

“*Sieferle von links*”: A Fair Criticism?

Helmut Walser Smith

Vanderbilt University

Unfortunately, in one crucial aspect, yes.

The problem lies in the reified religious language of Dirk Moses’s polemic, concentrated in his evocation of Heinrich von Kleist’s ultra-nationalist “Catechism of the Germans” of 1809.

According to Moses’ updated version, published May 23rd in the online journal *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, it is an article of faith in the Federal Republic that the (1) the Holocaust is unique, (2) constituted a civilizational rupture, and (3) implies “a special responsibility to Jews in Germany, and a special loyalty to Israel.” Moreover, (4) “antisemitism is a distinct prejudice—and was a distinctly German one” that “should not be confused with racism.” And finally (5), anti-Zionism is antisemitism.

As Patrick Bahners, the sharp-minded *FAZ Feuilleton* editor who levelled the “*Sieferle von links*” charge no doubt knew, Rolf Peter Sieferle, once a talented, wide-ranging, iconoclastic historian, had made similarly religiously-inflected arguments in his *Finis Germania* (2017), published posthumously after his suicide in 2016. Hitherto the declension narratives of the new nationalism had focused on ethno-demography, as was the case with Robert Hepp: *Die Endlösung der Deutschen Frage (The Final Solution of the German Question)*, 1988) and Thilo Sarrazin: *Deutschland schafft sich ab (Germany Abolishes Itself)*, 2010). But Sieferle’s short book was different. *Finis Germania* proffered a bleak vision of decline centered on how Germany had faced its past, describing the Federal Republic’s memory work in terms of religious eschatology, the theology of last things.

Auschwitz (which he famously put in quotation marks) had become “the last myth of a thoroughly rationalized word,” Sieferle declared. He defined myth as a truth beyond discussion. And like Moses, Sieferle began with the supposed ontological singularity, the alleged public-sphere commandment number one of Auschwitz, namely: You may not compare your atrocity with other atrocities. Like Moses, Sieferle did not stop there. Pushing his religiously-inflected analysis of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* further, he argued that as the Jews are the “chosen people,” the singularity of Auschwitz brings with it a concomitant singularity in guilt. Like the mark of Cain, this singularity will stay with the German people forever. The Jews as elect, the Germans as damned. According to Sieferle, this was the most compelling myth of our times. It condemned the Germans to perpetual penance, and it meant that other histories, other discussions, other possibilities, were forever shut down.

Some parts of Dirk Moses’s analysis seem drawn directly from Sieferle. The catechism, Moses tells us, lays out articles of faith “on a path to national redemption” via a “redemptive story in which the sacrifice of Jews in the Holocaust by Nazis is the premise for the Federal Republic’s legitimacy.” The Holocaust, he underscores, is “a sacred trauma that cannot be contaminated by profane ones,” and counts non-Jewish victims and other genocides as belonging to the impure that would “vitiolate its sacrificial function.” Other parts seem drawn from religious sociology, as when Moses writes of priestly censors, priests conducting inquisitions, and priests forever on the lookout for anti-Semitism.

So, what is the problem? It is not, for me, that *les extrêmes se touchent*, if indeed they do. It is not that I



cannot recognize the truth of some of the so-called articles of faith of the catechism with respect to my own German experience over the years (as is the case with article four, antisemitism as a distinctly German prejudice, not to be confused with racism). And it is not even that some of those articles are too much in the realm of pure politics for me to want to mix them up with honest attempts at historical memory (as is the case with article 5, anti-Zionism is anti-Semitism). Rather, for me, the central problem is the mystification that the religious analogy brings to the understanding of how Germany faced its past.

To narrate Germany's turn to its past as an expectation of national salvation, as did both Sieferle and Moses, dramatically foreshortens two aspects of that turn: how it happened on the ground, and the complexity of the historical landscape. It also makes national memory into a

kind of religious war, which it is not.

