

Antisemitism: Before and After October 7

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Turning Memory of the Holocaust against Jews

A Debate in Germany and Far Beyond

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“The virtuous antisemite has an enviably clear conscience and a perfectly calm disposition. His peace of mind is enhanced further by the fact that he knows he is in step with the historical development.”¹

IN RECENT YEARS, MORE AND MORE ATTEMPTS HAVE BEEN made to disconnect the Holocaust from antisemitism and downplay antisemitism in general. These moves have been made not chiefly by the political right, as one might assume, but far more so by the mainstream and the left. And not by people driven by malicious intent, but often by those meaning to do good. In the German-speaking public debate, an

1. Jean Améry, “Virtuous Antisemitism. Address on the Occasion of Jewish-Christian Brotherhood Week,” in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 66.

aim frequently put forward today is to develop an “inclusive memory culture.” Much has already been written about the reduction of the extermination of European Jewry to “man’s inhumanity to man.”² It is a well-intended slogan that serves to comprehend—nothing. Such empty phrases obscure the conditions of how the Holocaust was possible and ignore the specifics that distinguish it to this day from other forms of mass violence. Instead, memory of the Holocaust is now turned against Jews, who are imagined to stand in the way of an inclusive future for a universal mankind. Once again, Jews are accused of disrupting social harmony.³

WHAT MEMORY IS OBLIVIOUS TO

In 2021, a new Holocaust memorial was established in Vienna. Several Austrian historians issued a public statement in which they argued that a monument that “only commemorates those who were persecuted under the Nuremberg Laws” was “no longer a timely approach.”⁴ A stone slab was erected at the entrance to the memorial commemorating other, non-Jewish victims of the Nazis. Such an approach does not exist for any other group of victims. It seems as if the Holocaust is to be subsumed under a general history of violence, which ultimately includes everything and anything, from the persecution of political opponents, to colonial exploitation and slavery, to general victims of war.

When Hannah Arendt called the Holocaust “absolute senselessness,”⁵ she was not using a figure of speech for a lack of better words. The Nazi

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2. See for instance Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 11.
 3. While the deed that tore apart the human bond is incorporated into that “harmony.”
 4. Christina Vogler, “Ein Stein des Anstoßes,” in *ORF.news* (July 4, 2021), www.orf.at/stories/3209185/. Translation Marlene Gallner.
 5. Hannah Arendt, “Die vollendete Sinnlosigkeit,” in *Nach Auschwitz. Essays & Kommentare*, ed. Eike Geisel/Klaus Bittermann (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 2014), 7. Translation Marlene Gallner.

extermination of European Jewry defied the rationality of means and ends, including the basic self-preservation of the perpetrators. Antisemitism became an end in itself, proven by “[. . .] the fact that not even the most urgent military requirements were allowed to interfere with this ‘demographic policy.’ The Nazis seemed convinced that it was more important to keep the extermination factories in operation than to win the war.”⁶ The Holocaust does not stand out primarily in terms of quantity but because of its quality and the intention of the perpetrators. “The extermination of the Jews was not a means to another end,” writes Moishe Postone. “They were not exterminated for military reasons, or in order to violently acquire land (as was the case with the American Indians and the Tasmanians), or in order to wipe out those segments of the population around whom resistance could most easily crystallize so that the rest could be exploited as helots (as was Nazis policy towards the Poles and Russians), or for any other ‘extrinsic’ goal. *The extermination of the Jews not only was to have been total, but was its own goal—extermination in order to exterminate—a goal which acquired absolute priority.*”⁷ With the Holocaust, what held civilization together, self-preservation and, derived from it, reason, were abandoned. Both turned into collective mania. Extermination became the highest purpose, carried out—not coincidentally—upon the Jews.

This is why Dan Diner coined the concept of *Zivilisationsbruch* (Rupture of Civilization).⁸ He is both right and wrong. Right for the aforementioned reasons: The Holocaust shattered everything that had held humanity together until then. It also shattered the philosophical conviction of progress in human history, held firmly by liberals and leftists alike. He is wrong because the Holocaust was not merely the breach of modernity. The civilization that had existed before already carried within itself

6. Ibid., 9.

7. Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: notes on the German reaction to ‘Holocaust,’” in *New German Critique* 19 (1980), 105.

8. See Dan Diner, “Vorwort des Herausgebers,” in *Zivilisationsbruch. Denken nach Auschwitz*, ed. Dan Diner (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1988), 9.

the possibility of Auschwitz. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer for this reason write about the “dialectic of enlightenment.”⁹ National Socialism, with antisemitism as its core that tied all facets of the Nazi state together, was at the same time something fundamentally different from modern civilization *and* rooted in a discomfort brought about by this very civilization. The answer to the cold, abstract modernity was the warm, “authentic” blood and soil *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community). In an attempt to get rid of all social contradictions by annihilating those who embody them, the Holocaust demonstrated the turn from the logic of utilization to the logic of extermination.

Primo Levi’s conviction that “It happened, therefore it can happen again,” holds true because the ground from which the masses embracing antisemitic policies cropped up is still fertile. We are seeing it again today, when the response to an antisemitic massacre that was broadcast the world over is rationalized as “resistance.” Such distorted thinking leads to even more antisemitism and persecution of Jews elsewhere—as if those who call for a global Intifada today want to take part in what they saw on October 7, 2023, in the kibbutzim and towns near the Gaza border. They feel oppressed by what they imagine Israelis to be, the ultimate oppressor, just as the Nazis imagined themselves oppressed by the Jews. The solution they believe they have found for their “liberation” is the same in both cases.

In contrast to other forms of discrimination, the Jew in the antisemitic imagination embodies not someone inferior but superior, and hence is seen as all the more dangerous. “Particular aspects of the extermination of European Jewry by the Nazis remain inexplicable so long as anti-Semitism is treated as a specific example of prejudice, xenophobia, and racism in general, as an example of a scapegoat strategy whose victims could very well have been members of any other group,”¹⁰ writes

9. Theodor W. Adorno/Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 2012), 50. Translation Marlene Gallner.

10. Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: notes on the German reaction to ‘Holocaust,’” in *New German Critique* 19 (1980), 105.

Postone. Modern antisemitism builds upon a long tradition of Jew hatred that has always evolved according to the societal circumstances and has met the socially accepted norms, while older forms continued to exist.¹¹ In the European Middle Ages, when Christianity constituted the dominant mode of thinking to explain the world, the Jew was seen as the Anti-Christ. When feudalism was replaced by more abstract forms of domination, Jews were identified with exactly the side of domination that is elusive and impalpable. They were simultaneously regarded as rapacious capitalists as well as corrosive communists.

