

A Plea for More Balance

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Dirk Moses' recent blog post "The Catechism of the Germans" has triggered a vehement discussion about Germany's culture of memory. While acknowledging the arguments made by Moses, in my response I take issue with a number of them. I argue that while the Holocaust still takes centre stage in German memory, the last ten years particularly have seen a move towards precisely the more inclusive approach Moses misses. As examples I cite the integration into Germany's memory landscape of the crimes of socialism, and of the controversial history of the flight and expulsion of Germans from eastern Europe at the end of World War Two. As far as Israel is concerned, I point out that the German government is not always only supportive. While the anti-BDS resolution, problematically, could prohibit quite legitimate criticism of Israel, it is motivated by an equally legitimate concern at the antisemitic programme underlying the aims of the BDS. I express surprise that Moses and others do not balance criticism of Israel or support for the Palestinian refugees with concern at the actions of Hamas or empathy for the 850,000 Jews driven out of Arab and African countries. In short—we need more balance.

Anyone who has read Dirk Moses' recent article "The Catechism of the Germans" can hardly not be impressed by the power of the writing and the strength of the arguments. There is a moral passion too in his prose which commands respect. Many of his points are well made, and he leaves us with much to think about. Yet I have to disagree with these points. That Holocaust memory has become a kind of ersatz religion, not least because of the uniqueness argument—the "more" unique the crime, the greater the need for penance, but also the greater the redemption—is a criticism that has been levelled before. It is an interesting interpretation, but seems to me to impose a kind of theodicy on German memory: if any sense can be made of the Holocaust, then it is through German penance, and the salvation that offers. This seems to offer little room for a much more secular and less self-indulgent understanding of a key motive which informed Germany's facing of its past: namely the wish for a more democratic political consciousness arising from a deeper awareness of National Socialist crime. Of course, if German Holocaust memory has become the stomping ground for high priests bent on identifying heretics, then this makes those who find fault with that memory into martyrs. One wonders whether the religious vocabulary used by Moses reflects more his own perception of the status of critics of the supposed German memory regime rather than that "regime" itself.

Recent criticism of German memory of the past as having ossified to the extent of becoming exclusive in its focus on the Holocaust is not without some foundation, but more notice should surely be taken of the way in which this memory has opened out over the last ten to twenty years. Debates around colonialism in the last year or so have often been framed in terms of a second Historians' Dispute, recalling the debate in the 1980s around the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the crimes of Stalinism. Yet this is to simply omit all the intervening debates around the Nazi past, not least the long-running discussion around whether or not German victimhood during and after the war had been "taboo", or the equally protracted debate around how to set memory of the GDR in relation to memory of Nazism and the Holocaust. With regard to the latter, some consensus has developed around the so-called "Faulenbach formula", according to which Nazi crimes should not be relativised when dealing with the crimes of Stalinism, nor should Stalinist crimes be trivialised through reference to Nazi crimes. The debate around German victimhood has subsided somewhat in recent years, but the fact that the Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation will now finally open this year in Berlin may indicate that

Germany can find a way to remember its own suffering, and the crimes committed against it, without losing sight of the responsibility for remembering the Holocaust. While the Historians' Debate seemed to result in the victory of a left-liberal consensus on the central place of Auschwitz in German memory, these more recent debates are not about one way of remembering ousting or triumphing over another, but about negotiating a space for memories to coexist.

As I see it, the current debate over colonialism fits into this pattern. At present, it may seem that a kind of extreme particularism (the Holocaust cannot be connected to colonialism) is pitted against an equally radical inclusivism (the Holocaust cannot be understood without colonialism). These tensions need to be negotiated so that memory of the Holocaust and of colonialism can sit side by side. This may, though, take some time. It helps neither to dismiss out of hand the links between the Holocaust and colonialism, nor to shoehorn the Holocaust into a history of colonialism. It does not help to deny links between antisemitism and the wider history of racism, but nor does it help to absorb the history of antisemitism into the history of racism so that the particularities of antisemitism are lost from view. Those who loudly deny links are indeed, no doubt, setting out to defend the trope of Holocaust uniqueness—one of the “catechisms”—but those who insist loudly that the Holocaust really cannot be grasped without situating it within the history of colonialism may be responding in part at least to their own anger at what they see as the dominance of Holocaust memory.

