

# GERMAN ANTI-ANTISEMITISM AND ZIONISM

## AN ANTHOLOGY



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# INTRO

Scrappy Capy Distro, 2023.

During the summer of '23, we traveled to different anarchist convergences and talked with comrades while we tabled and hung out at the venues. The conversations often were the swapping of stories about radical actions and the political climates in our places of residence. Frequently we spoke of a major – if perhaps not *the* major – driving force behind the complexities of organizing in Germany: the very positive view the average German and German radicals have toward Israel and the hard split this causes within organizing spaces. Sometimes this is simplified by speaking of the Antideutsche tendencies.

We thought it was common knowledge, but generally it seemed people weren't aware of how German radicalism often sides with Israel and colonial policies over the Palestinian people. Those that were aware seemed to only have fleeting knowledge that *something* was odd about German radicals and Israel. We've been preparing a longer text explaining the post-WWII relation between the German citizenry and radicals with Israel and Judaism, but with the events that have been escalating since October 7<sup>th</sup>, we wanted to get something out that quickly gave an overview of the situation in Germany. People seem to be noticing the reactionary nature of German radicalism, and we want to help illuminate *how* and *why* it's like this. Our hope is that those who have comrades or friends in Germany might put pressure on them to rethink their views, because at present a significant proportion of radicals support the Israeli military occupation of Palestine and the Israeli state's unlimited right to "self-defense."

You'll notice that none of these texts are from German radical sources, and maybe it's because we haven't looked hard enough, but what we've found<sup>1</sup> has been polemic screeds or nitpicking over various actions without giving an overview of the current state of affairs written in a way that an outsider could easily understand. Maybe if we had more time we could have deeply trawled and found more anarchistic texts, but for now, this will have to do.

The cover image is a sketch of a demo in Berlin on November 9<sup>th</sup> during a memorial for the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kristallnacht. Nearly a month into the genocidal bombing of Gaza and increased violence by settlers in the West Bank, antifascists in Germany still wave the Israeli flag. The banner says "Against all antisemitism," which often is weaponized against anyone who criticizes Israel and most specifically Palestinians and others from the Middle East.

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<sup>1</sup>Ja, wir haben Texte sowohl auf deutsch als auch auf englisch gesucht.

# ANTINATIONALIST NATIONALISM

CrimethInc., *Rolling Thunder*, 2006.

“The idea that an understanding of genocide, that a memory of holocausts can only lead people to want to dismantle the system is erroneous. The continuing appeal of nationalism suggests that the opposite is true: that an understanding of genocide has led people to mobilize genocidal armies, that the memory of holocausts has led people to perpetuate holocausts. The sensitive poets who remembered the loss, the researchers who documented it, have been like the pure scientists who discovered the structure of the atom. Applied scientists used the discovery to split the atom’s nucleus, to produce weapons which can split every atom’s nucleus; nationalists use the poetry to split and fuse human populations, to mobilize genocidal armies, to perpetrate new holocausts.”

— Fredy Perlman, *The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism*

Back in the 1990s, answering mail for the 'zine I used to publish, I noticed that Germans — even German anarchists — responded strangely whenever the conflict between Israel and Palestine came up. Every time anything related to the issue appeared in my 'zine, I got a lengthy letter from an irate German accusing me of Palestinian nationalism or even borderline anti-Semitism. I never once received such a letter from citizens of any other nation, even though the 'zine was distributed as far as Israel, nor did I ever receive one from a Jewish reader of any nationality. From my perspective, the positions in the 'zine on that issue were not particularly controversial: like most others in the anarchist community, I deplored the violence and racism of the Israeli military and the Zionist settler movement, while remaining suspicious of those seeking to capitalize on what I considered understandable Palestinian desperation. At the time, I interpreted these letters as nothing more than an overzealous effort on the part of some Germans to be sensitive about issues affecting Jewish people.

I returned to Europe last fall for the first time in some years. In the course of my travels, I discovered that what had seemed like a minor blind spot in the German radical milieu had evolved into what I regard as a really problematic strain of thought: the “Anti-German Critique,” a reactionary nationalism that masquerades as radical anti-nationalism. For adherents of this ideology, the important thing is not to oppose capitalism, racism, and hierarchy everywhere, but to oppose Germany and anti-Semitism specifically, even to the extent of supporting other capitalist nations and other forms of racism.<sup>2</sup> Revolutions being unforthcoming, Anti-German

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<sup>2</sup>The word racism is used in this text to call attention to the double standards so many white people

antifascists settle for supporting the current government of Israel, all the injustices it perpetrates notwithstanding, on account of the injustices perpetrated by its opponents.