While all forms of discrimination attribute potential power to the object of resentment, this power usually is concrete: material or sexual. The power attributed to the Jews, however, “is not only much greater and ‘real,’ as opposed to potential, it is different. In modern anti-Semitism it is mysteriously intangible, abstract and universal. [. . .] It stands behind phenomena, but is not identical with them. Its source is therefore hidden—conspiratorial. The Jews represent an immensely powerful, intangible, international conspiracy.”¹² While in the mindset of the racist or the misogynist, the objects of hate still have an assigned place in the world, which must not be abandoned, for the antisemite Jews have no such place at all. They are imagined as a superior power, as the ultimate evil that ought to be eradicated. Modern antisemitism constitutes an entire world view and a false rebellion against what ails the world at large. What makes antisemitism unique is that its supposedly redemptive dimension inherently aims at extermination. As Jean-Paul Sartre

11. See Thorsten Fuchshuber, “From Wilhelm Marr to Mavi Mamara: Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism as Forms of Anti-Jewish Action,” in *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism. The Dynamics of Delegitimization*, ed. Alvin H. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 30–52.

12. Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: notes on the German reaction to ‘Holocaust,’” in *New German Critique* 19 (1980), 106. However, to Postone’s observations it must be added that concrete elements invariably play a decisive role too—as can be seen in the hatred of the very concrete Jewish state, which is considered the “source” that is no longer hidden.

put it: “What the anti-Semite wishes, what he prepares, is the death of the Jew.”¹³

Antisemitism is not a pathology, as the one who carries the “illness” of antisemitism does not suffer from it. In that sense, he acts in line with reality. Adorno and Horkheimer, therefore, describe antisemitism as “pathic projection,”¹⁴ a neologism to express a contrast to the pathological projection of the conventional paranoid who is cut off from reality and unable to function in a social setting. The opposite is the case for the antisemite. His world view gives him relief from social contradictions that are in fact illogical. Enlightenment, according to Adorno and Horkheimer, had not brought about “the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority,”¹⁵ but rather was accompanied by new forms of domination that go unrecognized. As long as they remain unconscious and unchanged, antisemitism will continue to provide an attractive false solution to human suffering.

With the military defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 came the marginalization of traditional, outspoken hatred of Jews. However, such hatred has merely mutated to new socially acceptable forms. In his 1966 essay “Education after Auschwitz,” Adorno observes that “the fundamental conditions that favored that relapse [into barbarism] continue largely unchanged,” and he concludes: “That is the whole horror.”¹⁶

GERMAN MEMORY CULTURE

German memory culture often is believed to be a success story. Today, the Holocaust is addressed in political speeches, in TV programs, and

13. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 35.

14. Theodor W. Adorno/Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2012), 201. Translation Marlene Gallner.

15. Immanuel Kant, “An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?” in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 17.

16. Theodor W. Adorno, “Erziehung nach Auschwitz,” in *Gesammelte Schriften Band 10.2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2003), 674. Translation Marlene Gallner.

at memorials.¹⁷ Jean Améry, who survived Auschwitz and other concentration camps, agonized over the fact that he was harboring resentments against the Germans even as a new generation was growing up. He called for the young Germans to “break with your father.”¹⁸ But this is not at all what has happened since he wrote these words in the 1960s. The generation of ’68 claimed to have broken with their parents. But what they did ideologically, and too many times also violently, was to put on new clothing and follow in their parents’ footsteps. Not as dreadful antisemites—for Hitler had given antisemitism a bad name—but as virtuous anti-Zionists they now supported the case against Jewish national self-determination. Members of the leftist group *Tupamaros West-Berlin* were trained by the *Palestinian National Liberation Movement* (Fatah) in Jordan. On November 9, 1969, the 31st anniversary of the November pogroms, they commemorated the date by depositing a firebomb in West Berlin’s Jewish Community Center. They justified their actions by claiming Zionists were the new fascists and that real anti-fascism called for solidarity with the Fedayeen.¹⁹ This type of open Holocaust inversion is taken up again below. However, another way of turning memory of the Holocaust against Jews became predominant in West Germany in the following decades.

The Nazi inheritance was not renounced, neither regarding the economy—in the sense that without the war, the immense economic growth and prosperity would not have been possible—nor regarding a political gain that was to be extracted from the history of Nazism. For this reason Gerhard Scheit writes about the connection between destruction and national prosperity in his 2001 book *Die Meister der Krise* (The Masters

17. This should not detract from the fact that it is perfectly possible to grow up and live in Germany without ever having to concern oneself with the Holocaust or the Third Reich.

18. Jean Améry, “On the Impossible Obligation to Be a Jew,” in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 21.

19. See Bommi Baumann, *Wie alles anfing* (Frankfurt am Main: Rotbuch, 1975), 67.

of Crisis) and describes the successor states to the German Reich as “losers of war and winners of annihilation.”²⁰ If Auschwitz has shown one thing that resonates with present-day admirers of the German crisis solution—in the Middle East, in Iran, or wherever they are—it is the possibility to dispose of the Jews with impunity.²¹ But breaking with the fathers, according to Améry, would mean to be irreconcilable with the past. He appealed to the descendants of the perpetrators, and basically to everyone in general, to resist a utilization of the Holocaust, a *positive incorporation*, which then reconciles with the past after all. During the immediate postwar years, the Nazi past in Germany was largely dealt with through silence. Only when the persons concerned, the perpetrators who could grow old in honor, had already passed away and no one could be unpleasantly affected and no backlash was to be feared, the now numerous memorials were built and political speeches given. The questions are, why were they built and what psychological and political needs do they fulfill?

It seems as if left-liberal Germans have wanted to reap some of the benefits that the Holocaust happened. They do not say the Holocaust was right—that is a matter of a few diehard neo-Nazis who by no means constitute the majority—but they do seek to incorporate the Holocaust into a renewed and better Germany. The first so-called *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute or historians’ debate) about the “singularity”²² of the

20. Gerhard Scheit, *Die Meister der Krise. Über den Zusammenhang von Vernichtung und Volkswohlstand* (Freiburg: Ça ira Verlag, 2001), 84. Translation Marlene Gallner.

21. According to the British historian Mary Fulbrook, all trials in the Federal Republic between 1945 and 2005 taken together, only 6,656 defendants were ever sentenced—of these, only a fraction was imprisoned for more than two years. See Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings. Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 356.

22. The term “singularity” can be misleading as it suggests the Holocaust is by nature a one time occurrence. However, something similar can happen again as long as the conditions that lead to it continue to exist. Therefore, the term “unprecedented” is more fitting. However, because the expressions “singularity” or “uniqueness” are used in the debates that are discussed in this essay, the term is also referenced here.