Especially during the Mbembe debate, the image projected of Israel as a modern colonialist settler or even apartheid state—almost the contemporary exemplar—caused some concern to Felix Klein, the Federal Government Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Anti-Semitism (since this office was created in 2018). It caused him concern because he believed it to be wrong, and antisemitic. But one can well imagine, too, that it would be hard to justify keeping a focus on Jewish victimhood at the heart of national memory if the idea takes root that the Israeli state today is behaving in ways which can only be understood in the context of precisely those wider historical traditions that informed colonialism, apartheid and even some aspects of Nazism. Of course right-wing Israeli politicians should not be conflated with Israelis as a whole, or Jews as a whole. Sadly, however, that is precisely what antisemites like to do. If the German government were to feel that what was happening in the West Bank is indeed apartheid, and say so, it would not take long for antisemites to exploit this (along the lines of the “victim people” have become the “perpetrator people”). I agree with recent calls for Germany to acknowledge responsibility for the Palestinians and actively support the two-state solution from a Palestinian, not just an Israeli point of view. I agree too that the Nakba should have a place in German memory alongside the Holocaust. A greater openness to sensitive contemporary political and historical issues is needed. But at the same time, the critics of Israel's history and politics need a similar openness. How many remember the migration of some 850,000 Jews from Arab lands since 1945? True, reasons for this migration were many, but there can be no denying a significant role was played by pogroms, antisemitism and expulsion. When we condemn, as we should, Israel's erasure of Palestinian villages and cultural sites, we might at least spare a thought for the erasure of Jewish heritage in Arab lands. I agree totally with Moses that the Israeli government's politics of settlement and annexation is more than seriously undermining prospects of the two-state solution, but there are certainly those who would argue that Hamas is not exactly supporting these prospects either. Opposition to the very existence of Israel is not uncommon among Palestinian politicians or Arab politicians more generally. Should we not at least mention this? I am formulating this very carefully. It could be formulated more robustly.

I don't really want to get into the debate around the BDS, but again, I think it would be helpful if the "warring parties" tried to see things from each other's perspectives. The German parliament passed a resolution against the BDS in 2019 (the AfD actually abstained during the vote, contrary to what Moses implies, though of course their reasons for abstention were that the resolution did not go far enough). Some regional parliaments have done the same. That not providing a platform through public funding for anyone who has supported the BDS, or might have done, is tantamount to censorship, is true. It severely inhibits criticism of Israel, as lots of people critical of Israel's politics support the BDS or have sympathised with their measures, however they might feel about the BDS itself. Roundly dismissing the BDS as antisemitic, as German parliament did, simply overlooks the wide variety of motives for the support it enjoys. Yet can one not at least have some understanding for Germany's concerns? The three main demands of the BDS are: end the occupation and colonisation of all Arab lands; create true equality for Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel; and recognise the right of return of Palestinian refugees. These all sound absolutely reasonable, until you start to ask what the BDS means by "all Arab lands", and reflect on the demographic consequences of the return of the Palestinian refugees and their families to Israel (and this is what Palestinian negotiators have wanted for years—i.e. the refugees should not simply be resettled in any future Palestinian state). I do find it slightly ironic that many on the left in Germany are so sympathetic to the idea of Palestinian return, when not long ago they would have roundly dismissed any such right of return in the case of Germans wanting to return to former German lands in central-eastern Europe. The historical contexts are very different, of course, but still...

