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A Model for Coming to Terms with the Past? Holocaust Remembrance and Antisemitism in Germany since 1945

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Antisemitism and spurious views of the Holocaust are often intertwined. That is certainly the case in the land of the former perpetrators. Germany is, of course, by no means the only country that has seen a rise in antisemitism since the turn of the twenty-first century, but it does display certain specific characteristics, especially in how it deals with the past. Germany has changed dramatically and in many ways since 1945. It has been transformed from a belligerent nation that started two world wars to a major force for stability and democracy in Europe that promotes the ideals upon which the EU was founded.

Today, minorities do not flee Germany because of persecution. On the contrary, during the 2015 refugee crisis, the country was a magnet for those escaping war, destruction, persecution, and poverty in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere. Over the course of the last three decades, tens of thousands of Jews have settled in Germany, mainly from the former Soviet Union but also from Israel, and many feel at home there. Seventy-five years after the Holocaust, there are some 100,000 members of registered Jewish communities across the country.¹ However, the Jewish population is today estimated at about 225,000, as many people of Jewish origin are unaffiliated.² That is less than half of what it was before 1933, but Jewish life today is flourishing, as attested to by Jewish schools, museums, and festivals; active synagogues; the variety of rabbinical seminaries found in the country; and kosher cafés and restaurants. This is the case despite the major demographic challenges posed by an aging Jewish population.³

Holocaust memorials can be seen across the country, often commemorating local atrocities, such as the deportation of Jews from a particular town, neighborhood, or street. In 1996, the German government designated January 27 (the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz) as the official “Day of Memory of the Victims of National Socialism.” Holocaust denial is a criminal offense there. Thousands of students visit the sites of former concentration camps every year with their teachers. As a result of these and other developments, the way Germans have dealt with their past is often seen as exemplary. Susan Neiman, the director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, and herself a native of Atlanta, wants to “encourage Americans and other peoples to learn from the Germans” and believes that the German *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* could serve as a model for the US in dealing with its legacy of racism.⁴

Still, Germany’s approach has led to a number of problems, including new forms of antisemitism. Even just a cursory look reveals that German society is only now beginning to honestly confront its Nazi past. Today, the government tries to assist Jewish communities, and their institutions are increasingly protected by police. However, the very fact that their security has to be ensured by heavily armed law-enforcement officers is only one of the many signs that antisemitism is still a threat in Germany and that, in fact, important “lessons of the Holocaust” have not been learned—or perhaps more precisely, that the lessons learned reduced only overt antisemitic actions but did not do much to reduce underlying antisemitic sentiments. This has enabled antisemites to express their antipathy and even hatred in new ways.

Between Acknowledgment and Evasion

Shortly after the war, German politicians understood the prescience of what US High Commissioner for Occupied Germany John McCloy told the Jewish community in 1949. “Germany’s relation to the Jews,” he stressed, “would be the ‘real touchstone’ of the new German democracy.”⁵ In other words, it was important for Germany to be seen as having good relations with its Jewish communities and by extension with the Jewish State, to which many Holocaust survivors had immigrated. This was particularly true for a nation that depended heavily on exports to countries that were very skeptical about the prospects of its developing a viable democracy. Perhaps even more importantly, dealing with the Nazi past is crucial for Germans and Austrians themselves in forming new—that is, post-Nazi—national identities. The crimes are too great to ignore or forget. For two reasons they haunt Germans and Austrians who have still not addressed them self-critically. First, perpetrators, bystanders, and profiteers—from SS men and women to those who bought a shop or some furniture at a distress sale price—can be found in the majority of German and Austrian family trees. Second, the crimes were committed in the name of a nation they identify as their own.⁶

All three countries that succeeded the Third Reich — Austria, the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), and the German Democratic Republic (Communist East Germany) — had to deal with the fact that millions of people in their own populations were heavily implicated in the crimes of National Socialism. They have had to deal with the fact that their predecessors channeled the power of government and society toward organizing crimes against humanity, including a total war of destruction and the genocidal program directed against the Jewish people. The Allies stopped these crimes by force and demanded a program of de-Nazification, but that quickly waned with the advent of the Cold War. This enabled the successor states and their populations to reject and externalize all personal guilt and to convince themselves and others of the convenient lie that only a handful of Nazi leaders were responsible. Even today, the majority of Germans (53 percent) believe that “the bulk of the Germans were not to blame; it was just a few criminals who started the war and killed the Jews.”⁷ Repression, rejection, and silence about the crimes were the norm in reaction to the Nuremberg trials conducted by the Allied forces immediately after the war.⁸ Self-reflection and empathy for the victims were, and remain, the exception.

The most obvious case of a national failure to seriously acknowledge the crimes of Nazism in the decades that followed World War II was Austria, which claimed to have been Hitler’s first victim. They made that claim even though not a single shot was fired in resistance to the *Anschluss* in 1938, and the overwhelming majority of Austrians enthusiastically approved of it. For its part, the German Democratic Republic defined itself as fundamentally anti-capitalist and anti-Fascist. Through that definition, it rejected all responsibility for the Nazi past because it saw itself as having triumphed over Fascism, an ideology that had been enabled by capitalist elites. The fact that Jews constituted a large number of the so-called anti-Fascist resisters was not highlighted. West Germany took some limited responsibility, but it rephrased its new identity as anti-totalitarian, rejecting the Nazi past and Communism equally. In the immediate postwar period, German society was focused more on non-Jewish German casualties during and after the war than on victims of the Nazi regime. Payments to victims of Nazi crimes, including compensation for theft and destruction, were slow in coming and have remained unpopular among the German public. The total sum of “reparation payments” paid by West Germany and then later reunited Germany remains low in relation to the damages inflicted on the victims and in relation to the country’s GDP (€3,436 billion in 2019 alone). In total, ethnic Germans displaced as a result of the war received about €75 billion,⁹ almost the same amount of compensation as was paid to all victims of the Nazi regime (some €77.8 billion) — including payments to individual victims as well as those made within the framework of agreements with other countries such as Israel, France, and the Netherlands.¹⁰ The flight and displacement of ethnic Germans at the end of the war and shortly afterward have been a constant theme in politics, literature, and film. Even in modern-day German films and television programs

