

Does Holocaust Memory Still Matter?

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Holocaust commemoration is both a scholarly and political endeavor. In this post, Udi Greenberg assesses the values and limits of Dirk Moses' interventions in both spheres. First, he discusses Moses' historical research and the effort to situate the Nazi genocide in the broader framework of colonial violence. He claims that while this approach is highly fruitful (especially in its focus on the racialization of space), it does not fully explain some of the Third Reich's most radical policies. Second, Greenberg explores Moses' critique of current German focus on Holocaust memory, and especially Moses' belief that it prevents Germans from confronting the legacies of their country's colonial violence, both at home (in relations to immigrants communities) and abroad (in their unilateral support of Israel). He argues that Moses is correct to call out these political injustices, but wonders whether memorialization is truly important for their constitutions; after all, similar social and diplomatic dynamics are in works also in countries like Britain or France, where Holocaust memory is not as central.

In the heart of Vienna, a stone's throw from university's main compound, stands a statue of an antisemite. It celebrates Karl Lueger, the charismatic mayor of Vienna (1897-1910), whose career was built on relentless anti-Jewish rhetoric and who, among other things, helped inspire a young Adolf Hitler. Despite this ugly legacy, and even as it became a meeting point for far-right activists, Vienna is deeply dedicated to this monument. When protesters (inspired by anti-racist demonstrations in the US and elsewhere) recently covered it with graffiti, city workers rushed to clean it. This commitment is of course designed to make some feel uncomfortable. Either through malice or indifference, it signals to non-Christians that their presence in the city is precarious. It may be an exaggeration to attribute so much meaning to a statue, but this at least was my own experience when I was a student in Vienna. I am a Jewish grandchild of holocaust survivors, and every time I passed by Lueger's imposing figure I felt like someone was saying: *It's fine for you to visit, but this space is not for you.*

On the face of it, Berlin seems like the opposite of Vienna. From the enormous memorials to the holocaust in the city's center to the Jewish Museum in Kreuzberg, the city overflows with reminders of antisemitism's violence and of a centuries-old Jewish community. As many commentators note, what is so striking about Berlin's—and Germany's—approach to the politics of memory is its resistance to self-glorification. Instead of demarcating the communities' borders, as the Lueger monument does, German historical monuments seek to make the native population uncomfortable. Nothing illustrates this more than the famous “Stumbling Stones” project, which inscribed the names of the Third Reich's victims on the sidewalks near their houses. Its purpose is to impose a daily encounter with loss, to remind inhabitants of those neighborhoods that they live on stolen property. The intended message seems: *This space does not belong to anyone in particular, but to everyone.*

Commentators have showered endless praise on Germany's memory politics, but in his provocative essay, Dirk Moses offers a far less dewy-eyed assessment. The country's intense focus on holocaust memorialization may comfort people like me, he claims, but it does so at the expense of others, especially the people of Africa and the Middle East. Unlike Jews, members of these groups do not enjoy any recognition of their collective historical suffering. There is no museum to the Berlin Conference (1884/5), where European powers (with German coordination) radically expanded the reach of their brutal imperialism in Africa. There are also no “Stepping Stones” to remind Germans of the African lives lost to German troops' genocidal violence in Namibia (1904). For Moses, this is not an omission but an

active repression. German elites have fixated on holocaust repentance precisely so they could avoid confronting the country's long history of violence and exclusion that has targeted multiple groups. It is therefore time for them to acknowledge that the holocaust was not unique, but part of a broad set of atrocities in which Germany was implicated. It was one version of settler colonial racism that has destroyed communities the world over.

Situating the holocaust in the broader history of modern colonialism is not a new endeavor, and as Moses notes, historians have been doing so for over a decade. Moses' goal is not just scholarly but also political: in his mind, Germany's memory politics have dire consequences in our own world. In his telling, the focus on Nazi crimes may once have had its political benefits (in fighting jingoism or in solidifying a commitment to democracy) but this is no longer the case. Now it mostly serves to deflect the plight of Germany's new minorities, mostly immigrants and their descendants from the Middle East and Africa, whose status as second-rate subjects is tolerated because they are not Jewish. Even more egregiously, the Holocaust's meaning as a unique and unparalleled crime helps feed Germany's unilateral support for Israel, even as its government systematically forces Palestinians off their lands and bombs their homes into oblivion. In a dark irony, Moses concludes, holocaust memory helps reproduce the forces it seeks to tame, giving cover to racism and violence.

Scholarship and politics are so deeply intertwined in Moses' essay that it may feel forced for me to address them separately. But his interventions in history and political discourse are not identical, and thus generate different sets of questions. When it comes to scholarship, like most historians, I admire and appreciate the quest by Moses and others to expand our understanding of Nazism's violence. Thanks to their efforts, few scholars would now doubt that the Nazis drew *some* of their ideas, especially their conflation of space with race, from other colonial projects. In this regard, Moses has built on—and very much enriched—a scholarly tradition that highlight the features the Third Reich shared with other regimes, whether the Soviet Union's state terror (Timothy Snyder) or the United States' modernization efforts (Wolfgang Schivelbusch). Like them, he has contributed to our understanding of Nazism less as a uniquely German pathology and more as an extreme manifestation of broad trends.