At first, I only came across hints of this. Climbing the immense stairwell of the EKH, Vienna's longstanding squatted social center, I came upon a little exhortation scrawled on the wall: "Support Zionism." That's strange, I thought to myself: here, in an anarchist stronghold, graffiti urging people to rally to a cause already receiving more support from the United States than any other government in the world, and responsible for the displacement and repression of an entire population of people of color. In the ageless tradition of marker-bearing squatters, I added a little message of my own: "down with all isms — support people, not nations."

The following week found me staying at a social center in Dresden. Among the other occupants of the space were two Israelis, who — like many young Israelis I had met upon earlier visits to Europe<sup>3</sup> — were traveling the continent in order to avoid the draft that compels Israelis to serve in the military. I fell to talking politics with one of them. He declined to take a position on the Israel-Palestine conflict — an admirable enough stance for a person coming from such a complicated situation, who had accepted exile rather than risk killing or dying for a cause in which he did not believe.

Others in Germany had not respected his decision, however. He recounted to me his experience traveling for a few days with a German band; when it came out that he was avoiding military service, another person on the tour — a German gentile, otherwise committed to revolutionary politics — was outraged: "You mean you wouldn't serve to protect your people? You coward!"

Scarcely two days later, during an antifascist action in Leipzig, I had my first brush with Anti-Germans. I'll spare you the details of my participation in the event — suffice it to say my friends and I spent hours wandering around peering at photocopied maps, followed by a few exhilarating minutes being pursued by riot police through cordoned-off streets and over spiked fences, and in the end the scheduled fascist march was thwarted. After traveling throughout southern and eastern Europe, where fascism is gaining more and more power, it was a real relief to see it being held at bay somewhere. It was not so encouraging, however, to see US, Israeli,

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bring to their considerations of the Palestine/Israel conflict. One must be a racist to compare the living conditions of average Palestinian and Israeli families today and not see injustice, however things stand in the gang war. It's also impossible to describe the policies of the Israeli government, which disenfranchise, dominate, and humiliate Palestinians the same way apartheid did native Africans in South Africa, as anything less than racist. Some Palestinians might also be described as having racist ideas, but they are hardly in a position to subject Israelis en masse to such dehumanizing treatment.

<sup>3</sup>Among others, I had spent time with members of the band Dir Yassin, an anarchist and anti-Zionist band from Israel. They were interviewed in the anarcho-punk magazine *Profane Existence* in 1998, and with luck you can still find the interview.

and British flags being unloaded at the departure point of an antifascist march.

I went immediately over to the young men unloading them. My German friend had urged me not to waste my time, but whether or not they would listen to me I was curious what they had to say for themselves.

“What are you doing with that flag?” I gestured at the stars and stripes one young fellow was pulling from the truck.

“We are going to march with it.”

“I’m from the United States,” I began, “and I can’t fucking believe you would march with a US flag at this rally. Don’t you know what this flag means?”

“But it is different here! Here, this flag is a symbol of the antifascist struggle.”

“Listen, everywhere in the world that flag represents the same things: Hollywood, Coca-Cola, the absolute power of the capitalist market. What does that have to do with freedom?”

His answer was almost plaintive. “But Britain and the United States beat the German government! They were the only ones who could do it. We carry their flags to remember this.”

“They fought that war with their armies segregated into black and white divisions, and Japanese citizens in internment camps! They weren’t fighting for freedom, but for their own national power — just like in the genocidal wars against the Native Americans! That flag is stained with the blood of millions!”

“But they were the only ones who could stop the Nazis here,” he repeated, almost sheepishly. I hadn’t caught myself a particularly fierce Anti-German.

“That war only happened because people were willing to march under flags in the first place, and we could have won it without flags if people like you didn’t insist on them. If you’re going to march with that flag, count me out, and every antifascist like me in the US would do the same.” I left to find my own route to block the fascists — hence the crazy chase scene involving the spiked fence.

That night, sporting a limp that lasted for weeks, I stayed at a squat in Erfurt. Here, someone had gone around to every poster that had read “Antifascist” and blacked out “fascist” to replace it with “Deutsch.” What kind of people thought it was more important to take a stand against Deutschland than against fascism?

It wasn’t until Hamburg, my last stop in Germany, that I got to have the discussion I’d wanted with a real live Anti-German. It was someone I knew: back in the ’90s, he had booked my old punk rock band at a social center in Germany. He was thinner now, with a more haughty, intellectual air about him and a pencil-thin moustache.

“Yes,” he was saying, “but your new band is... not so good, yes?” He nodded to me, eyebrows raised.

“We’re a new band,” I replied, gamely. “We’ve just learned new instruments. Over

time, I hope we'll improve. But yes, right now, perhaps we are not so good."

"Your last band" — he paused for dramatic effect — "did not improve with time, I think. I saw you at the beginning of your last tour, and then at the end. Do you remember?"

"Yes, of course. I agree." Humility is the better part of celebrity, if you want to last an hour in punk circles.