about World War II such as the popular TV series *Unsere Mütter, unsere Väter*, the main victims are not Jews or other persecuted minorities, but ethnic Germans.¹¹ Personal responsibility for Nazi crimes has generally been avoided even in fiction, and this is still the case today.

Rejection of Personal Responsibility

Despite research that has consistently demonstrated the culpability of large swaths of society, personal responsibility is seen as lying squarely, and *exclusively*, with a small group of top Nazis, such as Adolf Hitler, Hermann Göring, and Heinrich Himmler. This way of thinking, however, is counterfactual. In his 2001 book on Nazi elites after 1945, Norbert Frei describes how German prosecutors and judges rarely tried people who were directly responsible for the murders of Jews and other minorities or ethnic German civilians. Most perpetrators continued their careers after the war; many even drew on professional and social networks they had developed with other Nazis.¹² As Andreas Eichmüller has shown, murder convictions in German courts in connection with Nazi crimes have been extremely rare. He lists 1,147 convictions in West Germany (and later in reunited Germany), half the victims of which were non-Jews. Only 204 were convicted for murder; all others were for lesser crimes such as complicity in murder, involuntary manslaughter, or “illegal restraint resulting in death.”¹³ The German population and judicial system had no interest in holding Nazi war criminals or perpetrators of the Holocaust accountable; quite the opposite—more often than not they attempted to cover up for them. This changed only in 2011, when a prison guard at the Sobibor death camp was convicted as an accessory to murder.¹⁴ By that time, of course, most of the perpetrators were already dead.

In 1958, the first trial by a West German court for the mass murder of Jews took place, seventeen years after the crimes committed by members of the Tilsit SS-Einsatzkommando in 1941. The ten defendants stood accused of shooting more than 5,000 Jewish men, women, and children.¹⁵ The court in Ulm sentenced the commanders and perpetrators of these crimes to relatively light punishments of between three and fifteen years imprisonment for complicity in murder. Some were released before serving their full sentence. In this and in other cases, the Nazi leadership was seen as the exclusive perpetrator of the slaughter of Jews. Others were cast as simple helpers and minor accomplices—not as murderers themselves. Fritz Bauer, one of the prosecutors in the case against the Tilsit killers, confronted formidable resistance both from the judicial system and the wider society over his efforts to bring the defendants to justice. It was five more years before he could begin the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials, the largest and most prominent conducted against Holocaust perpetrators in West German courts. From 1963 to 1965, twenty-two defendants were charged for their roles

as officials in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death and concentration camp complex. Only seven were convicted of murder.

Indications of Progress

Considerable progress in research and documentation has left no doubt as to the personal culpability of large segments of the population for Nazi capital crimes. Nevertheless, the reaction of the public, the judiciary, and the political echelon has been marked by evasion and deflection and has rarely addressed the antisemitic motivations of individual citizens. The desire to “leave the Holocaust behind,” to draw a *Schlussstrich* [final line] and to put an end to inquiry into the Nazi past, has been predominant. Whatever impulses to the contrary did exist often came from outside the country. The American TV mini-series *Holocaust* aired in Germany in 1979. Seen by some 20 million viewers, it was met with fierce resistance, including violent attacks from the extreme right.¹⁶ However, it also led to unprecedented and widescale public discussion in Austria and West Germany about the destruction of European Jewry. It was at that point that German society finally acknowledged that Jews had been systematically annihilated. It took many more years for it to enter the public consciousness that not only high-ranking SS officers but also many ordinary German soldiers were personally responsible for war crimes and the execution of Jews and other civilians. Initiatives inspired by the local history movement of the 1980s (“dig where you stand”) certainly helped advance this discussion in West Germany and led to the establishment of memorials and local research centers, but they were largely driven by dedicated, left-leaning individuals.¹⁷

Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* advanced this debate significantly in 1996, although, as Julius Schoeps noted in his anthology on the controversy over the book, the overwhelming majority of German commentators condemned it.¹⁸ The main argument behind the hostile reactions in Germany was the rejection of the accusation of collective guilt, one that Goldhagen specifically did not make. That accusation was, in fact, a German invention that can be traced back to 1943 when leading Nazis, such as Göring, warned the nation of a crushing revenge for the deeds of the Nazis if Germany were to lose the war. The vehement rejection of an imagined accusation of collective guilt, which was widespread in the immediate aftermath of World War II, and still is today, is evidence of a suppressed guilty conscience.¹⁹

Stubborn Rejection of the Responsibility of One’s Own Grandparents

Between 1995 and 1999, a major touring exhibition entitled “War of Annihilation: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941–1944” by the Hamburg Institute for Social

Research showcased the complicity of ordinary German soldiers in war crimes and had close to a million visitors. It was met with opprobrium from conservatives and violent opposition from the extreme right, including a 1999 bomb attack on the exhibition in Saarbrücken.