National Socialist extermination of the Jews was conducted in the West German feuilleton in 1986 and 1987. Representatives of the national-conservative position, including Ernst Nolte, Joachim Fest, and Andreas Hillgruber, and of the left-liberal position, Jürgen Habermas, Rudolf Augstein, Eberhard Jäckel, et al., were pitted against each other. Characteristic of the former is Nolte's assertion that the Holocaust should be classified as an "Asian deed"²³ and that the Soviet labor camps were the archetype of the German concentration and extermination camps. The Holocaust, therefore, is neither unprecedented nor unique—all mass murders are more or less unique in their own way—but just one part of a series of historical crimes. In short: in killing the Jews the Germans did nothing special. Habermas, a leading protagonist of the left-liberal side, contested this view as trivialization.²⁴ He advocated that Germans should draw national self-confidence from their "critically appropriated history"²⁵ and wrote explicitly about the necessary "use of the past."²⁶ It was this position that gained acceptance in official Germany. Large parts of the German public came to adopt Habermas's position, although most did not show much interest in the question of how the Holocaust is distinguished from other mass crimes. What was really at stake in the first *Historikerstreit* were societal needs of the day that the national-conservative point of view, with its implied rejection that there was anything special about German history, could not fulfill.

23. Ernst Nolte, "Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will," in *Historikerstreit. Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (München: Piper, 1987), 45. Translation Marlene Gallner.

24. See Jürgen Habermas, "Anmerkung, 23. Februar 1987," in: *Historikerstreit. Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (München: Piper, 1987), 383. Translation Marlene Gallner.

25. Jürgen Habermas, "Vom öffentlichen Gebrauch der Historie," in *Die Zeit* (November 7, 1986), <https://www.zeit.de/1986/46/vom-oeffentlichen-gebrauch-der-historie>. Translation Marlene Gallner.

26. *Ibid.* Habermas' "use of the past" stands opposite to the "desire that time be turned back," that Améry had called for. Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits. Contemplation by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 78.

According to the sociologist and essayist Wolfgang Pohrt, the success of Habermas and others in the first historians' dispute can be attributed to a "need for national distinction"²⁷ among Germans. Pohrt recognized that both sides of the historians' dispute were in fact two sides of the same coin. Both tried in their own way to exculpate a post-Holocaust German national identity. The national-conservative position, which understood the Nazi crimes as an "Asian deed" and not as something specifically German, could not have met with broad acceptance among the German public. Such an assumption was useless for creating a genuinely German identity. "Even worse than the certainty of having murdered six million people is the certainty of having committed this crime as a mere imitator,"²⁸ Pohrt writes.

The left-wing position, on the other hand, was able to *positively incorporate* the extermination for the sake of extermination, to speak proudly of "us Germans" not despite but because of the Holocaust. It is, therefore, not surprising that Eberhard Jäckel, who was involved on the side that emphasized the singularity of the mass murder of the Jews during the first historians' dispute, soon took the initiative for a central German Holocaust memorial. In 1994, a competition for the memorial's design was announced. Symbolically, it was to be built on a piece of land where the Berlin Wall had previously separated East and West Berlin and which had become accessible following the unification of the German Democratic Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany four years prior. The monument was finally opened in 2005. Then chancellor Gerhard Schröder of the Social Democratic Party SPD, who kept a picture of his father in Wehrmacht-uniform on his desk in the chancellery,²⁹ publicly

27. Wolfgang Pohrt, "Nationalismus am Ende. Über Habermas, Hillgruber u. a.," in *Werke Band 5.2.*, ed. Klaus Bittermann (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 2018), 30. Translation Marlene Gallner.

28. *Ibid.*, 36.

29. See Götz Aly, "Ehre für Fritz Schröder," in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (May 17, 2010), <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/der-kanzler-am-grab-seines-vaters-ehre-fuer-fritz-schroeder-1.417128>.



The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, *credit: Wikimedia Commons*

stated it was a memorial “that is a pleasure to visit.”³⁰ At the *Bürgerfest*—literally: citizens-celebration—on the fifth anniversary of the monument’s inauguration, Jäckel gave a speech in which he emphasized its role: “In other countries, people envy the Germans for this memorial. We can walk upright again because we have been upright. That is the purpose of the monument, and that is what we celebrate.”³¹ The fact that others did not commit a Holocaust is treated almost as a disadvantage. In the virtual competition between nations, it is finally possible to take first place again. And the murdered Jews are, as Eike Geisel wrote,

30. Thomas Eppinger, “Die immerwährende Verantwortung Deutschlands,” in *Jüdisches Medienforum* (October 20, 2018), <https://www.ikg-wien.at/nachrichten/jmf-mena-die-immerwaehrende-verantwortung-deutschlands>. Translation Marlene Gallner.

31. *Ibid.*

“excellently suited as a binding agent for the national collective.”³² This would not have been possible with the national-conservative rhetoric of Nolte.

According to this way of dealing with the past it is not necessary to have had Nazi parents or grandparents to participate in an ideology of a renewed Germany that can lecture others—especially Israel³³—about peace and human rights. In an obscenely twisted religious sense, the murdered Jews turned out to be not only the immediate victims but also the posthumous sacrifices for “proper national self-confidence,”³⁴ as Susan Neiman affirmatively put it in her book *Learning from the Germans*. That it was never really about the question of what makes the Holocaust unprecedented, never about the conditions that enabled it, is also shown by the fact that some of the heirs of Habermas’ position, like Neiman, are today on the side of Holocaust relativizers.

Over the past decades, the horrible fate of the Nazi victims has been constantly emphasized. Dead Jews are mourned in political speeches and ceremonies. But they are treasured only as long as they can serve a purpose. Antisemitism is either not addressed at all or reduced to one

32. Eike Geisel, “Opfersehnsucht und Judenleid. Ein Kommentar zur Nationalisierung der Erinnerung,” in *Die Wiedergutwerdung der Deutschen*, ed. Klaus Bittermann (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 2015), 139. Translation Marlene Gallner.

33. In the summer of 2024, German chancellor Olaf Scholz demanded Israel to stop fighting Hamas in the Gaza strip. Otherwise, Israel would fuel violence in the region. See “Scholz fordert von Netanjahu Waffenstillstand—Hinweise auf iranischen Angriff in nächsten Tagen,” in *Die Welt* (August 11, 2024), <https://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article252948282/Krieg-in-Nahost-Im-Telefonat-mit-Netanjahu-fordert-Scholz-einen-Waffenstillstand-und-warnt-vor-Eskalation.html>. The German Foreign Office is spreading false information that Israel is deliberately targeting civilians and, like the chancellor, demanded an immediate cease fire. Such public pressure, however, makes it much less likely that Hamas will agree to a deal to release the Israeli hostages because it would get what it wants without having to compromise. See <https://x.com/AuswaertigesAmt/status/1822605867612565785>.

34. Susan Neiman, *Von den Deutschen lernen. Wie Gesellschaften mit dem Bösen in ihrer Geschichte umgehen können* (München: Hanser, 2020), 34. Translation Marlene Gallner.