"You know," he said, leaning his head back and looking into the middle distance, "I think when I first started to lose interest, it was when the record came out with the song about Intifada."<sup>4</sup>

"Aha!" I exclaimed, practically pounding my fist upon the ubiquitous foosball table — the game is known as "kicker" in Germany, and heaven help any foreigner who takes on even the drunkest of native players. "An Anti-German! I've been waiting for this! Let's get down to business."

"Yes, I think there is a lot where we do not agree! But maybe there is no reason even to talk about it." He darted me a sidelong glance. "For example, you said you live in the woods — you are against technology and civilization, yes? But for us, you know, we think that technology is just something that works. It spreads, because it works."

He had my complete attention now. "And other peoples who are less, shall we say, advanced...?"

"Ah, I see what you suggest. Yes, some might say that this is a Western-centered view. But people around the world are taking up this lifestyle as fast as they can."

"But you really can't argue that everything that spreads is a good thing. You know, a plague also spreads. A plague spreads because it works! And anyway, I am not against all technology — just technologies that promote hierarchy or water down our experience of life. Besides, if everyone lived the way people in Germany and the US live, the planet would be wrecked in one generation."

"A plague spreads because it works," he repeated, nodding in slit-eyed apprecia-

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<sup>4</sup>The offending song, named "Called Terrorists by Terrorists," was explained thus in the liner notes: "The title of this song refers to the well-known murder of United Nations mediator Count Folke Bernadotte, who was killed on orders from future Israeli politician Yitzhak Shamir. Bernadotte was appointed in 1948 to negotiate between the Palestinian natives and the Zionists who were attempting to establish an Israeli state in their homeland; he was the former head of the Swedish Red Cross, and had risked his life to save thousands of Jews from concentration camps during the second world war. After months of studying the situation, Bernadotte concluded that in the interests of human decency if the Zionists were to eventually be given sovereignty over a part of Palestine, Palestinian refugees who had been driven out by Zionist violence should be given two options: they should be allowed to return to their stolen lands, or else receive compensation from the new nation of Israel for what had been taken from them. The day after he made his proposal, he was killed by Zionist terrorists carrying out Shamir's instructions. Years later, supported by a media blackout on the past and the fact that history is always written by the victors, Shamir was able to join other world leaders in referring to the Palestinians who still resisted the racist repression of his regime as 'terrorists' without anyone bringing up his own blood-soaked past."

tion of my clever rejoinder.

I learned later, in my research into Anti-German thought, that indeed, some Anti-German writers conceive of world history in terms of the progress of civilization (i.e., Western civilization), with the implication that other cultures are primitive. This is an old-fashioned Marxist analysis, in which capitalist technocracy is a stage of human evolution that must be passed through on the way to communist utopia; this was the excuse the Bolsheviks and Maoists gave for forcing millions to give up their traditional lifestyles in order to join the machinery of industrial communism. “There is something worse than capitalism and bourgeois society: its barbarous abolition,” writes one Anti-German, and he goes on to make it explicit that he is referring to Arabic nationalism as well as German fascism. Thinking this way makes it easy enough to pose Israel and the United States as the flagships of culture and progress, and those dirty Arabs as the savages to whom the torch of Nazi irrationality and brutality has been passed.

But let’s return to the conversation in Hamburg. “But what are the US flags for in the demonstrations?” I demanded.

“Ah, they are a joke, to wind people up,” he explained. “There are certain people it is important to piss off with these flags. You know, in Germany, the right wing exploits the whole anti-American thing for its own purposes.”

“But isn’t it totally reactionary to carry them just because they bother your enemies? Does that mean you have to embrace the flag of such a destructive, oppressive nation?”

As I discovered later in my studies, if he had been a true hard-line Anti-German he would have explained to me that, because the US provides Israel with the money and guns to hold the entire Middle East at bay and do to the Palestinians as they please, it is not a destructive nation at all, but the foremost protector of peace. Instead, he opted for a more conciliatory approach: “This is a German thing, special to our German context. Here, where the holocaust took place, our most important job is to fight German power, and for this the flags are good.”

I reflected a minute. “Isn’t it very German to claim that in the German context, you have a special privileged perspective that justifies actions that don’t make sense anywhere else?”

As their name implies, Anti-Germans put quite a bit of energy into establishing the special status of the German nation-state as an evil more terrible than any other. Accordingly, my companion launched into an explanation of why the Holocaust happened in Germany, why it could only happen in Germany, and why it was worse than any other atrocity in history. To hear him tell it, the status of the German state as perpetrator of the most terrible of all crimes grants certain special rights and powers of observation to its citizens: knowing anti-Semitism better than anyone else, they



can see more clearly than others how it is still the most serious danger facing the world.