Fifty years after the Holocaust, this was a first step toward public acceptance of the long-established fact that responsibility for war crimes could not be restricted to a small circle of elites around Hitler. After much protest, however, the exhibition was revised and most images of ordinary soldiers—the inclusion of which served to reinforce the notion that they, too, were culpable—were removed.²⁰ More importantly, despite the acknowledgement of these facts across large segments of German society, very few were ready to admit that their own family members might have been among the perpetrators and profiteers.

Indeed, a detailed study using intergenerational interviews from 1997–99 as well as a representative survey in 2002 found that the overwhelming majority of Germans still rejected the idea that members of their own family could have been guilty of any crimes during the Nazi period. In 2005, Harald Welzer reported that only 3 percent believed that their relatives had been “anti-Jewish,” and only 1 percent thought it was possible that they “were directly involved in crimes,” at times even if their own grandfather had admitted as much in the interviews.²¹ This avoidance of responsibility was largely confirmed in 2020, when it was found that only 3 percent of the German population believe that their family members were Nazi supporters whereas 30 percent believe that they were opponents of Nazism.²² Any potential responsibility for the complicity of one’s own family members has been externalized, despite the knowledge that statistically speaking, it is unlikely that any given family does not have at least one member who was involved in one way or another with the crimes of the Holocaust. The Germans’ suppressed guilty conscience over unspecified Nazi crimes has actually enabled lingering sentiments of hostility toward Jews to surface in new forms. Rejection of the imagined accusation of collective guilt has oscillated between suppression, relativization, and the belief in conspiracy fantasies, all typically projected onto Jews.

Suppression: Rejecting the Imagined Accusation of Collective Guilt

The most overt form of Holocaust denial asserts that the atrocities never occurred. Suppression, however, is different. It allows for the acknowledgement of what happened in general terms but aggressively rejects examining concrete evidence or recognizing the personal responsibility of individual perpetrators. The wish to be “over and done with” the Nazi past has been highly prevalent among Germans from 1945 until today. Lars Rensmann noted that Jews have often been accused of standing in the way of Germans drawing such a *Schlussstrich*.²³ Examples of

accusations against Jews that have since been repeated in similar forms can be seen in Werner Fassbinder's play *Der Müll, die Stadt, und der Tod* [Garbage, the City, and Death] and Martin Walser's acceptance speech for the 1998 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. Today, the extreme right frequently describes Holocaust commemorations as an *Auschwitzkeule* [Auschwitz cudgel] with which the German people are "beaten." This is very similar to Walser's use of the word *Moralkeule* [moral cudgel]. These terms are in keeping with the writings of Rudolf Augstein, the influential publisher of *Der Spiegel* who, in 1998, inveighed against the Berlin Holocaust Memorial that was then being planned, calling it a symbol of shame directed against the capital and the new Germany. More recently, in 2017, Björn Höcke from the populist right-wing Alternative für Deutschland [Alternative for Germany, AfD], now the third-largest party in the German parliament, used very similar language, describing the Holocaust memorial in Berlin as a "monument of shame" that the German people have "planted in the heart of their capital." He called for a "180-degree turnaround" in the politics of memory.²⁴ One of the party's leaders, Alexander Gauland, insisted that "Hitler and the Nazis are just a speck of bird shit in over 1,000 years of successful German history."²⁵ These crude attempts to downplay the Holocaust have been largely condemned and seem to be confined to AfD sympathizers and those of parties still further to the right. However, the wish to stop talking about the Holocaust is widespread. In early 2020, 53 percent of Germans wanted to emphasize that the whole National Socialist "thing" was past history. Among those who sympathize with AfD, this number was 80 percent. About half the population has "the impression that whenever the crimes of National Socialism are mentioned, one has to show concern [*Betroffenheit*]," and they report being annoyed by this. The majority (56 percent) believes that "the constant remembrance of National Socialism prevents Germans from developing a healthy national consciousness like citizens of other countries," again with 80 percent of AfD sympathizers agreeing with that statement.²⁶ Surveys have consistently suggested that large parts of the population blame the Jews for this phenomenon. In 2019, 41 percent agreed with the statement that "Jews still talk too much about what happened to them during the Holocaust."²⁷

The fact that these sentiments are popular, however, does not mean that any serious scholar would subscribe to them. Significant progress has been made over the past two decades in revealing the complicity of much of the German civil administration during the Third Reich. Some of this research was commissioned by the ministries themselves, such as foreign affairs (2010) and food and agriculture (2020).²⁸

Relativization of the Holocaust

Another possible reaction to unprocessed feelings of guilt is the relativization of the Holocaust through the suggestion that others were "just as bad as the

Nazis.” The accusation of collective guilt is thereby deflected and promptly projected onto others, preferably the Jews themselves. On German Unity Day in 2003, Martin Hohmann, a parliamentarian for the conservative CDU at the time, described (secular) Jews as a “perpetrator people” similar to the Nazis, accusing them of being responsible for Communism and its crimes. He also referred explicitly to Henry Ford’s notorious antisemitic pamphlet “The International Jew.” Hohmann was subsequently expelled from the CDU, but he was reelected on the AfD ticket in 2017 and is still a sitting MP. While blaming the Jews for Communism and its real or alleged crimes is a phenomenon found most frequently on the far right, blaming them for nationalism, racism, and war can be observed in left-leaning circles. A frequent form of relativization is the equation of alleged Israeli war crimes with Nazi war crimes, accusing Israel of perpetrating the genocide of the Palestinian people or of putting the Palestinians into “camps” and “ghettos.” This kind of anti-Israel rhetoric has been on the rise since the early twenty-first century. Former Minister of Labor Norbert Blüm described anti-terror measures of the Israeli army during the violent Second Intifada in 2002 as a form of “extermination.” He claimed that there is a taboo on criticizing Israel in Germany because of the German past and that all criticism is stigmatized as antisemitism,²⁹ a recurring theme among German and other anti-Zionists despite all the criticism of the Israeli government voiced daily in German, Israeli, and international media. One of the most recent examples was in the summer of 2020 when an open letter was sent to Chancellor Angela Merkel in which more than sixty intellectuals tried to portray accusations of antisemitism as scandalous, since they allegedly create an “atmosphere of branding, intimidation and fear.” That type of outlook aims to preclude the evaluation of whether controversial statements on Israel are antisemitic or not.³⁰

