewish means feeling unprotected by a state that claims to do the reverse: might Germany be reaching a grotesque low point in its history? If antisemitism and racism have no space (‘keinen Platz’) in Germany, why do they still claim so much room? Who will set the future terms of historical memory in a country where for large multiethnic sectors of the society, denazification simply never happened?

* *Racist attacks still rarely make national headlines as such. Only this week, a quarter of a century later, the media fully acknowledged an 1996 incident in the author’s home town as racism. The murderer has never been found.*

Brandstiftung in Karlsruhe: 1996 starben drei Menschen — der Täter wurde nie gefunden

Brandanschlag: Bei einem vorsätzlich gelegten Brand in einem Mehrfamilienhaus in der Karlsruher Markgrafenstraße starben im Oktober 1996 drei Menschen. Sie stammten aus der Türkei. Foto: Rolf Donecker

History Is Complicated

The history of perpetrators, liberators and victims taught in Germany became a pedagogical morality play in which the *dramatis personae* were reified while others were excluded altogether. Yet history, as Moses argues, does not work with clear-cut categories, then and now. It is messy and entangled. Jews in Germany today, for example, might feel more like liberators than victims if their former compatriots fought for the Russians. Black people became forgotten victims of Nazi race science while also fighting for allied troops; some of them might have been Muslim, or Jews. Some Muslims might have been hiding Jews; while others fought for the Nazis who in turn viewed them as a mere “means to an end”. Many people in German society today cannot be put into single categories like perpetrators, liberators and victims, let alone into those based on gender, religion or ‘race’. Race science in itself, which also fueled specific forms of antisemitism, relied on pure categories that never existed—that is precisely what is wrong with race—always coalescing with social projections based on constructed prejudice. We run the danger of perpetuating these categories so long as we omit intersectional approaches that complicate histories, enabling us to eventually *undo* race. What is a German nowadays anyway?

Just as research showed how antisemitism and anti-Blackness are deeply entangled, it is impossible to move forward without taking into account how colonialism in Africa, and the prehistory to the Holocaust also overlap in myriad ways with German imperialism in the Ottoman Empire and its aftermath—to this

day. Moses' point how orientalism was intrinsic in German occidentalism has huge potential for German debate. Recent research discusses citizens of the Turkish Republic who lived in Germany during the Third Reich and during *Kristallnacht* feared being mistaken for Jews. While some of them might have been, others might have identified with different or mixed ethnicities. Many will have looked alike. Earlier this year, the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* published a piece by Esra Öyzürek on Muslim pupils who reacted with empathy during visits to concentration camps, fearing they might be next. Not fitting the national narrative, this was another piece ignored in German media. That Israel takes the lead for Germany was curiously unthinkable.

As a historian who approaches the Holocaust from distant vantage points around 1900, as Zoé Samudzi noted in this series, I am baffled by the resistance to any form of obvious continuity—*Lebensraum*, race science, or colonial collecting—and broader context. I've been rebuked for using the word 'genocide' in reference to Germany's targeted slaughter in Namibia, even days before the Bundesregierung's official announcement to call it just that. I've been rebuked for explaining how the idea of camps and race science were joint European inventions. Even in today's jingoistic Tory Britain, a major institution like the Imperial War Museum in its Holocaust exhibition names Francis Galton as the leading scientist who perpetuated racial ideology across Europe. If Germany wants to 'own' its racist history, why are its museums and universities largely silent on their own contribution to the invention of race science at the height of German colonialism, naming museums after antisemites instead?

I suppose it was easier in some way when the Holocaust seemingly grew out of nowhere—and then magically disappeared. Yet the current pushback against a different narrative not only dislodges the Holocaust from actual history, it also dislodges it from the research of professional historians, which is why *Historikerstreit 2.0* is indeed the entirely wrong term. It is not about relativizing the Holocaust, or its singularity. Rather, it is about finding more nuance, complicating what we believe we know, and looking for the ways in which other groups of people have used these histories to give force to their own struggles. Michael Rothberg, not an historian, presented these same ideas to acclaim ten years ago; the argument in his book that memory is not a zero-sum game has since been applied to move the field forward in important ways. This is peer-reviewed scholarship. Why is it being impugned and ignored?