Then German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (left) with Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif in Tehran in 2019, credit: picture alliance/dpa/M. Fischer

discrimination among many. Jews who are alive today and are being targeted by renewed hatreds receive support only when it serves Germany's own reputation. In the case of Israel—the state that is a refuge to Jews all over the world—German politicians claim that Israel's existence was their *raison d'état*. And yet, Germany is the European Union's largest trading partner with the Islamic Republic of Iran, the very country that is expanding its nuclear program and destabilizing the region by building a “ring of fire”³⁵ with proxies surrounding Israel. They are provided arms, training, and financial resources for one sole purpose—to eliminate the Jewish state. Similar to the delusion of the Nazis who claimed that the eradication of Jews would bring about the eschatological liberation of the world from evil, the Islamic regime is convinced—and this lies at the core of its politics—that Israel must be destroyed against all

35. Jason M. Brodsky/Yossi Mansharof, “Soleimani birthed Iran's Axis of Resistance, Ghaani coordinated it,” in *Middle East Institute* (December 15, 2023), <https://www.mei.edu/publications/soleimani-birthed-irans-axis-resistance-ghaani-coordinated-it>. At the time of submitting this article, this ring of fire is beginning to loosen due to the military losses of Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the successful ousting of the pro-Iranian dictator Assad in Syria.

rational arguments. However, this does not deter German politicians and entrepreneurs from knitting close ties with the regime in Tehran.³⁶

At the United Nations, Germany regularly abstains or votes against Israel. Even after October 7, Germany has been the second largest government donor to UNRWA, the *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees*, which is perpetuating the Palestinian refugee status, running schools that propagate hatred against Jews, and lend the physical infrastructure for terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians.³⁷ It has been confirmed that immediate UNRWA employees participated in the massacre and facilitated the taking of hostages on October 7.³⁸ But German payments have only been frozen temporarily.³⁹

German public broadcasters and news programs are well-known for portraying Israel unfavorably.⁴⁰ And the claim often repeated these days that pro-Palestinian voices are being silenced is proven false not only by their invitations to German talk shows and publications in prestigious newspapers, but also by the frequent public demonstrations against the “child murderer Israel,” drawing thousands of participants and very little counterprotest. It is in the nature of things that a *raison d'état* always has

36. See <https://iran.ahk.de/en/media/news/germany-irans-most-important-trading-partner>.

37. “UNRWA Announces Investigation Into 10 Teachers & Staffers For Anti-Jewish Hate, Supporting Terror,” in *UN Watch* (August 6, 2021), <https://unwatch.org/unrwa-announces-investigation-into-10-teachers-staffers-for-anti-jewish-hate-supporting-terror/>.

38. Emanuel Fabian, “Israel reveals 12 UNRWA staffers it says took part in Oct. 7, says 30 more assisted,” in *Times of Israel* (February 16, 2024), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-reveals-12-unrwa-staffers-it-says-took-part-in-oct-7-says-30-more-assisted/>.

39. See Tagesschau, “Deutschland nimmt UNRWA-Unterstützung wieder auf,” (April 24, 2024), <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/deutschland-unrwa-100.html>.

40. To uncover this ongoing bias in the German-speaking media, the *Medienbeobachtungsstelle Naher Osten* [Middle East Media Monitoring] was founded on a private initiative in 2011. It has since become the think tank *Mena-Watch* that publishes interviews, analyses and commentary on the Middle East. See <https://www.mena-watch.com/ueber-uns/>.

to do first and foremost with the preservation of one's own state. Everything else may be well-intentioned but guarantees nothing at all, because it can change again when the wind shifts.⁴¹

"Since Hitler, the Jews [. . .] have been the pawns of power," Geisel remarked. "[T]he state can corrupt or save, destroy or protect them. What in feudalism was still purely the whim of the ruler has been systematically directed by the modern executive. When it protects or sacrifices Jews, unlike at court, it is not concerned with the coffers, but with the spiritual budget of the nation."⁴² Jews are also used as pawns in memory politics. If they are useful and bring an advantage to others, they are gladly invoked, as in the case of the Berlin Holocaust memorial. However, if they are perceived as disturbing, it is claimed that invoking the memory of the extermination of European Jewry as an incommensurable crime is no longer "a timely approach."⁴³ A prominent example is the case of the public statement regarding the new memorial in Vienna in 2021, which was mentioned earlier. Today, it is about *inclusive memory culture*, about contemporary—that is: intersectional—memory politics, which obscure the distinctive role of antisemitism as emphasized by

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41. Annalena Baerbock, the German foreign minister, said about October 7 that it was "the worst day for the Palestinians." A statement that glosses over the intention of the attack and is a prime example of perpetrator-victim reversal. See Henryk M. Broder, "Annalena Baerbock und der 'schlimmste Tag,'" in *Die Welt* (June 5, 2024), <https://www.welt.de/debatte/henryk-m-broder/plus251806106/Gaza-Krieg-7-Oktober-Annalena-Baerbock-und-der-schlimmste-Tag.html>. In the midst of the Israel-Hamas war, Germany has de facto stopped arms deliveries to Israel: "Vice-Chancellor and Economy Minister Robert Habeck [. . .] had refused to give the go-ahead for the delivery of new weapons to Israel demanding that the Israeli government first give a written confirmation that they would 'not be used for genocide.'" Ben Knight, "Germany slows arms exports to Israel—without admitting it," in *DW* (October 14, 2024), <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-slows-arms-exports-to-israel-without-admitting-it/a-70347570>.
42. Eike Geisel, "Die Verstaatlichung der Juden," in *Die Wiedergutwerdung der Deutschen*, ed. Klaus Bittermann (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 2015), 133. Translation Marlene Gallner.
43. Christina Vogler, "Ein Stein des Anstoßes," in *ORF.news* (July 4, 2021), www.orf.at/stories/3209185/. Translation Marlene Gallner.

Postone. “The way remembrance is practiced today,” wrote the Jewish-German journalist and author Henryk M. Broder in 2012, “is an exercise in pretense, mendacity, hypocrisy and opportunism. And it paves the way for future disasters.”⁴⁴

THE SECOND HISTORIKERSTREIT

All the more worrying is a development that ties in with the far leftist formula of the 1960s and 1970s that regards Zionists as the new perpetrators who must be fought against. After Auschwitz, it has become frowned upon to avow oneself an antisemite. There were, and there still are today, some old-fashioned antisemites who explicitly admit to hating Jews, but at least in the West they are a small minority. Antisemitism has largely become an *antisemitism without antisemites*. Améry pointed this out when he wrote in 1976: “The antisemitism we are confronted with *today* does not speak its name. On the contrary: if one tries to hold it to account it disowns itself. It is no easy task to drag it before the court that has long since condemned it but would nevertheless need to be in constant session. How does the new antisemite present himself? His contention is extremely straightforward and [. . .] perfectly plausible: all claims to the contrary notwithstanding, he is no antisemite, he is in fact an *anti-Zionist!*”⁴⁵ Antisemitism and anti-Zionism, however, rely upon the same emotional infrastructure, involve the same belief in Jews possessing a superior conspiratorial power, and carry the same inherent death threat and eschatological dimension. Not least, both target the same victims.⁴⁶

44. Henryk M. Broder, *Vergesst Auschwitz! Der deutsche Erinnerungswahn und die Endlösung der Israel-Frage* (Munich: Albrecht Knaus Verlag, 2012), 12. Translation Marlene Gallner.