Two German bishops, Walter Mixa and Gregor Maria Hanke, visited Israel and Gaza in 2007 and, after a stop at Yad Vashem, described the Palestinian territory as being similar to the Warsaw Ghetto. Some years later, after a visit to Hebron, then-German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel described that city as being under an Israeli “apartheid regime.”³¹ In 2011, Jakob Augstein, *Spiegel Online* contributor and owner and editor of the weekly *Der Freitag*, characterized Gaza as a “camp” and a “place out of the end of time.” His article was entitled “The Law of Revenge,” projecting old antisemitic accusations onto Israel.³² In 2012, the Simon Wiesenthal Center put him on their annual list of the year’s top ten antisemites, citing a number of antisemitic and anti-Israel statements he made in his *Spiegel Online* column, such as “With backing from the US, where the president must secure the support of Jewish lobby groups ... the Netanyahu government keeps the world on a leash with an ever-swelling war chant.”³³ Public debate in Germany, however, was more concerned with how a liberal German intellectual could possibly find himself on a list of antisemites than with a critical investigation into what he had actually said.³⁴ The difference between slander and criticism is deliberately blurred, and the accusation of antisemitism becomes the problem, not the statements that precipitated it.

This can also be seen in the case of the controversial poem “*Was gesagt werden muss*” [What must be said], published in 2012 by Günter Grass. The celebrated author and Nobel laureate accused Israel of planning a preventative nuclear attack against Iran with overwhelmingly destructive [*allesvernichtende*] warheads that would ultimately result in a genocide of the Iranian people, mayhem in the region, and a threat to international peace. His poem expressed what many in Germany had been thinking. “Israel presents a threat to the world,” maintained sixty-five percent of Germans in 2003, significantly more than the 19 percent who said the same about Russia.³⁵ “What the State of Israel is doing to the Palestinians today is basically no different than what the Nazis did to the Jews in the Third Reich,” said 39 percent of Germans polled in 2018 and 2019. Some turned that sentiment directly against the Jews. “With the policies that Israel executes, I can well understand that one has something against Jews,” declared about a quarter of the population.³⁶

Conspiracy Fantasies

Conspiracy fantasies that arise as a reaction to the imagined accusation of collective guilt are often overtly antisemitic and at times related to Holocaust denial. Some see a nefarious “Holocaust industry” run by Israel and/or the “Jewish lobby” that exists to extort political and financial concessions from the Germans. Norman Finkelstein’s notorious book advancing that very thesis became a bestseller in Germany in 2000 and was widely praised both on the extreme right as well in mainstream newspapers, despite the many false claims and wild conspiracy theories it contains.³⁷ This kind of thinking is still reflected in recent polls. In 2018, a third of the German population agreed that “Jewish people use the Holocaust to advance their position or to achieve certain goals” and forty-six percent agreed that “Israel uses the Holocaust to justify its actions.”³⁸

Conspiracy theorists cast doubts on the veracity of the Holocaust, or diminish it by making inappropriate comparisons. From a psychological perspective, this can be interpreted as a rejection of the alleged accusation of collective guilt. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it has been remarkable to see that anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests often use symbols and phrases drawn from the Nazi era. The use of such symbols can hardly be explained without considering the psychological dimension. Many protesters pinned yellow Stars of David to their chest to suggest that they are victims of persecution similar to that suffered by Jews in the Nazi era. The stars often say “vaccination will set you free” in reference to the cynical Nazi slogan “*Arbeit macht frei*.”³⁹ At the same time, conspiracy fantasies about a sinister Jewish or “Zionist” cabal said to be responsible for the pandemic are popular in the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination movement and are disseminated by prominent figures within it, including activist and

bestselling cookbook author Attila Klaus-Peter Hildmann and the popular singer Xavier Naidoo.⁴⁰ Hildmann uses in-person rallies and his social media account on Telegram, which has more than 100,000 followers, to spread crude conspiracy fantasies such as the idea that the pandemic was orchestrated in order to implant microchips in people through mass vaccination. He claims that the “Rothschilds, Rockefellers, Warburgs, and other Zionists are the supreme Corona-criminals” and that the “[Zionists] want to wipe out the German race and Germany for good and kill a large part of humanity, because they see themselves as the ‘chosen people!’” He has also suggested that the Holocaust was financially supported by “the Zionists.”⁴¹ Naidoo uses his Telegram channel to propagate the notion that Israel threatens a nuclear genocide against the German people.⁴² Jan Kerbsen, a radio host who is also prominent within this movement, compares the “Merkel regime” with the Third Reich and views himself and his followers as rebels standing up against it.⁴³ However, negative sentiments resulting from lingering feelings of a diffuse guilt that has not been adequately addressed are but one source of antisemitism in Germany today, even if it is a sizeable one.