When we turn to how *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) actually happened, and widen our analytical aperture, we see that this was not a movement of high-minded clerics but a social movement that encompassed a great many ordinary people and unsung heroes. Already in the 1980s, certainly in the 1990s, the effort to face the past honestly had become an immensely popular, widespread, sociologically deep, politically eclectic movement. Not secular priests but local archivists, school teachers, retired people, young people, on the left and on the right, were its *Macher* (makers) So too were Jews. Often in cooperation with non-Jewish Germans, often from outside of Germany, Jews participated in this project more than many people realize. Moreover, this movement was both transnational and local. It was transnational because of the many actors, from the U.S. Great Britain, France, Israel, Canada, and elsewhere, who were involved (indeed this forum is a testament to that ongoing involvement). And it was local because of the seemingly immense amount of commemorative work that went into it.

Consider only one dimension of this localness. More than 1300 synagogues were desecrated or destroyed during the November Pogrom. Close to a thousand now have commemorative plaques. This involved hundreds of local conflicts, city and town-council discussions, restoration club meetings, letters to survivors (many cities and towns organized *Besucherwochen*), and yes, a lot of people reading and indeed writing history. Tens if not hundreds of thousands of people, from all walks of life, participated in this movement. Dirk Moses's late dating—by the way—begins with the movement's success and misses the years, sometimes even decades, of preparatory work that went into achieving limited victories, as thousands and thousands of people, in one town after the next, fought for a more honest historical understanding of what happened in their own home town.

The emphasis on the expectation of national salvation also flattens the historical field. For at least three decades, it has been the case that historians do, actually, compare dictatorships and genocides, and Dirk Moses has been an important part of this story. There are even journals, like *The Journal of Genocide Research*, devoted to the comparison, and handbooks, one edited by Moses himself, that demonstrate the great differentiations and increasing sophistication of the field. Moreover, for at least three decades, there has been a discussion about the relation of genocide of the Nama and Herrero with the Holocaust, though its outcome is not as much a matter of consensus as Dirk Moses implies (especially in the German translation). On the contrary. Two of the most trenchant recent interpretations, Peter Hayes' *Why: Explaining the Holocaust*, and Christian Gerlach's *The Extermination of the European Jews*, do not even mention the direct link. And it is, indeed, the direct link that is in question: not whether racism and colonial violence belongs to the background factors of the Holocaust.

Likewise, major advances in the study of the Holocaust in the last two decades no longer admit of a kind of national salvation argument. Historians no longer see the perpetrators as just German. Even as the orders came from the Nazi SS, the killers also comprised Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians, and others. Often, they were local fascists. In almost all cases, they did not kill because they were forced to, but rather out of hatred and avarice. The same holds true for the people who occupied the houses of Jews and without remorse stole the belongings of their neighbors. Throughout Europe, the Nazis plundered most of what the Jews possessed, but others took the rest. Seeing genocide at this level of micro detail, town by town throughout Europe, and especially in Eastern Europe, means re-envisioning the genocide as it actually happened—*wie es eigentlich gewesen*, to cite Leopold von Ranke, insofar as that is humanly possible. All of this makes the study of the Holocaust hardly a German-centered undertaking anymore. One need only think of major pathbreaking works of recent years—from Jan Gross's *Neighbours* (2002), to Omar Bartov's *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (2018), or Wendy Lower's recent *The Ravine* (2021), to realize that many of the most important works no longer centre on German actors alone.

Two decades ago, the works of the late German-English author and critic W.G. Sebald spurred a discussion of how see historical tragedy more precisely. In a series of lectures on aerial bombing and literature, he argued something had kept German authors from treating the devastation of German cities with an acute eye for the ruin it wrought. If scholars have since shown that Sebald exaggerated his case, it nevertheless remains that he pointed to a general tendency to avert one's eyes to the complexities, beyond sin and redemption, of wartime destruction. That looking "has something to do with truth," as Sebald said in one of his poems. And that experience of truth, in post-Holocaust Germany, has something to do with the openness of the German public sphere. National memory is not a zero-sum game. As I write these lines, *Al Jazeera* reports that the Federal Republic will recognize the the genocide against the Herero and Nama as a genocide (*Völkermord*), and fund 1.3 billion in infrastructure, healthcare and training projects in Namibia over the next 30 years. People who worked for Germany's turn to its past, centered, as that turn was, on the Holocaust, are, nearly to a person, applauding.

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