45. Jean Améry, “The New Antisemitism,” in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 51.

46. Since October 7, attacks against Jews have increased sharply around the world. See Bianca Zanini, “New survey finds startling increase in rates of antisemitic incidents around the world,” in *i24 news* (May 5, 2024), <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/diaspora-affairs/artc-new-survey-finds-startling-increase-in-rates-of-antisemitic-incidents-around-the-world>.

It fell to the Soviet and Western left to make anti-Zionism popular in an updated manner as “virtuous antisemitism.”⁴⁷ In a world of human rights declarations, Zionists are now regarded as the leading violators of human rights.⁴⁸ In the postcolonial world view, the Jewish state is now accused of the worst conceivable crime: being the ultimate colonial aggressor or new Nazi state. These defamatory accusations not only legitimize violence against those identified as Zionists but *demand* it.⁴⁹ Robert Wistrich called this violent turn against Zionism and Israel “the most potent form of contemporary anti-Semitism.”⁵⁰

The development crystalized in the public debate that came to be known in 2020 as the *Second Historikerstreit*. It got its name because the debate, again, was about the singularity of the Holocaust. Since then, the historical revisionism now coming from progressives, instead of national-conservatives, has demonstrated its potential to find broad popularity. While the second historians’ dispute was conducted in the German-speaking media and later on in books published in German, notable participants this time around were international scholars of

47. Jean Améry, “Virtuous Antisemitism,” in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 34.

48. The numerous condemnations of Israel by the United Nations bear witness to this. Israel is denounced more often than all other states put together. See “2023 UNGA Resolutions on Israel vs. Rest of the World” (December 19, 2023), <https://unwatch.org/2023-unga-resolutions-on-israel-vs-rest-of-the-world/>.

49. Zionism as a political movement emerged in the second half of the 1800s when it became clear that neither the recently established legal rights for Jews nor assimilation could provide the hoped for protection from antisemitism. Not in Europe and Russia, but also not in the Middle East and North Africa, where Jews lived as dhimmis under the Muslim majority population. The first and foremost objective of the state of Israel since its inception has been to offer shelter from antisemitism by not depending on the goodwill of others. The particularism imposed on Israel by antisemitism is now being held against it. The national self-determination of Jews became a thorn in the side of those advocating for universalism—and this fact has turned out to be the determining factor for progressive memory of the Holocaust today.

50. Robert S. Wistrich, “Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism,” in *Jewish Political Studies Review* 16, no. 3–4, 2004, <http://www.jcpa.org/phas/phas-wistrich-fo4.htm>.

Memory, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies—a testament to the global role of memory culture today and to the significance of the debate far beyond contemporary Germany.

One of these scholars was the postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe, professor at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, whose case also sparked the controversy that ensued. In 2020, Mbembe was invited to give the opening speech at the annual *Ruhrtriennale* arts festival in Germany. Already in the previous two years Stephanie Carp, organizer of the festival, had invited artists and speakers who demonized Israel and labeled it a “fascist state.”⁵¹ For the 2020 edition of the festival, her final year overseeing it, she decided to continue this legacy. Mbembe had previously delegitimized Israel and signed several petitions calling for the academic boycott of Israeli institutions and individuals.⁵² When it became known that he was to be the opening speaker, the cultural policy spokesman of the liberal party FDP in the North Rhine-Westphalian state parliament, Lorenz Deutsch, called on Carp to reconsider the invitation. In his public statement, he also drew attention to the fact that Mbembe not only compared Israel’s policies towards the Palestinians to South Africa’s Apartheid regime, which in itself would be a distortion of the historical facts, but presented it as even more extensive and far worse.⁵³ In his request, Deutsch referred to the recently adopted resolu-

51. See Alex Feuerherdt, “Israelhass auf der ‘Ruhrtriennale’: Die unbelehrbare Intendantin,” in *mena-watch. Der unabhängige Nahost-Thinktank* (March 14, 2019), <https://www.mena-watch.com/wieder-israelhass-bei-kulturfestival-ruhrtriennale/>.

52. In 2010, Mbembe had signed a petition calling for the boycott of Ben Gurion University (see www.web.archive.org/web/20100927171559/https://www.ujpetition.com/2010/09/south-african-academics-support-call.html). In 2015, he supported another petition for the academic boycott of Israel and in 2018, he was, with direct reference to the *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions* (BDS) campaign successfully pressuring the South African Stellenbosch University to disinvite the Israeli peace activist Shifra Sagy (see www.wiser.wits.ac.za/content/state-ment-sarah-nuttall-and-achille-mbembe-%E2%80%99Cognition-reparation-reconciliation%E2%80%9D).

53. See www.lorenz-deutsch.de/antisemitismus-keine-buehne-bieten/2234.

tion by the German parliament, according to which events supporting the *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions* (BDS) campaign against Israel would no longer receive government funds—meaning they had to be financed elsewhere.⁵⁴ Soon after Deutsch, the German government’s commissioner for the fight against antisemitism, Felix Klein, and local Jewish groups also voiced their concerns over Mbembe’s role at the festival.⁵⁵

In his preface to the anthology *Apartheid Israel. The Politics of an Analogy* Mbembe stated: “The occupation of Palestine is the biggest moral scandal of our times, one of the most dehumanizing ordeals of the century we have just entered, and the biggest act of cowardice of the last half-century.”⁵⁶ These words, which surfaced early on in the public criticism of Mbembe,⁵⁷ outline only a small part of the much larger problem of his thinking. His overall theoretical approach, which stands for a broader trend in the present-day humanities, is bound to lead to opposition to the Jewish state. His way of thinking not only makes it impossible to recognize the tendency towards a renewed turn from modern civilization into “a new kind of barbarism,”⁵⁸ which Adorno and Horkheimer drew attention to, it also favors it.

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54. In a supposed clarification that he was not a member of BDS—something that is not even possible, as BDS is a loose association of activists—Mbembe later confirmed his stance in the newspaper *Die Zeit*: “For me, refusing to cooperate with people and institutions involved in the colonial occupation of one people by another is part of exercising freedom of conscience.” Achille Mbembe, “Die Welt reparieren” in *Die Zeit* (April, 25, 2020), <https://www.zeit.de/2020/18/antisemitismus-achille-mbembe-vorwuerfe-holocaust-rechtsextremismus-rassismus>. Translation Marlene Gallner.
55. As a result, neither did Carp face any consequences due to her invitation politics nor was Mbembe disinvited. The *Ruhrtriennale 2020* was ultimately canceled because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the restriction of all public events.
56. Achille Mbembe, “On Palestine” in *Apartheid Israel. The Politics of an Analogy*, ed. Jon Soske/Sean Jacobs (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015), viii.
57. See Stefan Laurin, “Mbembe: ‘The time has come for global isolation,’” in *Ruhrbarone* (April 20, 2020), <https://www.ruhrbarone.de/mbembe-the-time-has-come-for-global-isolation/183480>.
58. Theodor W. Adorno/Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2012), 1. Translation Marlene Gallner.