I wasn't able to follow his argument this far, though, as I was still getting over my shock at his dismissal of others' racist oppression and slaughter. "Wait, what about the extermination of the Native Americans?"

"That was different: that was simply a conflict over land and resources, and it was concluded when the last of the Indians surrendered. The Jews were law-abiding German citizens, and were singled out for purely racist, ideological reasons. You'll probably say that there were people in the death camps besides the Jews; but the Jews were the real targets of the Shoah."<sup>5</sup>

"Of course, Jewish people now have the means to talk about their experiences in the death camps, whereas the Romani people, who are still oppressed and dispossessed everywhere, are unable to get a hearing."

"Don't you think that sort of rhetoric is a little anti-Semitic, like saying there is a worldwide Jewish conspiracy?"

"It's very convenient for a gentile like you to call everyone who disagrees anti-Semitic! You'll recall that the last time I was here with a band that talked about Israel and Palestine, half of us were Jewish. Anyway, what about my earlier question? Isn't it nationalist to consider Deutsch culture a context unto itself apart from the international context? What ever happened to 'no borders, no nations'?"

He answered me with a phrase that summarized everything for me: "But that does not take into account our special situation. Here we say, 'destroy all nations, but Israel last.'"

In this formulation, we arrive at the central fallacy of the pro-Zionist position: the idea that nations protect their citizens. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of the way state power works. Each government argues to its citizens that it exists to protect them from other governments; but when nations fight, it is not governors that die, but their citizens. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of Israelis have died since the formation of Israel in 1948. Former terrorists such as Shamir and Sharon have risen to power upon waves of fear, assuring their constituents that if anyone is to suffer, it will be Arabs — but their policies have continued to result in the loss of Israeli lives, while they die of old age.<sup>6</sup>

Compared to the aforementioned Romani people, who are still persecuted across the whole of Europe, one might even say the Israelis have it worse: thanks to billions and billions of dollars from the United States, they are able to maintain an artificially

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<sup>5</sup>"Shoah" is a Hebrew word for the Holocaust.

<sup>6</sup>With the exception, of course, of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, who was assassinated by a Zionist Jew for fear he might make progress towards a peaceful and just solution to the conflict. One would think this, if anything, would have turned the Israeli public against militant Zionism — but no, he was succeeded in power by a right wing hardliner.

high standard of living, but at any moment a suicide bomber may kill them or their loved ones. One must wonder if, given the opportunity, most Romani people would opt for power and luxury beneath the sword of Damocles over their current circumstances. Had they somehow been chosen by destiny to force a people out of their homeland and carry on a US-financed war against their neighbors for the past half-century, the results would surely be similar.

Neither fate, of course, is desirable. If Jews today were in the same situation as the Romani, that would also be a terrible tragedy. But let us not imagine that those are the only two possibilities for survivors of the Holocaust. Such a lack of imagination, that reduces all questions to a matter of picking the lesser of two evils, is at the heart of all the impasses that face us across the world today. It is the same lack of imagination that led people to mobilize around Kerry against Bush, rather than opposing the US government itself; it is the same lack of imagination that induces the Anti-Germans to side with the state of Israel against its enemies, rather than with us against nationalism and enmity themselves.

To be sure, the Jews who have been murdered worldwide over the past six decades have been killed by anti-Semites. Anti-Semitism has flourished among Arabs; much is made of this by the Anti-Germans, who trace Arabic nationalism back to early connections between certain Arabs and German Nazis. But these few connections would have been meaningless if Arabic anti-Semites had not had been able to make use of Israeli atrocities in the years that followed to recruit converts. The violence in the Middle East today is not the direct successor to the Nazi Holocaust; rather, it is the result of the violence committed by survivors of that Holocaust, who became abusers in their turn — as survivors all too often do.

Until now, we have barely touched upon the number of Palestinians and other Arabs who have suffered at the hands of the Israeli state. If one is making an argument for nations as protectors of human beings, one must take all human beings into account, not only the citizens of certain nations — unless one believes the others to be subhuman. Here we can see that the cost of the establishment and perpetuation of the state of Israel has been colossal in terms of the suffering and death of both Israelis and Palestinians.