Antisemitic Experiences in Germany Today

Antisemitic remarks and attacks have been on the rise in recent years, including extreme violence, such as the Yom Kippur outrage in Halle in 2019 and the assault in Hamburg on Sukkot of this year. This and many other incidents have led to a heightened feeling of unease and insecurity among Jews in Germany, where surveys demonstrate that they increasingly feel threatened and harassed.⁴⁴ Forty-one percent of those surveyed in 2018 by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights said that they had been harassed during the past year specifically because they were Jewish. Twenty-nine percent said that they had experienced offensive or threatening comments, up from 21 percent in 2012. Almost half of the respondents said that they are worried about being attacked physically in the near future because they are Jewish, up from 34 percent in 2012. The fear of verbal abuse is even higher. Jewish community leaders have increasingly voiced concern about rising antisemitism. In January 2018, Josef Schuster, head of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, noted: “It is part of everyday Jewish life that our institutions are under police protection, Jewish pupils are under police protection, and we are increasingly reluctant to make ourselves known as Jews in public.” This pattern of behavior is confirmed by various studies. Thirty-six percent of Jews reported frequently choosing not to wear, carry, or publicly display items that could identify them as Jewish, and 37 percent do so occasionally, leaving only a quarter of Jews who never worry about it. Given the frequent harassment to which they are subjected, it is sad but understandable that many feel the need to hide their identity. As Julia Bernstein documents in her 2020 study of German schools, many Jewish pupils and teachers try to conceal their identity because

they fear harassment, although it is more difficult to do so in that environment. She and her team interviewed 251 Jewish and non-Jewish students, teachers, parents, and social workers and came to the conclusion that in many schools, anti-semitism is so pervasive that it and “the resulting hostile atmosphere are considered normal in everyday school life.”⁴⁵ Jérôme Lombard reported cases in which public schools could not ensure the physical safety of Jewish pupils who then had to transfer schools, often choosing to attend a Jewish one.⁴⁶

Where Is Antisemitism Coming from Today?

As we have seen in the examples above, suppressed feelings of guilt for the Holocaust or a rejection of the imagined accusation of collective guilt have played a significant role in German attitudes toward Jews since the war and explain many of the views currently held regarding the Holocaust and the Jews, including among those on the political right and left. This frequently surfaces in perspectives that can be described as Holocaust inversion, in which Jews are blamed for crimes similar to those of the Nazis.⁴⁷

One of the major themes touted by the extreme right and the populist right in Germany today is a celebration of German history tantamount to revisionism.⁴⁸ This includes some form of denial or diminishment of the Holocaust, or, in the case of the extreme right, glorification of the Holocaust and Nazism. Another theme popular among white supremacists around the world, including the extreme right in Germany, is that the Jews are to blame for immigration. This has motivated terrorists to mount attacks against Jewish targets, such as the one in Halle. Only a solid door prevented a massacre there. The terrorist’s stated objective was to “[k]ill as many anti-Whites as possible, jews [sic] preferred.” Misogynist and racist motivations may have also played a role, as he killed a female passerby and a customer inside a Turkish kebab restaurant out of frustration at not being able to break into the synagogue. Such white supremacists and neo-Nazis are one of the reasons police protection is needed for synagogues and other Jewish institutions around the country. Police registered 1,844 antisemitic crimes in 2019 “motivated by ideology of the extreme right,” fifty-six of which were violent.⁴⁹

Antisemitism originating on the political left is currently less violent but has had perhaps more success in influencing the mainstream, mostly in the form of anti-Zionism.⁵⁰ Most of its key arguments can be traced back to Stalin’s anti-Zionist propaganda campaigns of the early 1950s in which Zionism was demonized as a reactionary nationalistic movement. Today’s anti-Zionism from the political left is part of an anti-imperialist worldview that accuses Israel (and the US) of imperialism and colonialism. It is influenced by the teachings of Mao Zedong and Che Guevara. Using a supposedly Marxist dialectic, this anti-imperialism has

reinterpreted class conflicts as conflicts between oppressed peoples and oppressor peoples. This has deeply influenced many movements on the left, such as those ostensibly devoted to demonstrating solidarity with the developing world, and can also be seen in some anti-racist movements today. Naturally, the perspective that assumes an oppressed/oppressor power dynamic comes with the moral obligation to side unconditionally with those seen as oppressed. This dualistic view is applied to many conflicts, but it is particularly and obsessively applied to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. It has made inroads into most media outlets in Germany (with the notable exception of the influential Springer Group) beginning after the 1967 Six-Day War and the massive Soviet propaganda efforts that intensified at the time in an attempt to further demonize Israel.⁵¹ Anti-Zionism also gained popularity among intellectuals in Germany in those years, often with strong antisemitic undertones, as noted by Jean Améry.⁵² Such hostile views of Israel have become widespread in the German media and population.⁵³

Nowadays, about half of the German population say they have a negative opinion of Israel (48 percent in 2014 and 49 percent in 2019).⁵⁴ Anti-Zionism and negative views of Israel are not necessarily antisemitic, although anti-Zionism and a fundamental opposition to the existence of the Jewish State is very often antisemitic.⁵⁵ Moreover, anti-Zionism today implies a call to eradicate the Jewish State. This in turn, given the present stance of Iran and some of its proxies, could mean the physical destruction of Israel's citizenry. Anti-Zionists today turn a blind eye to the danger of mass murder by antisemitic terror organizations and regimes in the region (regardless of whether we call them antisemitic or not). However, the fact that almost half of Germans seem to have negative views of Israel and that many say that Israel negatively influences their opinions about Jews indicates a close connection between hostility toward Jews in Germany and hostility toward Israel. Thirty-eight percent report that Israel affects their views of Jews, and of those, 65 percent say that this is for the worse.⁵⁶ As a result, many Jews in Germany feel that they are somehow held responsible for the actions of the Israeli government, real or imagined, i.e., that they are permanently suspected of supporting the “evil” State of Israel. Sixty-three percent of Jews surveyed in 2016 said that within the last twelve months they had experienced situations in which they were blamed for the policies of the Israeli government.⁵⁷