The central concept in Mbembe's political theory is the concept of *necropolitics*. It draws on and expands the concept of *biopolitics* by Michel Foucault. Biopolitics and its racial distinction between excluded and included are, according to Mbembe, the basis of modern statehood. And the Nazi state, he claims, was only its most advanced form until then. Within such an understanding, it is logically inevitable that South Africa's apartheid regime and the extermination of European Jewry fall into the same category as "two emblematic manifestations of the mania for separation."⁵⁹ The Holocaust is subsumed under the history of state sovereignty, under a general history of violence, and thus made to disappear. Due to his theoretical premises, Mbembe can only recognize a quantitative and not a qualitative difference—according to him, there is nothing exceptional about antisemitism. That Jews were not persecuted as an inferior race but as the anti-race is made invisible in this kind of thinking. Nor is the total extermination of the Jews as the highest purpose recognized. Mbembe does not see that the Nazi state epitomized exactly *not* the modern state but something fundamentally different, a state that had given up its own self-preservation for what it regarded to be a higher cause. Instead, the postcolonial theorist refers to Giorgio Agamben, who assumes the (death) camp to be the "paradigm of the occident."⁶⁰ Mbembe correspondingly says in a lecture given in Germany in 2019: "There have never been as many camps in our world as today. We thought this form called 'the camp', we thought we had dealt with it with the Holocaust. That it was over. [. . .] But we have never had as many camps as we have today on the planet. And most of them are in Europe: Encampment, detention, and incarceration."⁶¹ Mbembe sees

59. Achille Mbembe, *Politik der Feindschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), 89. Translation Marlene Gallner.

60. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002), 190. Translation Marlene Gallner.

61. Achille Mbembe, "Is mobility a human right?" Lecture given on May 12, 2019 at Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus. <https://vimeo.com/336565003?signup=true> (Starting at 28:40).

no difference between extermination camps, refugee camps, or prisons—this is the progressive solution to avoid having to deal with anti-semitism. All forms of suffering are identified with one another, which means that important distinctions are being ignored. It is not surprising that Mbembe misinterprets the war on terror as a “war of conquest”⁶² by the West, and ultimately as a “boundless, absolute war of extermination.” The causes for fighting militant expressions of Islamism are being distorted into “endless retaliations.”⁶³ He could have written something similar about the Allied forces in World War II and would have found himself in perfect agreement with those German soldiers who became prisoners of war in American, British, or Soviet hands and complained about their internment.

As a possible way out of the world of suffering, Mbembe presents death as the “mediator of redemption.”⁶⁴ He exalts suicide attacks by writing “the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen as laboring under the sign of the future. In other words, in death the future is collapsed into the present.” Further, “the body [. . .] in death, literally and metaphorically escapes the state of siege and occupation.”⁶⁵ Mbembe at this point refers affirmatively to Martin Heidegger, who stated that “being toward death” (*Sein zum Tode*) is the condition of freedom, a philosophy that was—in theory and in practice at the time—very much compatible with Nazism.

While he sympathizes with the suicide bomber, whose “death achieves the character of a transgression,”⁶⁶ Israel represents the opposite to Mbembe. The Jewish state, according to the postcolonial theorist, is driven by a logic of survival that does not sacrifice itself but the other. It does so because of “its own particular narrative of history

62. Achille Mbembe, *Politik der Feindschaft* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2017), 65. Translation Marlene Gallner.

63. *Ibid.*, 74.

64. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 91.

65. *Ibid.*, 37.

66. *Ibid.*, 91.

and identity,”⁶⁷ by which he means the ‘narrative’ “of the Holocaust.”⁶⁸ Mbembe grossly distorts the actual, manifest threat against Israel.⁶⁹ The fact that from before the creation of the state of Israel until today the Arab-Palestinian population increased from 1.3 million to 5.04 million, the fact that life expectancy increased from 45 to 74 years, the fact that the Palestinian territories have a higher Human Development Index value than Morocco, Syria, Iraq or Yemen⁷⁰—nothing can change Mbembe’s conclusion that the “most accomplished form of necropower is the contemporary colonial occupation of Palestine”⁷¹ *because of the Holocaust*.

Mbembe claims, that having once been victims is the determining factor for people to commit new atrocities. He uses the empty phrase of a “hateful cycle.”⁷² He pretends to shed light on the underlying causes for human suffering, but actually draws attention away from these sources. He writes: “former victims—survivors of all sorts—have no misgivings about transforming themselves into executioners and projecting on those weaker than they are the terror they once suffered, thus reproducing on occasion, and excessively so, the logics that presided over their own extermination.”⁷³ While South Africa sought to avoid this problem

67. *Ibid.*, 80.

68. *Ibid.*

69. Jews who leave behind their subordinate status as dhimmis and claim equality with Muslims in the Domain of Islam must be “uprooted and destroyed,” as the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei emphasized in a speech hailing Tehran’s supply of arms to Palestinian militias. See Parisa Hafezi, “Iran lauds arms supply to Palestinians against ‘tumor’ Israel,” in *Reuters* (May, 22, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/iran-lauds-arms-supply-to-palestinians-against-tumor-israel-idUSKBN22Y10K/>. Long before 1948 there have been pogroms against Jews in the region. See George Bensoussan, *Pogroms in Palestine before the creation of the state of Israel (1830-1948)* (Paris: Fondation pour l’innovation politique, 2024).

70. See “2023/2024 Human Development Report,” (March 13, 2024), <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/ranks>.

71. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 80.

72. *Ibid.*, 39.

73. *Ibid.*

through a *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Israel did not and is, hence, according to Mbembe, forced to do to the Palestinians what the Germans did to the Jews⁷⁴—a baseless claim made also by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in 2022 during a press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin in order to demonize Israel as the new Nazis.⁷⁵

In an interview about postcolonial thinking, Mbembe explains that Palestinians were being killed solely because Israeli society made a “fetish” out of the fact that Jews were once “a victim in world history.”⁷⁶ This fetish, he imagines, is being kept alive in Zionism through constant bloodshed: “endless sacrifices and thus fresh victims killed to appease the sacrificer-god.”⁷⁷ In claiming that the Israelis would offer the Palestinians as a sacrifice to their deified commonwealth, Mbembe not only insinuates that the Jewish state is reintroducing human sacrifice, which Judaism long ago abolished, he also provides a new version of the classic blood libel, which turns the extermination of European Jewry against Jews today.⁷⁸ In so doing, his thinking not only relativizes the Holocaust but instrumentalizes it in the service of contemporary antisemitism.

After Felix Klein had voiced his concerns, a fierce defense of Mbembe ensued in the German media, as did multiple open letters of solidarity with him. Right from the start, the first letter was signed by many acclaimed academics, among them Aleida Assmann, Germany’s leading scholar on memory culture, Wolfgang Benz and Felix Axster of the

74. Achille Mbembe, “What is postcolonial thinking?” in *Eurozine* (January 9, 2008), <https://www.eurozine.com/what-is-postcolonial-thinking/>.