As anarchists, we can find the explanation for this not in the innate bloodthirstiness and anti-Semitism of Arabs (nor the imperialistic machinations of Jews, for that matter), but in the way nationalists and nation-states pit human beings against one another. For us, the answer is clear: we must struggle against the governments of Israel and Palestine, as well as those of the US, Germany, and all other nations. So long as one intolerant, violent, self-interested government is able to carry on unchallenged, it will be all too easy for rival governments to muster frightened adherents to commit murderous acts as well. So-called pragmatists who insist that we must sup-

port one or another of these gangs would have us perpetuate the whole mess into eternity. We can find our solidarity with all Palestinians and Israelis who struggle against their own rulers on the basis of a recognition of each other's humanity.<sup>7</sup>

Before we conclude, let's revisit the origins and mentality of the Anti-German ideology, as it exemplifies many of the potential pitfalls for radicals in today's global context. Long before the Nazis came to power in Germany, opposition to capitalism and the rich was often directed against caricatures of "the International Jew." Many German nationalists considered the proletariat to be composed of non-Jewish Germans, who were supposedly preyed upon by Jewish money lenders; the implication was that by getting rid of the Jews, the capitalist system could be symbolically cleansed of its parasites. Anti-Semitism was taken for granted in many revolutionary circles: Bakunin, one of the most famous early anarchist thinkers, made anti-Semitic remarks, and Mussolini himself started out with an interest in anarchism. Revolutionary working class activism was co-opted by national socialism such as that of Mussolini's blackshirts no less than by nationalist socialism such as that of the Bolsheviks. This checkered heritage makes it easy for the Anti-Germans to read anti-Semitism in the radicalism of their contemporaries, whether it's there or not.

Today, fascists in Germany and other nations have similarly muddied issues by adopting environmentalist and anti-globalization stances. It would be nice to stop at the conclusion that the Anti-Germans have simply been provoked by their enemies into thoughtlessly adopting contradictory positions, but the fact that they have crossed into nationalism and borderline racism suggests something more insidious: that in setting out to resist fascism, they have been infected by it, perhaps as a result of the same German predispositions they aim to oppose. In studying their example, we can recognize the importance of developing a nuanced critique of power relations, but we are also reminded of Nietzsche's dictum that those who do battle with monsters must take care lest they become monsters themselves.

Every holocaust justifies itself on the pretext of protecting innocents. In the US, during the extermination of Native Americans (and, later, during the segregation era), white women were said to be threatened by colored savages; in Nazi Germany, citizens of pure "Aryan blood" were fetishized as victims of a worldwide conspiracy of degenerates. In coming to see the Jewish people as a category — "the" endangered, "the" victims of oppression — rather than committing to a struggle against injustice

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<sup>7</sup>In that spirit, I'd like to conclude this text with a poem by leading Israeli author Aharon Shabtai:

*I, too, have declared war: / You'll need to divert part of the force / deployed to wipe out the Arabs — / to drive them out of their homes / and expropriate their land — / and set it against me. / You've got tanks and planes, / and soldiers by the battalion; / you've got the rams' horns in your hands / with which to rouse the masses; / you've got men to interrogate and torture; / you've got cells for detention. / I have only this heart / with which I give shelter / to an Arab child. / Aim your weapons at it: / even if you blow it apart / it will always, / always mock you.*

everywhere and in all forms, the Anti-Germans set the stage for themselves to end as abettors of racist, nationalist war. It is easy to see how German radicals, eager to distance themselves from their nation's anti-Semitic history and desperate to oppose a resurgent fascist movement, might prioritize Jewish concerns over others. But this is sometimes how new atrocities occur: the survivors of persecution become persecutors, and others, anxious to atone for condoning their former persecution, turn a blind eye.

Anti-German partisanship for Israel, once set in motion, did not lack justification and encouragement: there is an entire propaganda industry given over to rationalizing Israeli policy, just as there is another given to taking advantage of it to mobilize Arabic resistance groups. Zionist Israelis are indeed victims in the Israel-Palestine conflict, as are Palestinian suicide bombers; the problem is that both fight not to end the conflict but to win it. The Anti-German phenomenon should remind anarchists not to hurry to pick sides in national and ethnic strife; we must, rather, side with whatever parts of those struggling resonate with our desires to supercede the terms of such conflicts, however buried those parts may be. We can intercede in the manner demonstrated by Rachel Corrie, the US activist killed by a bulldozer of the Israeli Defense Force while fighting to protect Palestinian homes: not so that one side may triumph, but to help human beings survive an inhuman conflict.

All this is complicated, for sure. In a world in which seemingly everybody is lined up on one side or another of such conflicts, it seems those who would take sides with everyone against conflict itself find themselves apart from everyone else, even at odds with them. But again, let us learn from the Anti-Germans: those who resign themselves to the failure of revolutionary prospects turn, defensively, into the very monsters they so recently opposed.

## **WHY GERMANY GETS IT WRONG ABOUT ANTISEMITISM AND PALESTINE**

Inna Michaeli, *Open Democracy*, 2021.

Palestine solidarity demonstrations and actions in Germany have been accused of antisemitism, yet when we ask what was actually antisemitic about them, it turns out not to be antisemitism at all. Let me explain why. What I am offering here is a public service, a Jewish queer woman's perspective for the German media, politicians and public.

In Germany, defending the right of the Palestinian people to exist, to live in safety and dignity in their homeland, is regularly met with accusations of antisemitism. But these accusations have little to do with Jews, and everything to do with a German-

centred view of the world, and racism against Palestinians, Muslims and migrants in Germany and across Europe.