Antisemitism, however, was present in Germany long before Israel, the Holocaust, or the emergence of the modern political right and left. The majority of Germans are Christians or have a Christian heritage. Christianity has had a major impact on all facets of German culture and society throughout the centuries that can still be felt today, even if the power of the Church itself is waning and German Christians are increasingly secular.⁵⁸ Germany has two main religious confessions: the Catholic Church with 23 million members and the Evangelical (Protestant) Church with 21 million. Both have taken important steps in the framework of interfaith initiatives with Jewish communities and have revised their

supersessionist theologies, beginning in the 1960s with the Second Vatican Council. The direct impact of traditional Christian imagery and theology hostile toward Jews seems relatively low today, despite the fact that some of those images, such as the Jewish swine [*Judensau*], are literally carved in stone on the facades of cathedrals across the country⁵⁹ and despite the inglorious role of the Churches during the Nazi era.⁶⁰ However, antisemitic stereotypes with origins in Christian thought on the Hebrew Bible frequently surface in all spheres of society, though they go mostly unnoticed. These include the accusations that Jews are vengeful and cruel, worshipped idols such as the Golden Calf, and adhere to the letter but not the spirit of religious texts.

Another significant antisemitic current in Germany not influenced by any suppressed feelings of guilt for the Holocaust comes from segments of the Muslim population.⁶¹ A combination of factors have created a situation in which holding antisemitic views is the unquestioned norm in many Muslim communities around the world, particularly in countries with Muslim majorities. These include anti-Jewish stereotypes found in traditional Islam; the propagation of Jewish-focused global conspiracy theories by Islamist groups beginning with the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood at the end of the 1920s; Nazi propaganda in the Muslim world; and antisemitic propaganda disseminated by Arab regimes, Iran, and more recently, Turkey. Three quarters of the population of the Middle East and North Africa agree to at least six out of eleven antisemitic statements. Many believe in deeply antisemitic conspiracy theories. Sixty-five percent in the region believe that Jews are responsible for most of the world's wars.⁶² In Turkey, the country of origin of the majority of Muslims in Germany, 78 percent believe that Jews have too much power in the business world.⁶³

These numbers are significantly lower among Muslims in Germany but still much higher than in the general population there.⁶⁴ The majority of Muslim associations in Germany are now dominated or influenced by Islamist parties or groups, such as the Turkish AKP (Justice and Development Party) or the Muslim Brotherhood, and are funded in large measure from abroad. These organizations are not representative of German Muslims, even if they pretend to be. However, they often control the local mosques, pay the salaries of the imams, fund Muslim religious education, and organize cultural events. It is therefore no surprise that Muslim educational material often includes anti-Western and antisemitic stereotypes and that extremist literature can be found in many Islamic bookshops housed in mosques.

Islamist associations take advantage of the paucity of secular Muslim alternatives and the fact that non-Muslims take little interest in their activities. The official immigration policy until 2000 was one of non-integration for newcomers who were not of ethnic German stock. The Turkish-Islamist Millî Görüş movement, established by the late Necmettin Erbakan, an unabashed antisemite, is the

second-largest Muslim group in Europe. The largest, the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs, is directly funded by Turkey and at one time had a secular tradition. This changed, however, beginning in 2003 with the rise to power of the Islamist Turkish government under the direct influence of Turkey's antisemitic President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.⁶⁵ In addition to the four million Muslims already living in Germany before the refugee crisis, mostly descendants of Turkish guest workers who came to Germany in the 1960s and '70s, some one million more arrived after 2014, and about 700,000 Syrians today live in Germany. The Syrian regime has disseminated antisemitic propaganda for decades, including through its education system.⁶⁶ Consequently, many of its citizens harbor antisemitic attitudes. Taken together, it is not surprising that, a significant number of perpetrators of antisemitic crimes in Germany are Muslim.⁶⁷

In a 2018 survey, 41 percent of Jews who experienced antisemitic harassment said that the worst perpetrators were Muslim extremists; 20 percent experienced the worst harassment from the extreme right, 16 percent from the left, and 5 percent from Christian extremists. Two other survey studies reached similar conclusions.⁶⁸

Even if antisemitism among Muslims cannot be traced to feelings of guilt for the Holocaust, the failure to examine antisemitism among Muslims and refugees may be. Some scholars in Germany consistently deny the fact that a significant proportion of antisemitic perpetrators are Muslim and that antisemitic views are more widespread among them than non-Muslims in Germany. In many ways, Muslims have come to be seen as “the new Jews.” By finding excuses for Muslim antisemitism and by characterizing as racist those who identify the phenomenon among minorities, Germans can ostensibly prove that they have learned their lesson and stand as the defenders of the marginalized (as opposed to the Jews who are themselves accused of racism in connection with Israeli government policy). However, others focus exclusively on antisemitism among Muslims and thereby conveniently diminish the widespread antipathy to Jews in Germany or in their own organizations, and in fact use it as a tool with which to “other” minorities.⁶⁹

Conclusions

Views of Jews and antisemitism in Germany are integrally related to views of the Holocaust and World War II. The wish to “leave the Holocaust behind” and to be “over and done with” the Nazi past is still common, despite a widespread but vague culture of Holocaust remembrance. Honest engagement with the history of Nazism, the Holocaust, and World War II—including the question of the specific responsibility of perpetrators, bystanders, and profiteers in families, companies, or professional and private associations—can be found in academic circles but less so among the German population.