75. NBC News, “Palestinian President Accuses Israel Of Committing ‘50 Holocausts’” (August 17, 2022), <https://youtu.be/J-FbsUTjaRU?si=ZTJXZZqxHUfwyjrR>.

76. Again, he is blurring the perpetrators and the intention.

77. Achille Mbembe, “What is postcolonial thinking?” in *Eurozine* (January 9, 2008), <https://www.eurozine.com/what-is-postcolonial-thinking/>.

78. For a comprehensive critique of Mbembe’s political thought see Alex Gruber, “Speerspitze des postkolonialen Antisemitismus. Achille Mbembes ‚Nekropolitik‘ als Handreichung für deutsche Erinnerungskultur” in *sans phrase. Zeitschrift für Ideologiekritik*, 17/2021, 5-25.

Center for Research on Antisemitism in Berlin, the aforementioned Susan Neiman of the Potsdam Einstein Forum,⁷⁹ as well as prominent international scholars such as Michael Rothberg and Dirk Moses.⁸⁰ Mbembe's critics were defamed as racists and right-wingers. His supporters accused them of trying to censor him because he is a black scholar.⁸¹ According to his defenders, Mbembe was to be illegitimately silenced by invoking antisemitism. The accusation of antisemitism was regarded as a greater problem than what Mbembe actually said and wrote. Assmann, one of his most active advocates in the German media, was more concerned about a "climate of suspicion, insecurity and denunciation" due to the work of the commissioner for the fight against antisemitism and publicly called for Klein's dismissal.⁸² In the name of anti-racism, many international actors took up this call. Among them were the news outlet

79. In her book chapter in the anthology *Jenseits von Mbembe—Geschichte, Erinnerung, Solidarität*, published in 2022, she claims „none of the arguments for a singularity [of the Holocaust] were put forward as a carefully elaborated theoretical argument that could claim validity beyond a certain period of time. The assertion of singularity was not yet a doctrine, much less a dogma, but a counter-argument in the context of a polemic that was promoted by Nolte's volleys and their publication in the [newspaper] FAZ [sparking the first Historikerstreit].” Susan Neiman, “Ein neuer Historikerstreit?” in *Jenseits von Mbembe—Geschichte, Erinnerung, Solidarität*, ed. Matthias Böckmann/Matthias Gockel/Reinhart Kößler/Henning Melber (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2022), 252. This view can only be upheld if it is assumed that the thesis of singularity resulted from the German Historikerstreit. In doing so, she blatantly ignores scholars such as Saul Friedländer, Yehuda Bauer, Lucy Dawidowicz, Deborah Lipstadt or Steven T. Katz who developed their arguments independently.

80. See <https://www.dropbox.com/s/idp56qbs3wh4ko5/Aufruf%20-%20Solidarität%20mit%20Achille%20Mbembe.pdf?dl=0>

81. If engaging with someone's theses and taking his work seriously amounts to racism, the term has become void of analytical significance.

82. Aleida Assmann, “Ein Klima des Verdachts, der Verunsicherung und Denunziation,” in *Frankfurter Rundschau* (May 15, 2020), <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/klima-verdachts-verunsicherung-denunziation-13749410.html>.

Al Jazeera and the Ahmed Fathrada Foundation, again with support of well known Holocaust scholars such as Rothberg.⁸³

One of the few academic English-speaking publications on the debate at the time was published by Assmann in the *American Journal of Genocide Research*. She opens her article by pointing to the danger she regards as most urgent: “the accusation of antisemitism. It places us Europeans, especially Germans, under general suspicion.”⁸⁴ Again, recognizing and denouncing antisemitism is seen as a bigger problem than antisemitism itself. She warns that the criticism of antisemitism “introduce[s] a tension and polarization into the German immigration society that stands in the way of the possibility of a shared and equal existence in a pluralistic, democratic society.”⁸⁵ She also offers a solution: simply introducing a new concept of antisemitism. In order to be inclusive of statements such as Mbembe’s, she calls for a new concept, one that “does not divide.”⁸⁶ Memory of the Holocaust as well as of other mass crimes to her is merely a political tool for the present. What causes friction is simply dismissed.

Assmann’s quest for social harmony at the expense of prospective victims of antisemitism did not end there. She also insisted that a cause for the “climate of suspicion” was the working definition of antisemitism by the *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance* (IHRA). It is no coincidence that in 2020 she was one of the coordinators of the so-called *Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism* (JDA), which was released in March 2021 and is supposed to serve as an alternative to the former. While the IHRA definition includes as a form of antisemitism the delegitimization of Israel as a new Nazi state, the JDA does not. “[T]he JDA

83. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/6/19/colonial-discourses-are-stifling-free-speech-in-germany> and <https://www.kathradafoundation.org/2020/06/08/letter-call-to-replace-felix-klein-as-the-federal-government-commissioner-for-the-fight-against-antisemitism/>

84. Aleida Assmann, “A Spectre is Haunting Germany: The Mbembe Debate and the New Antisemitism,” in *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2020.1847861>.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

authors,” writes Jeffrey Herf, “do not include in their definition of anti-semitism the key elements of the IHRA definition: [. . .] calling Israel a racist endeavour, applying double standards, applying symbols of classic antisemitism to Israel, or calling Israelis Nazis. That the JDA authors refrain from calling any of these examples possible forms of antisemitism is one of its significant shortcomings.”⁸⁷

Michael Rothberg, professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, and another signatory of the JDA, explained in the foreword to the German edition of his book *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, published in 2021, that he does not think Mbembe’s views have anything to do with antisemitism and that the postcolonial theorist was rather “critical of various forms of domination.”⁸⁸ Rothberg simply ignores the fact that contemporary antisemitism is a false criticism of domination against the supposedly powerful, which plays the central role in Mbembe’s statements about Israel as being the ultimate oppressor of our time. On the Holocaust-relativizing side of the second Historikerstreit, pointing out that antisemitism is not simply racism against Jews, is not worth any serious consideration but understood as an “immunization strategy”⁸⁹ against the opposition. This claim was not published by just anyone, but by the *German Culture Council*, the umbrella organization of the German cultural associations.

In May 2021, the genocide scholar Dirk Moses, another of Mbembe’s outspoken defenders, published his essay “The German Catechism” in the Swiss academic online journal *Geschichte der Gegenwart*. At first glance, his theses might seem similar to Pohrt’s critique of the positive

87. Jeffrey Herf, “IHRA and JDA: Examining Definitions of Antisemitism in 2021,” *fathom* (April 2021), <https://fathomjournal.org/ihra-and-jda-examining-definitions-of-antisemitism-in-2021/>.

88. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirektionale Erinnerung. Holocaustgedenken im Zeitalter der Dekolonisierung* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2021), 15. Translation Marlene Gallner.

