

On the ‘German Catechism’

Matt Fitzpatrick

Flinders University

From the vantage point of Australia, and cognizant of that nation’s own struggle to come to terms with its violent settler colonial past, Matt Fitzpatrick defends the comparative (and contrastive) approach to German histories of violence and genocide, arguing that our understanding of the Holocaust is greatly enriched by analyzing it alongside other extremely violent societies. He reaffirms the importance of postcolonial approaches to German history and suggests that linking criticism of the dispossession of the Palestinians with antisemitism is a deliberate conflation of two different things. The contribution concludes by asserting that many longstanding political and historiographical assumptions need to be re-examined in light of the experiences and testimony of colonized peoples, who have clearly articulated how framing the violence of the German and European past without reference to colonial atrocities distorts that history.

Dirk Moses’ provocative intervention into the historical dimensions of German political culture may take its title from Kleist, but its substance arguably deals with more Schmittian themes, laying bare what he sees as a new German political theology, one in which the friend / foe distinction orders public discourse and debate. As a short polemic aimed at a broader public, the tone is sharp—at times caustic—and it necessarily simplifies some complex ground in the interests of brevity. It also probably overstates the extent to which the hold of this ‘catechism’ is a monolithic feature of German public culture, where lively debate is still possible and still taken seriously. Nonetheless, these matters of tone and form do not alter the fact that Moses’ intervention is overwhelmingly for the good.

Given limited time and space I want to demonstrate this by addressing three central aspects of the piece: namely the status of the Holocaust as a historical event, its relationship to the colonial past and the subsequent meaning of the Holocaust in German public life, with particular reference to the question of Palestine and Germany’s unstinting support for Israel.

As I wrote in an article in 2008, Jürgen Habermas’ *Historikerstreit*-era prohibition on comparing the Holocaust to other events has been a problematic legacy for historians. Tactically, this prohibition proved to be an immensely useful bulwark against the brown-tinged revisionism of Ernst Nolte, but it was an ahistorical understanding that lifted an event out of history when it, like all events, was necessarily intertwined with broader histories. The genocidal violence of the Holocaust cries out for historical explanation, and part of the process of explanation is comparison and assessing its relationship with other events. As Moses points out, this has long been understood by historians, which is why there has been no serious work recently that supports the earlier notion that the Holocaust was ‘uniquely unique’ or that antisemitism, including violent antisemitism, was *sui generis* or the sole preserve of Germans. That the incomparability of the Holocaust has become a pillar of German public culture seems to be a historically contingent by-product of the laudable and extremely important work of honouring the memory of the victims of Nazi violence and ensuring that the violence of the far right is not unleashed once again on those deemed to be inferior or a threat. But for non-Germans such as myself, the German insistence on controlling the terms of debate regarding genocide and how it might be studied has had a deleterious effect on efforts to understand the history of other extremely violent societies.

There is no historical reason why colonial violence, particularly colonial genocides, should not be

discussed alongside the Holocaust, just as there is no reason why the Holocaust cannot still be studied from the perspective of its relationship with long and short-term developments in Germany itself. Personally, I consider examining, testing and debating the relationship between the Holocaust and other manifestations of racial exclusion, colonial violence and genocide to be important historical work. I share Moses' incredulity at the way in which Achille Mbembe was lambasted in the German press, and how Jürgen Zimmerer's work was seen as somehow beyond the realm of acceptable discourse by some commentators (although it would be hard to maintain that Jürgen Zimmerer, one of the most ubiquitous commentators on German colonialism in the German media, has been 'exorcised' from public debate). Both scholars have in their own ways opened up important new ways of seeing the past. One of these new ways of seeing entails accepting the viewpoint of the colonised who, as Moses put it, know too well why 'the article of faith about the Nazis' *Zivilisationsbruch* rings hollow' given the devastating effects that European civilisation had on their societies.

As it happens, I do not share Zimmerer's or Moses' sense that there are strong structural continuities between Windhoek and Auschwitz. In my work I have frequently tried to point out that while the comparative approach is fruitful, so too is the contrastive. I continue to hold that the genocide in German Southwest Africa sits best within the logic that drove (for example) Britain's annihilatory warfare in the Sudan, as witnessed at Omdurman, and the violent impulses of other settler colonies such as Australia. That Nazi genocide unfolded during an imperialist war does not mean that all imperialist wars (German or otherwise) or genocides (German or otherwise) can be seen as a coherent whole or structurally linked. To do so risks flattening what is deeply complicated terrain.

This is perhaps my sole difference with Moses. But this is not a matter of doctrine, rather a difference of interpretation drawn from the same method—comparative history. And these differences certainly do not stop me from sharing Moses' unease regarding the 'German catechism'.

Crucially, three of the five points of the 'catechism' deal with the consequences that withholding the Holocaust from comparison has had on German public and political culture and in particular on Germany's support for Israel and its actions in all circumstances. Here it pays to tread carefully. Quite deliberately, it has been a long time since I've discussed the question of Palestine, although careful readers will know that I have always counted Israel among settler colonial states. My reticence has not been a question of timidity. Instead, it came from a deep-seated uneasiness about the fact that I live, as Moses did for a long time, in a place that is far from having its own settler colonial house in order. I write this short piece, for example, on Australia's National Sorry Day, where we remember the Stolen Generations of Indigenous Australians, at a time when Indigenous calls for white Australians to face up to their annihilatory history remain all but ignored in political debate and where the gracious and extremely generous offer of *Makarrata*—the coming together of two sides after a struggle—that stemmed from the joint-Indigenous nations' Uluru Statement from the Heart has been rebuffed by a bipartisan refusal to stare the uglier facts of colonial history in the face. Accusing Israelis of settler colonial violence while living happily on unceded Kaurna country in Australia seemed at best problematic and at worst hypocritical.

The recent violence against Palestinians and the German political and media response to it, however, means that confronting Moses' charges regarding German political culture is sadly both timely and necessary. I can only applaud the way in which Moses has shown how the responsibility to honour and protect the public memory of the Holocaust has become a rationale for defending the violence and

dispossession now occurring in Israel. That the Holocaust seems to be understood by the German state and media as a reason why the systematic and violent dispossession of Palestinians might be ignored or rationalised strikes me as shocking. So too I agree that linking antizionism and antisemitism is a deliberate political tactic designed to conflate two very different things. More speculatively, I also think that the Germans discussed by Moses will in all likelihood find themselves on the wrong side of history. With the one-state solution increasingly the only real solution beckoning as Palestinian territory shrinks house by house and hill by hill, Germany's rigid adherence to supporting any and all actions by Israel against the Palestinians is either anachronistic or inadvertently accelerationist.

To conclude, if intellectual and cultural decolonisation means anything, it surely means testing longstanding political assumptions against new understandings garnered from listening to those whose experience of history differs from that of the metropole. German history necessarily intersects with the histories of other peoples, many of whom remember only too well the experience and costs of European imperialism. I cannot speak on their behalf, but it might be with some justification that colonised peoples remain sceptical of German claims to be serving historical justice by excluding the Holocaust from a broader history, refusing to take seriously the genocidal legacy of colonialism or excusing Israel from the need to treat Palestinians justly. Instead, they might well see in this yet another means for the continued suppression of their own historical experiences.

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