It is necessary to complicate national pasts not just because of the entangled histories of suffering, resistance and indeed liberation that Jews, Muslims, and Black people share with one other. But also, because there are more atrocities for which Germany shares a responsibility. Add to this not only an egregious colonial genocide, but also the long road to adequately commemorating Sinti and Roma, Soviet and Polish, homosexual and euthanasia program victims during the Holocaust. Yet could the additional monuments that will no doubt be built, this time please come with equity and equality for those still affected by the lingering racism, sexism, ableism, and homophobia whose origins, like antisemitism, do not come from away but are still at work chez nous? Stones and monuments have almost become a burdensome symbol for a political standstill. But many have had enough of being cemented into some netherworld, filled with rituals of fealty and ostracism, rather than being allowed to walk among the living with their own minds, opinions, interventions, thoughts.

Our Histories Included

To some Germans on the right, today's problems are precisely those living Jews, immigrants and their children who are now demanding agency in constructing a new historical narrative: a volunteer 'refugee

guide' in a museum who wants to be the new multilingual curator of a more inclusive national display, and actually gets credited and paid for her work. A role-model Muslim history teacher, her hijab suddenly considered illegal. Wasn't it just fine when her mother wore it as she cleaned the toilets in the same school? Germany could have drawn on the skills of a multilingual population for decades. Yet rather than recruit students in Berlin Neukölln for subjects like history and political science to produce bilingual cultural diplomats, or archaeologists and art historians who can actually communicate with Middle Eastern collaborators and communities in Africa during excavations or those exigent repatriation negotiations, these strengths are considered a hindrance, rather than the incredible asset they actually are. There is no German equivalent of London's SOAS. Meanwhile, German Black Studies has a scandalous history of exclusion. Germany also *still* lacks a 'decolonize the curriculum' debate while German studies abroad is actively being decolonized, as are other disciplines. This is perhaps unsurprising given that some German media claim in all seriousness that postcolonial studies is more threatening than the AfD. I still laugh.

Histories are never neutral. They are always informed by those who write them. For a more inclusive version to be successful it also matters who is granted authority. "If our colleagues are the Nachwuchs of the Nazis", Wendy Shaw, an international renowned expert in Islamic Art has argued, it was not because of their "birth as Germans, but because many had not rethought the nature of authority and exclusion and replaced the white-patriarchal hierarchy at the heart of universities with a working system of diversity and inclusion". Last year, when 'Black Lives Matter statements' filled websites of predominantly white history departments in the US and the UK, it did not escape the attention of colleagues abroad that historians in Germany chose not to speak out. One tweet read: 'Even my swimming club speaks out in favour of #BLM—but German historians don't.' I channelled this observation into a blog piece on race, history, and academia. Part two suggested how to move forward, including collecting data on ethnic minorities in history programs. It is ironic that the means that could help fight discrimination today is contested in Germany because it was also such data that once facilitated the persecution of Jews. Should it not trouble us deeply that some people fear such data might still fall into the wrong hands? And yet, in order for claims of discrimination to be made, we are asked for evidence.

Meanwhile, German academia refuses to recognize that it is excluding large parts of society in its workforce. In the UK, a report based on data collected by the Royal Historical Society highlighted considerable racial and ethnic inequalities in the field of History, concluding 'with tailored advice and guidance' for change. Similar numbers could be found across Germany. Those who try to diversify their departments report fierce opposition to their proposal that posts be advertised in a way that would encourage diverse candidates to apply. Shaw's professorship will now end: one would have thought, her extraordinary scholarly achievements and acclaimed expertise in Islam notwithstanding, that her Muslim-Turkish *and* American-Jewish background would also make her indispensable in a city like Berlin.

If anything was more daunting than the deafening silence of German academia and museums during the Black Lives Matter protests, it has been the deafening silence since. Confronting it feels like pushing a stone—a monument, perhaps?—up a steep *Trümmerberg*. As someone on a temporary contract, I acknowledge the anxiety of colleagues in an academic system that grants access to tenured positions only to a select few. It largely relies on self-recruiting and patronage (the fact that many people of colour and those without traditional 'habitus' never had patrons anyway is our *Alleinstellungsmerkmal*). Some expressed concern that criticizing the system or investing time in something not directly related to one's

own career goals could harm them in their prospects. Yet what does it reveal about a country—where collective duty says ‘never again’ while antisemitism and racism keep returning ‘again’ and ‘again’—and that being anti-racist is considered alternatively a risk or waste of time?