There is little desire today for the type of critical reflection that might engender any sense that the forebears of present-day Germans bore personal responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust. The majority of the population say that they know nothing or very little about the history of their current place of residence during the time of National Socialism, and 38 percent say that they also do not want to know more about it.⁷⁰ The early failure to confront personal responsibility for Nazi crimes has led to a suppressed guilty conscience and to the rejection of an invented accusation of collective guilt. This results in the desire to draw a *Schlussstrich*, relativization of the Holocaust, and Holocaust inversion.

The significance of the Holocaust seems to be waning. When asked in 2019 what they considered the most important event in German history, 46 percent of Germans said reunification, 22 percent said World War II, and only 7 percent chose the entirety of the Nazi era. Furthermore, 81 percent of the German population today think that the term “new beginning” describes well or even very well what the end of the war meant for Germany. Only 5.5 percent disagree.⁷¹ Doron Kiesel and Thomas Eppenstein noted: “Only 5.5 percent of all respondents found the term ‘new beginning’ to be inappropriate to describe what the end of World War II meant for Germany. Are they the only ones who have retained an awareness of continuities in history, knowing or suspecting that talking about a ‘new beginning’ means repression and defense against guilt?”⁷² Furthermore, some 54 percent of the German population say that “because of the history of National Socialism, we Germans can no longer openly discuss certain topics” and 42 percent think that “you cannot honestly say your opinion about the Nazi past in Germany.”⁷³ One wonders what kind of opinions they would like to voice.

Despite some encouraging signs, Germany should hardly be seen as a model for dealing with the past. Too much of its history has been suppressed and distorted for too long. Too many false accusations have been made against Jews as a result of the failure to honestly confront the Nazi era. The idea that America should follow the German example in dealing with its own past becomes almost grotesque. More than 40 percent of the German population believe that Jews talk too much about the Holocaust. Would American society be content with having 40 percent of its population think that its Black citizens talk too much about slavery?

Notes

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¹ The Central Council of Jews in Germany had 94,771 members in 104 communities as of 2019. The Union of progressive Jews in Germany lists 24 communities on its website and has approximately 5,000 members. Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland e.V., “Mitgliederzahlen Und Altersgliederung Der Landesverbände

- Und Gemeinden 2019" (Frankfurt am Main, June 2020), <http://www.zwst.org/de/service/mitgliederstatistik/>.
- ² Sergio DellaPergola, "World Jewish Population, 2018," *American Jewish Year Book 2018: The Annual Record of the North American Jewish Communities Since 1899*, Arnold Dashefsky and Ira Sheskin (eds.) (New York, 2019), pp. 361–449.
- ³ The size of the Jewish community rose significantly in the 1990s with Jewish migration from countries of the former Soviet Union. The number of Jews is currently declining despite ongoing migration to Germany from some countries, such as Ukraine, because of a low birth rate. Almost half (48 percent) of the registered community members are over 60 years old.
- ⁴ Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, 1st edition (New York, 2019).
- ⁵ Frank Stern, *Jews in the Minds of Germans in the Postwar Period* (Bloomington, 1993), p. 5.
- ⁶ Samuel Salzborn, *Kollektive Unschuld: Die Abwehr Der Shoab Im Deutschen Erinnern* (Leipzig, 2020).
- ⁷ Policy Matters, "Die Haltung der Deutschen zum Nationalsozialismus. Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Erhebung. Tabellarische Auswertung. Im Auftrag von DIE ZEIT" (Gesellschaft für Politikforschung und Politikberatung, January 18, 2020), p. 30.
- ⁸ Peter Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland: die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute* (Munich, 2001).
- ⁹ Henning Bartels, "Überblick über den Lastenausgleich" (Kriegsfolgenarchivgut, Bayreuth, October 14, 2019), <https://www.bundesarchiv.de/DE/Content/Publikationen/Aufsaeetze/kriegsfolgenarchivgut-p1-bartels.html>.
- ¹⁰ Bundesministerium der Finanzen [Finance Ministry], "Entschädigung von NS-Unrecht. Regelungen zur Wiedergutmachung" (Berlin, May 2020), https://www.bundesfinanzministerium.de/Content/DE/Downloads/Broschueren_Bestellservice/2018-03-05-entschaedigung-ns-unrecht.html.
- ¹¹ Antonia Schmid, *Ikonologie der "Volksgemeinschaft": 'Deutsche' und das 'Jüdische' im Film der Berliner Republik* (Göttingen, 2019).
- ¹² Norbert Frei, *Karrieren im Zwielicht: Hitlers Eliten nach 1945* (Frankfurt, 2001).
- ¹³ These numbers refer to the period from World War II to 2005. Andreas Eichmüller, "Die Strafverfolgung von NS-Verbrechen durch westdeutsche Justizbehörden seit 1945. Eine Zahlenbilanz," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 56 (2008), 634.
- ¹⁴ German prosecutors reluctantly dealt with Nazi war criminals and even more reluctantly those who could "only" be accused of an accessory to murder, such as death camp prison guards. It took until 2011 for this to change, when John Demjanjuk was convicted as an accessory to the murder of 27,900 Jews at Sobibor. No laws had to be changed at that point. The obstacle of limitations of actions for murder had been removed in 1979. The Demjanjuk case was successful because Sobibor was clearly solely a death camp and it set a precedent.
- ¹⁵ For evidence of massive crimes committed by the Einsatzgruppen, see Patrick Desbois, *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews* (New York, 2008).