As was the case with those earlier comparisons, however, one can wonder if Moses' focus on imperialism and settler colonialism is at times too broad to clarify Nazism's distinct characteristics. An army of scholars has shown in the last few decades that modern colonialism included countless techniques of rules, utilization of technology, and legitimizing ideologies. Colonial authorities and settler communities employed a diverse repertoire of actions when dealing with colonial subjects, from building schools and hospitals (in an effort to "uplift") to murdering them in camps. The question therefore is whether situating the Nazis in this framework explains why and how they chose their particular assortment of colonial actions. Why, for example, did they eschew the language of a civilizing mission, which was common among some imperialists (including some earlier German colonialists in Eastern Europe)? Why did they not only emulate other countries' colonial violence (say Belgium's brutality in the Congo) but also radically expand on it by establishing industrial death centers? Answering these questions requires focusing on the particulars, like anti-Communism's central role in the Nazi imagination (which it shared with regimes that were not colonial) or the trauma of WWI's mechanized killing. Settler colonialism provides a crucial pretext for their visions but does not fully explain them.

Both the value and limits of Moses' intervention can perhaps be illuminated by comparing it to the depiction of Nazism as a version of "biopolitics." In lectures delivered in the 1970s, Michel Foucault

famously claimed that Nazism was but a version of a new European approach to the human body. All modern European regimes, he claimed, whether democratic, fascist, or socialist, developed a fixation with health and reproduction, and unleashed campaigns to control and regulate them (in a brief comment, which has not gotten as much attention as it deserves, he also claimed that colonialism was an important pretext to this modern racism). In the years since, several historians have echoed Foucault by noting that the Third Reich's dystopian efforts to control reproduction through mass sterilization of "undesirables" (prostitutes, gay people, alcoholics, and others) was indeed part of a broader trend that cut across political structures. Similar horrific campaigns also unfolded in Sweden the United States, postwar Japan, postcolonial India, and communist China. Despite its obvious insights, this contextualization also has clear limits. It does not explain why the Nazis expanded sterilization to an unparalleled scale, nor why they ultimately deviated from existing models by moving from sterilization to mass killing. Providing context, in short, is certainly illuminating, but leaves some of the hardest questions unanswered.

I similarly have both admiration and some reservations for Moses' claims about history's place in contemporary affairs. As a former Israeli, I know well what Moses describes as "the nightmare" of the region's ethnic violence. I share his damning views of Israel's brutality against Palestinians as well as his allergy to the holocaust's instrumentalization to justify it. Indeed, like him, I find the blind support of some German elites for Israel scandalous. The 2019 Bundestag resolution that criminalized the BDS movement, equated it with Nazism, and passed over vocal opposition from countless Jewish organizations and individuals, is only the most recent example of the tragic consequences of this approach. Some critics thought that Moses was too polemical when he called German holocaust remembrance "catechism," and I agree that it risks dismissing some people's serious and at time brave efforts to confront their society's crimes. It also risks conflating different forces and motives behind memory politics (some were initiated by state authorities, others by volunteers and artists). Moses is right, though, to question whether the German approach to the Middle East is too rigid, and to call for its radical rethinking.

The question however is whether holocaust memory is actually so central to these dynamics. It is certainly part of the story, but are the countless monuments, museums, and school plans responsible for it? Most people in the United States, for example, do not seem particularly riddled with guilt over the holocaust or the U.S. government's refusal to provide Jewish refugees shelter in the 1930s. Yet support for Israel is just as intense and bipartisan in the United States as in Germany: dozens of states have passed anti-BDS bills, and the U.S. Congress considered similar legislation in 2018. Similar support for Israel flows from other commentators who cling to simplistic narratives of national innocence, like Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Czech President Miloš Zeman. The reasons for this intense investment in Israel and hostility to Palestinians are complex, and combine geopolitics, business, history, and other factors. They also, of course, vary from one setting to another. But the fact that pro-Israel sentiments flourish in so many places can lead one to wonder if they have as much to do as it seems with holocaust memory.

The same question can be asked regarding Moses' claim about Germany's relationships with its growing black and brown communities. Is the centrality of holocaust memory, at the expense of colonial violence in other parts of the world, a crucial factor in their marginalization? Germany is not unique in facing a recent wave of calls to recognize its ugly imperial history, which have often come from the descendants of colonialism's victims. Similar calls have appeared in Britain and France. Neither are the

uncomfortable feelings that such demands sometimes generate unusual. In both Britain and France, an apologetics industry has emerged, insisting that colonialism should also be remembered for its “positive” legacies. Moses is right that the holocaust’s uniqueness is sometimes utilized as a rhetorical tool to avoid other historical wrongs. But it is unclear if it is the cause of this evasion, or merely a symptom.

Moses, in short, is right to call for more reckoning with the legacies of European colonialism, but I am not sure that the fastest path there goes through the critique of holocaust memorialization. Even if one believes that the Nazi genocide was unique, it does not preclude one’s hope that Europeans would build museums, monuments, and schools plans that highlight the history of colonial violence. As Helmut Walser Smith noted here a few days ago, Germany just announced this week its plans to pay reparations to Namibia. It was an act that did not require denouncing the holocaust’s distinct role in Germany’s formal national narrative. If anything, holocaust monuments could provide one of the models for new memory culture. For if such culture ever emerge, it will likely follow the “Stumbling Stones” project: not by initiative of state authorities, but by the works of local and independent activists.

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