There is something deeply unsettling about the fact that Black German history, for instance, is mostly written by competent Black scholars who have no choice but to work freelance or abroad. They become targets of yet more racist abuse if they point out that the only Black staff in most German universities are, again, the cleaning staff. Are ‘we’ really ok with this status quo? Can ‘we’ not see how it deeply relates to this debate here? Exclusion and silent compliancy continue not in spite of, but *because* they are part of the country’s past.

It seems pertinent to ask what exactly is happening here at this very moment in time. Is it not also very awkward that we largely rely on former ‘Western allies’—besides Israel—to ‘liberate’ us from one-sided approaches to our history? The fact that Moses’ essay too was published abroad, after a German journal demurred, fearing controversy, proves his point. This is alarming. Inside the country, many are disillusioned with the traditional *Feuilleton* and museums, and opt for spaces outside the fold: in the arts and literary world, theatre, podcasts, on social media, and blogs. On our own, voices from the Global South write the erased stories of places from whence museum objects were violently taken, Palestine included, back into history.

Who do we want to be? While the debate around pluralizing memory culture is framed as a generational issue, I think it is more of an issue of people who ought to listen not sharing the same space. Not only do the high priests to whom Moses refers seem unwilling to retire, but they wrongly assume their histories were not also ideological. Rather than listening, they are now using harmful and distressing rhetoric, insulting living Jews—philosemitism being an insult—and denouncing those affected by the aftermath of colonialism. Many of us have respectfully listened to older generations for decades, admiring and learning from certain arguments, while often silently disagreeing with others. Is it too much to ask for the same?

The question is further how established media and museums, which mediate a changing landscape of historical commemoration to the broader public, will stay relevant unless they engage with new approaches, grounded in international research, or better still, offer actual jobs to those who develop them. Opinion pieces on colonial legacies are still written by white authors rather than the affected. Publications on looted objects mainly continue to follow the white saviour complex. What if communities might not want all of their objects back, just because Europeans have decided they are now done with them? Who sets the terms for their return?

In the UK, our network of museum workers of colour holds cultural institutions to account. Last week the panel *Black Lives Still Matter* asked what museums have achieved since 2020. Repatriation efforts aside, how is it that German institutions assume they can just stay out of such conversations—in a week that drew fierce criticism about the insulting reparations offered to Namibia for the genocide? The Humboldt Forum would have been the country’s unique chance to revisit neglected parts of its history, and to diversify its workforce. Instead, four days after the killing of George Floyd, a cross, a symbol of white Christian supremacy, was fastened on top of its edifice. Now Jewish, Muslim and Black staff members, if hired at all, will have to work under its roof—at the same time as racist statues elsewhere in Europe are being toppled. A week later, Black Lives Matter protesters fought for justice down the road,

some of them descendants of forced adherents to Christianity in the colonies, converted in the name of that very cross. Can a situation get more perfidious than that?

All this deserves satire. For this reason, I appreciated the sarcasm of Moses' piece. Its un-German humour seems to have been disliked by or lost on some readers. To see Moses, a scholar who actually listens to marginalized voices, discussed side by side with a populist and right-wing author rather than generously engaged with over his key points of concern about more inclusive histories, shows just how utterly removed some have become from the concerns of the younger, multicultural population. But where some fear losing power (and *Deutungshoheit*), many others fear losing their lives. In her essay on the silencing of Jews in Germany, Shaw writes: "I do believe in analysing and undermining the systems that perpetuate violence so as to build new systems that avoid repeating the horrors of the past. German and non-German alike, our collective sin is not a failure to recognize the past, but our incompetence in preventing its repetition." Memory formations require a radical rethinking. *Vergangenheit* (the past) has not been not *bewältigt* ('come to terms with'), not in the slightest. If a large proportion of German society fears they are next, it is time to acknowledge that this simply hasn't worked.

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