- ¹⁶ In addition to threatening letters to television broadcasters, neo-Nazis tried to blow up transmission systems near Koblenz and Münster. Heiner Lichtenstein, Michael Schmid-Ospach, and Westdeutscher Rundfunk (eds.), *Holocaust: Briefe an Den WDR* (Wuppertal, 1982).
- ¹⁷ Jenny Wüstenberg, *Civil Society and Memory in Postwar Germany* (Cambridge, 2018).
- ¹⁸ Julius H. Schoeps (ed.), *Ein Volk von Mördern? Die Dokumentation Zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse Um Die Rolle Der Deutschen Im Holocaust* (Hamburg, 1996).
- ¹⁹ Norbert Frei, "Von deutscher Erfindungskraft oder: Die Kollektivschuldthese in der Nachkriegszeit," *Rechtshistorisches Journal*, 16 (1997), 621–34.
- ²⁰ Gerd Wiegel, "Das Verschwinden der Bilder. Von der alten zur neuen 'Wehrmachtausstellung,'" *Informationen*, 56 (November 2002), 17–20.
- ²¹ Harald Welzer, "Grandpa Wasn't a Nazi: The Holocaust in German Family Remembrance," *International Perspectives* 54 (2005).
- ²² Policy Matters, op. cit., p. 45. However, if asked more broadly, another study found that 23 percent concede that some of their ancestors were "among the perpetrators during the time of National Socialism." See also Institut für interdisziplinäre Konflikt- und Gewaltforschung (IKG), "MEMO. Multidimensionaler Erinnerungsmonitor. Studie III" (Funded by Stiftung "Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft" (EVZ), 2020), 16.
- ²³ Lars Rensmann, "Guilt, Resentment, and Post-Holocaust Democracy: The Frankfurt School's Analysis of 'Secondary Antisemitism' in the Group Experiment and Beyond," *Antisemitism Studies*, I:1 (Spring 2017), pp. 4–37.
- ²⁴ "Höcke-Rede im Wortlaut 'Gemütszustand eines total besiegten Volkes,'" *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/hoেকে-rede-im-wortlaut-gemuetszustand-eines-total-besiegten-volkes/19273518.html>.
- ²⁵ See "Wortlaut der umstrittenen Passage der Rede von Alexander Gauland," <https://www.afdbundestag.de/wortlaut-der-umstrittenen-passage-der-rede-von-alexander-gauland/>
- ²⁶ Policy Matters, op. cit., pp. 21, 23.
- ²⁷ World Jewish Congress, "Germany Antisemitism Assessment Study: General Population Survey. October 2019."
- ²⁸ Eckart Conze et al., *Das Amt Und Die Vergangenheit: Deutsche Diplomaten Im Dritten Reich Und in Der Bundesrepublik*, 2nd edition (Munich, 2010); Horst Möller, Joachim Bitterlich, and Gustavo Corni (eds.), *Agrarpolitik im 20. Jahrhundert: das Bundesministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft und seine Vorgänger* (Munich, 2020).
- ²⁹ Hans-Ulrich Jörges and Hans Peter Schütz, "Der Vorwurf des Antisemitismus wird auch als Knüppel benutzt" (Gespräch mit Norbert Blüm), *Stern*, June 18, 2002.
- ³⁰ Günther Jikeli, "Judenhass beim Namen nennen," *Jüdische Allgemeine*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/politik/judenhass-beim-namen-nennen/>.
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- ³⁷ Marc Schwietring, *Holocaust-Industrie Und Vergangenheitspolitik: Norman G. Finkelstein und die Normalisierung des sekundären Antisemitismus in Deutschland, Politische Kulturforschung*, Vol. 9 (Frankfurt, 2014).
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- ⁴³ Speech by Jan Kerbsen at a rally in Stuttgart, May 9, 2020, see <https://kenfm.de/ken-jebsens-rede-anlaesslich-der-demonstration-fuer-grundrechte-auf-den-cannstatter-wasen-am-9-mai-2020/>.
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- ⁴⁵ Julia Bernstein, *Antisemitismus an Schulen in Deutschland* (Weinheim, 2020), p. 84.
- ⁴⁶ Jérôme Lombard, “Wenn ‘Du Jude’ Zum Schimpfwort Wird. Antisemitisches Mobbing an Deutschen Schulen,” *Das Neue Unbehagen: Antisemitismus in Deutschland Heute*, Glöckner and Jikeli, op. cit., 227–41.
- ⁴⁷ Robert S. Wistrich, “Antisemitism and Holocaust Inversion,” *Antisemitism Before and Since the Holocaust*, Anthony McElligott and Jeffrey Herf (eds.) (Cham, 2017), pp. 37–49, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-48866-0_3.
- ⁴⁸ Günther Jikeli, “Antisemitism in the Extreme Right and Islamists’ Circles,” *Being Jewish in 21st Century Germany*, Olaf Glöckner and Haim Fireberg (eds.) (Oldenburg, 2015).
- ⁴⁹ Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat [Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Home Affairs], “Verfassungsschutzbericht 2019,” July 2020, p. 26.

- ⁵⁰ Antisemitism in enlightened movements that ostensibly aim to achieve egalitarian societies is often related to a perspective based on a universality that cannot accept difference or particularity. These characteristics are not unique to the Jewish people, but are often identified in them. This can lead to projecting the concept of standing in the way of egalitarian societies onto the Jews. The obsessive wish to make the Jews or the Jewish State disappear in the name of the Enlightenment and progress can be traced from the French Revolution to American campuses that do not accept the existence of a particular Jewish identity.
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- ⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 7–9.
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- ⁷³ Policy Matters, op. cit., pp. 34, 37.