Incidentally—in projecting the image I just have of a German government reluctant to criticise Israel or even allow criticism of Israel, I may be allowing myself to be influenced a little too much by those who keep complaining this is the case. Unquestionably, defending Israel is part of German "Staatsräson"—the BDS resolution of May 2019 states this in all clarity. That this leads to alarming one-sidedness is true. In an interview of late May 2021, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas lamented the effect of Hamas rockets on Israel, but had nothing to say about the effect of Israel's pummeling of Gaza. But it is also true that Germany has generally supported the UN resolutions criticising Israel—of which there were 17 in 2020. By contrast, only six were passed against other countries. In March 2021, Germany supported a resolution in the UN Human Rights Council which described Israel as an occupying power and made it responsible for the critical situation in the West Bank and Gaza. It also called for an end to discrimination against Palestinians. I am also not sure this image of the German press as uncritically supportive of Israel is true either. For sure, it would be true of the *BILD-Zeitung* and *Die Welt*. But it is worth noting that ARD and ZDF have been the subject of complaints that their reports on the current crisis in the Middle East and on pro-Palestinian protests in Germany carried an anti-Israeli bias. Often German newspapers seek to remain neutral. Many reports I have read do that. One might argue this is what newspapers are supposed to do.

Overall, I do not feel that Holocaust memory is "blocking" memory of other pasts. In the case of the Herero and Nama, it certainly seemed like that when Ruprecht Polenz, the German government's representative in the negotiations towards the conciliation agreement, flatly dismissed comparisons between the Herero and Nama genocide and the Holocaust. There was a disturbing arrogance about that dismissal, though of course it was pragmatic: paying reparations on account of the Holocaust has created a precedent, which you can only try to circumnavigate by denying it was a precedent. Yet over and again the Holocaust, and German reparations agreements, have been a reference point for Herero and Nama groups. In other words, the fact that Germany has acknowledged its responsibility towards Jewish victims creates an expectation. It is not one Germany will be able to evade, in the end. In addition to

berating Germany for not following up on this precedent, we would do well to berate Britain, for instance, for not creating any kind of precedent whatsoever.

Other atrocities are not forgotten in Germany. Even a cursory glance at memorialisation in the last twenty years shows a commitment to remembering the Nazi genocide against the Sinti and Roma, as well as the victims of the euthanasia program and the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. In October 2020, the Federal Government agreed on the construction of a memorial to Polish victims of Nazism, as well as a documentation centre to the victims of the German war of annihilation and Nazi occupation. Soviet victims remain a blind spot, though it was suggested that Polish and Soviet victims be jointly commemorated—a suggestion that would not have gone down well in Warsaw or Moscow, given the current history wars between Russia and Poland. This wider contextualisation of the Holocaust within Nazi criminality as whole is complemented by memorialisation of the criminal history of the GDR border regime and its repressive politics more generally. I pointed to the fact that the flight and expulsion of Germans will soon be centrally remembered in Berlin – in a broader European and transnational historical context, and also in relation to Germany’s population politics during World War Two. The recent debates around the question of guilt for World War One which raged in 2014 and 2018, while certainly prompting some euphoria on the part of those who finally saw Germany being let off the hook, led to wide reflection in the media on the relationship between Nazism, the First World War and post-World War One Germany. I don’t see Holocaust memory closing discussion down for fear of admitting points of comparison or historical context.

If colonialism has taken so long to establish itself in German memory, then not because of Holocaust memory, but because Europe generally has taken so long to face its white-supremacist racist past and present. There have been grassroots endeavours in Germany to change colonialist street names for some time, sometimes with success—consciousness has been developing. The current upsurge of interest in colonialist crime, however, can be put down firstly to the Mbembe debate, and secondly, ironically, to Germany’s recent attempts to resuscitate memory of Prussian heritage, which, rather than helping to engender some pride in pre-Nazi German history, backfired when the degree to which that heritage was steeped in colonial exploitation became public knowledge. Just as significant as a causal factor is the broad transnational sweep of anger at racism and its historical traces which has engulfed the USA, Britain and other. It is to be hoped this interest will intensify, and that Berlin will see a major documentation centre and memorial to German colonial crimes. The EU must take steps to ensure the memorialisation of slavery and colonialism is Europe-wide.

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