German politicians speak day and night of Germany's commitment to eradicate antisemitism and preserve Jewish life. One form this commitment takes is unconditional diplomatic, military and financial support to Israel, even as it commits war crimes in Gaza and maintains a regime recently recognised by Human Rights Watch as apartheid. Another way to demonstrate this commitment is to defame individuals and organizations who support human rights for Palestinians and resist the Israeli apartheid regime as antisemitic, even if these individuals or the members of these organisations are themselves Jewish. Yet another is to blame migrants and refugees for "imported antisemitism", positioning Germany as the protector of the Jews from antisemitism, the source of which by implication lie outside of Germany.

Take for example Berlin's interior minister, Andreas Geisel. In a 2019 interview with *Die Zeit*, the SPD politician stated: "When I hear that BDS [the boycott, divestment and sanctions campaign against Israel] supposedly has a commitment to oppose antisemitism, I can only smile wearily. Such organizations like to claim that they are anti-Zionist, but not antisemitic. In practice, BDS is hostile to Israel. There, the transitions to antisemitism are fluid." Contrary to Geisel's conflation of antisemitism with anti-Zionism, there is nothing fluid here, nor a conspiracy to mean something other than what they say.

While for some white supremacists Israel represents the centre of the global Jewish conspiracy and a force of evil (the way they understand it, of course), others are quite fond of it. Far right movements and politicians can often profess support for Israel, while at the same time promoting or tolerating antisemitic views. Think of the far-right AfD party in Germany, the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán in Hungary, or Donald Trump. On the other hand, movements like *Palästina Spricht* ("Palestine speaks") collaborate with many Jews, speaking out against antisemitism with an integrity that state institutions can only dream of. They make clear beyond doubt that antisemites aren't welcome, and that Zionism doesn't equate with Judaism; that Jews as a whole are in no way responsible for the crimes of the Israeli state.

Palestinians and those who support them are not the ones unable to distinguish between racism against Jews and resistance to Israel. It's politicians like Geisel and Michael Müller, Berlin's mayor, who conveniently compared the non-violent and anti-racist BDS movement to the Nazis.

It is widely assumed that due to its history, Germany is particularly sensitive to antisemitism. However, although German public figures and state institutions invoke antisemitism as an argument against Palestinian rights, they are rarely sensitive to the Jewish experience, or to racism at all. On the contrary, they seem to be exclusively attuned to white German history, experience, and cultural and emotional associations

— in other words, sensitive to themselves.

The popular narrative speaks of German guilt, but it is not the kind of guilt that comes with decentring oneself and recognising the other — it is a self-centered, narcissistic position. The result is a form of politics that effectively leads to death and destruction in Palestine, and to attempts to criminalise Palestine solidarity and act violently towards migrants in Germany itself. For a state so preoccupied with “integration”, Germany works hard to alienate us.

It is easy to see how this worldview results in the police brutality we then experience at demonstrations. On top of the classic police violence, this particular brutality is also politically motivated, serving the agenda to crush the Palestine solidarity movement. Yet it’s a growing, popular movement which is stronger than ever before in Berlin and the rest of Germany.

## **KINDERMÖRDER ISRAEL**

Slogans like *Kindermörder Israel* (“child-killer Israel”) are a description of horrendous reality — one of three Palestinians that Israel kills in Gaza are children. As inconvenient and triggering as it is for many Germans (and quite a few Jews), what should people chant when Israel is killing children? How can the victims express their rage and sorrow, how can they mourn their children who are killed again and again by Israel?

It appears that this particular slogan upsets some people for two reasons. One is the supposed equation between Jews and Israel. So when you say “Israel”, the listener hears “Jews”, regardless of the context of what is said and by whom. But a listener who thinks of Jews as synonymous with Israel is the one with the antisemitism problem, not the slogan.

One way to avoid this problem, suggested a commenter on a recent German Facebook thread, would be to say “Netanyahu” instead of Israel. Netanyahu certainly has blood on his hands, but not only Netanyahu. Israel killed children in Gaza before Netanyahu and will likely kill after him too — with the blessing of Germany and the European Union.

It’s not a single person, it’s an entire machinery. It is the Israeli education system that educates children from kindergarten onwards to become soldiers, it is the mandatory military service that creates a militarised society, it is the media that aligns with the army and always provides the ideological justification in advance for any war crime. It is a culture that perpetuates a permanent sense of victimhood, that denies the Nakba and the occupation, that dehumanises Palestinians, that sends its youth to occupy, shoot, and kill. Israel is doing the killing, state and society.