89. Reinhart Kößler/Henning Melber, “Debatte um Achille Mbembe: Gegen Antisemitismus als Immunisierungsstrategie,” in *Politik & Kultur*, 6/2020, 15. <https://www.kulturrat.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/puko6-20.pdf>

incorporation of the Holocaust. However, Moses is not bothered by a national identity drawing on a historical crime, but by the pro-Israel stance that he imagines to be ubiquitous in contemporary Germany. It would shut out the “perspective of migrants” and be a reason for fear of “unemployment and exclusion from public life.”⁹⁰ He can only explain the frequent invocation of the Holocaust by German politicians as a result of the influence of “American, British, and Israeli elites.”⁹¹ Who this code refers to is obvious. Even their being used as “pawns,” as Geisel put it, is now the fault of Jews themselves. And the one state where they are not, according to Moses, is the problem. He, too, imagines Israel as a colonial power that is oppressing the Palestinians under, as he writes, a “military dictatorship”—a claim disregarding the full withdrawal from Gaza or the Oslo Accords—while Nazism merely was a “compensatory undertaking to ensure the German people were forever invulnerable to the starvation they suffered in the Allied blockade during the First World War.”⁹² While the Israelis are seen as maliciously abusing the Palestinians, the Germans in the 1930s and 1940s simply did not want to suffer famine. Not even the national-conservative Ernst Nolte would have thought to present such a white-washed interpretation of Nazism.⁹³

Similar to Assmann, Moses calls for “inclusive thinking,” which allows for a memory of the past that indiscriminately “respects all

90. Dirk Moses, “The German Catechism,” *Geschichte der Gegenwart* (May 23, 2021), <https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/the-german-catechism/>. It is remarkable that those who engage in the relativization of antisemitism are imagining themselves as being silenced, even though they hold permanent positions, are invited as guests on German radio and TV shows and publish about the topic in reputable journals and newspapers.

91. *Ibid.*

92. *Ibid.*

93. Nonetheless, Moses is a respected scholar in the field and, among other appointments, a member of the scientific advisory board at *The Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies*. See <https://www.vwi.ac.at/index.php/en/institute/organization/international-academic-board>.



Holocaust inversion displayed in the S-Bahn station of Dortmund University, January 2024, credit: *European Jewish Congress*

victims of the German state and Germans of all kinds.”⁹⁴ The problem here is the same as with all the previously cited cases of—in both senses of the word—*progressive* historical revisionism. Levelling the fundamental distinctions of different historical experiences does not aim at addressing, let alone abolishing antisemitism, but contributes to the fact that it cannot be recognized. Either antisemitism is trivialized or the postcolonial representatives of a new memory culture hold antisemitic views themselves that they defend by emphasizing their good intentions. Améry warned against this when he wrote: “The virtuous antisemite has an enviably clear conscience and a perfectly calm disposition. His peace of mind is enhanced further by the fact that he knows he is in step with the historical development.”⁹⁵

94. Dirk Moses, “The German Catechism,” *Geschichte der Gegenwart* (May 23, 2021), <https://geschichtedergewegung.ch/the-german-catechism/>.

95. Jean Améry, “Virtuous Antisemitism. Address on the Occasion of Jewish-Christian Brotherhood Week,” in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022) 66.

EVER AGAIN AFTER OCTOBER 7

“The Holocaust appears to be ever more unintelligible the more people talk about it,” wrote Imre Kertész. “[I]t recedes ever more into the distance [. . .] the more memorials to it we construct. [. . .] The unbearable burden of the Holocaust has over time given rise to forms of language that appear to talk about the Holocaust, while never even touching the reality of it.”⁹⁶ To Kertész’ observation must be added the sorrowful fact that not only is it the case that the more memorials are constructed, the more unintelligible the extermination of European Jewry becomes. The same is true for the growth of Memory, Holocaust, and Genocide Studies. These academic disciplines are at the forefront of rationalizing violence against Jews today as a legitimate uprising: while in the 1940s, in retrospect, the murdered Jews were innocent and their guilt was a mere projection by the perpetrators, *today Jews are regarded as really guilty*. Just how popular this attitude is becoming can be seen in the comment sections of newspapers, on social media, at academic conferences, and not least in the mass protests since October 7.

In Germany, the genocidal chant “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” was soon supplemented by the revisionist slogan, “Free Palestine from German guilt,” and culminated in the mantra “Palestine will set us free.”⁹⁷ The ardently expressed redemptive dimension could not be sounded more clearly. The protesters are not interested in the actual reality on the ground. Otherwise, they would not be accusing Israel of genocide, although the ratio of killed combatants to civilians is demonstrably lower than in any other urban war.⁹⁸ They need the accusation

96. Imre Kertész, “Language in Exile,” quoted after Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *The End of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 12.

97. Jens Winter, “Palästina-Protest bei Kunstaktion. Ihr performt doch nur,” *taz* (February 12, 2014), <https://taz.de/Palaestina-Protest-bei-Kunstaktion!/5991553/>.

98. See John Spencer, “Israel Has Created a New Standard for Urban Warfare. Why Will No One Admit It?” *Newsweek* (March 23, 2024), <https://www.newsweek.com/israel-has-created-new-standard-urban-warfare-why-will-no-one-admit-it-opinion-1883286>.

of genocide to fuel and support their own desire for punishment. Completely divergent political groups—from queer activists to Islamic fundamentalists—find common ground in the hatred of “Zionists” and establish themselves as a community without any social divisions and contradictions. The false social harmony they strive for is made possible by the one enemy whom proponents of the entire political spectrum can agree on is to blame: Israel and the Jews.

As for German memory culture, it remains to be seen which side of the second *Historikerstreit* will prevail in the long run. Both sides can grow into a disastrous coalition against the survivors and their descendants if these do not play the desired role as “pawns” for the “spiritual budget of the nation.”⁹⁹ Israel is a painful reminder that the past has not been dealt with properly, in the sense that antisemitism no longer exists. The Jewish state is the necessary refuge from antisemitic persecution worldwide and that fact can be—and already is—held against it.

The new Holocaust relativizers see antisemitism not as central problem of modern civilization but just one discrimination among many. In doing so, however, they ignore the inherent threat of extermination. The Damocles sword of a renewed turn from modernity into barbarism, which Adorno and Horkheimer tried to comprehend, and which the postcolonial memory scholars simply dismiss, has by no means been banished. “It happened, therefore it can happen again.” Levi’s admonitory words continue: “It can happen, and it can happen everywhere.”¹⁰⁰

99. Eike Geisel, “Die Verstaatlichung der Juden,” in *Die Wiedergutwerdung der Deutschen*, ed. Klaus Bittermann (Berlin: Edition Tiamat, 2015), 133. Translation Marlene Gallner.

100. Primo Levi quoted after Noa Gutow-Ellis, “Primo Levi at 100” *Museum of Jewish Heritage. A Living Memorial to the Holocaust* (June 26, 2019), <https://mjhnyc.org/blog/primo-levi-at-100/>.

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