The second reason that such a slogan upsets people is the centuries-old anti-semitic blood libel, the accusation that Jews kill Christian children to use their blood,

found in the history of different regions but dominant primarily in Europe. It is indeed a terrible antisemitic trope. Yet Christian European history is not a universal reference point. It is a reference point of a particular ethnic and religious group in Germany, namely white Germans with Christian heritage. It is also, naturally, a reference point for Jews in Germany.

In Germany, different ethnic and religious communities have different historical trajectories and cultural associations, and the expectation for everyone to share what is primarily Christian European sensibilities and associations is problematic. For Palestinian refugees who came to Germany well after the Holocaust, for reasons not unrelated to it, “childkiller Israel” invokes associations to the Palestinian children killed by the Israeli military and policies, rather than the blood libel. Nor is this blood libel any central reference point for Israeli Jews, who grew up and were socialized in Israel. Yes, this is the primary association for those who grew up in or next to Christian European tradition — but the story here is not about them. Decentering oneself and one’s particular cultural associations and emotional landscape as the universal reference point is the task at hand facing the German society. It is, in other words, learning to say: it’s not about me.

## **ISRAELI FLAG BURNING**

On 15 May, the day that the Nakba — the 1948 expulsion and displacement of Palestinians from the newly-declared state of Israel — is commemorated, Germany saw possibly the largest-ever demonstrations of solidarity with the Palestinian people. It was impossible to ignore how intersectional those demonstrations were, from the Latin American bloc to intersectional feminists.

Yet the Guardian’s report on the protests chose instead to highlight German politicians’ condemnation of alleged antisemitism, ignoring speeches by Jewish activists and groups like Jewish Voice or the Jewish Bund, and focusing instead on such horrors as the burning of an Israeli flag. Much of the mainstream media coverage of Nakba Day demonstrations did not even mention nor explain to the readers what the Nakba is, and its continuation in the form of ethnic cleansing and denial of Palestinians’ right to return. Berlin, with the largest Palestinian population in Europe, is home to people whose family members have been murdered by Israel in the recent days. These protests are often framed as “anti” Israel, but the fact that they are primarily “for” Palestinian life is omitted.

This is exemplary of public discourse on the issue in Germany, the United Kingdom and elsewhere: Israeli flags matter, Palestinian lives do not. When people, politicians and the media, care more about the burning of national flags than the burning of homes and neighbourhoods and the killing of entire families, they should really have a hard look at themselves.

Here too, in the eyes of the beholder, Israeli flag stands for Jews (and the beholder assumes everyone shares their associations). You can be sentimental about the Star of David as much as you want, but painted on a house in Sheikh Jarrah, it is not more than a symbol of violence and ethnic cleansing. Painted on the Israeli flag, it is a symbol of colonization, occupation and an apartheid regime.

During Chanukah 2017, the Jewish Antifa Berlin group staged a Chanukia with the words: “on our Chanukia, instead of candles, there are now the symbols of human bondage — the national flags of repressive regimes from all over the world, which, in their own unique ways, are responsible for global misery. Their sacralisation is the modern form of idolatry.” Contrary to what some German politicians think, not all Jews are the same.

## **FROM THE RIVER TO THE SEA, PALESTINE WILL BE FREE**

Another slogan that’s stressful to many German ears — and many Jewish ones — is “from the River to the Sea, Palestine will be Free”. Like the hollow expression “Israel’s right to exist”, it evokes the fear that Jews will be annihilated, if they cannot maintain a state where Jews control the territory between the river Jordan and the Mediterranean. For many people, no Israel means no Jews. Feeding this fear is to perpetuate the logic that Jewish life depends on racial and ethno-national demographic and political domination of one group over another, rather than more egalitarian and democratic frameworks of civil rights, in all their imperfection.

Yet open antisemites who conflate Israel and Jews are not the only ones to do so. The Israeli state does its best efforts to position itself as the voice of the world’s Jewish communities. The German media often unthinkingly describes Israel as “the Jewish state”, even though democratic principles would suggest that a state should not be ethnically or religiously exclusive.

Tragically, mainstream Jewish institutions in many countries also align themselves with Israeli politics no matter what, and wave Israeli flags at every opportunity, including at the very moments that bombs fall and kill entire families in Gaza. This makes the task of distinguishing between Israel and Jews all the more difficult — yet an anti-racist position demands that we do.

There is also a deeper political and philosophical question here. What does it even mean, for Israel to exist? I was a child when my family immigrated to Israel, I have Israeli citizenship, and I grew up in the Israeli education system. I didn’t know where Palestine was and what exactly it was until I was an adult.

I grew up in Haifa not knowing it was and is a Palestinian city. Right or no right, Israel does exist for me — as a nation-state, as a system, as a society that made much of who I am. It exists as a colonial project and a machinery of oppression. Yet, this very land on which Israel exists and which it constantly tries to grab, occupy and



take control of, is Palestine.

My understanding of this land is neither religious nor essentialist, but political. I understand the land between the river and the sea to be Palestine, colonised. This understanding comes out of respect for what the land means to people who were colonised and displaced. Refusing to recognise this geopolitical space as Palestine would contribute to its colonisation and complete its erasure. This we must refuse. So for me, Haifa is Palestine, even if it is simultaneously the Israel I grew up in.

Palestine exists as a land, a country, and also as an idea of freedom, homecoming and decolonisation. It also exists as a Palestinian society, in diaspora and in Palestine. It has different degrees of overlap with the Jewish-Israeli one, and exists in different constellations of colonial control, from the besieged Gaza to the occupied West Bank to the Israeli citizenship of Palestinians.

## JEWISH LIFE DOESN'T REQUIRE PALESTINIAN DEATH

Ultimately, this Israeli apartheid system draws its legitimacy, among others, from telling Jews in Palestine and around the world, that if it collapses, so will they. Germany also gets this message loud and clear. South African Apartheid relied on a similar myth, convincing its allies in Britain, the US, Germany and elsewhere, that its fall would trigger an annihilation of whites by Blacks.

Yet what if it isn't true? What if one day this system collapses — the same way the Soviet Union collapsed, or the German Democratic Republic, or Czechoslovakia — and we are left very much alive and breathing?

The rockets from Hamas are invoked — not just by Israel but also by Germany, the EU and the US — to justify the death and destruction in Gaza. As if Gaza has to burn for Jews to live.

What if Jewish life doesn't require Palestinian death? (Though even if it did, my life certainly isn't worth more than the life of Rajaa Abu Al-Ouf, a dedicated social worker and psychologist who worked to provide children with psychological support, murdered last week in Gaza, with her children.)

What if Jewish existence doesn't mean that as Jews we necessarily have to become occupiers, colonisers, *Kindermörder*? What if the expectation placed on us to become these things is itself the worst antisemitic blood libel of all?

If you choose death in Gaza, you don't choose life for anyone. You choose death.

Consider the Israelis on the Gaza border who suffer from the rockets. The moment a resident of the south or elsewhere refuses to serve as justification for the massacre in Gaza and starts to talk of a peaceful solution, they are often branded as traitors (You note quite rightly that I am not talking about Hamas here, because when it wasn't Hamas or Islamic Jihad, it was someone else. You cannot hold millions of people in the world's largest prison, and expect they'll throw flowers at you.)

Israel and the international community had the chance, when Hamas was democratically elected, to enable them transition from a militarised group to political actors. Plenty of governments started as ‘terror’ groups. Nelson Mandela was listed on the terror watchlist in the US until 2008. In Germany, he was considered a ‘state terrorist’ for a long time by successive German governments. Clearly the interest here was not to allow any legitimate Palestinian sovereignty.

This is also my appeal to fellow Jews in Germany and beyond. I know our inter-generational traumas. Many of us know perfectly well from our grandparents’ generation what it means to have your entire family murdered. How loss and trauma and yes, fear, continue to live in the next generations.

Fear is a powerful instrument that is used to control people — so let us not be controlled. Let’s be afraid of what we really need to be afraid of: white supremacy and colonialism, fascism and nationalism, murderous regimes and apartheid. Even if these things come under the name of Israel.

As a Jewish queer woman, I know that I am genuinely safer with my Palestinian friends and comrades, than with the German establishment. I am convinced we must work against antisemitism and all forms of racism, with those affected by it — not by finding fake comfort in white saviours. As long as Jews turn to the white German establishment for safety, this will never stop the paralysing fear and anxiety, because we have excellent reasons not to trust this establishment with our lives. The establishment that lets thousands of refugees drown in the Mediterranean and shakes hands with Israeli war criminals before it is willing to speak with critical Jews.

So let’s take a deep breath and together: from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free.

## THE GERMAN CATECHISM

A. Dirk Moses, *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, 2021.

The heated German debate about Achille Mbembe’s alleged antisemitism, Michael Rothberg’s book, *Multidirectional Memory*, and Jürgen Zimmerer’s *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz?* linking German colonialism to the Nazi war of annihilation, has foreign observers like me scratching our heads. After all, we have been raising these issues for twenty years. Rothberg and Zimmerer attended a conference I organized in Sydney on “Genocide and Colonialism” in 2003, and Zimmerer published one of many articles on colonialism and the Holocaust in a book I edited the next year. By the end of the decade, many scholars had come to accept that the NS regime and the Holocaust could also be understood in imperial-colonial terms.

So what is new here? Certainly not the counter arguments, which were raised at the time by German and other historians, like Birthe Kundrus, Robert Gerwarth

and Stefan Malinowski. This debate deprovincialized Holocaust historiography and forced all participants to sharpen their thinking. The situation is different now. The vehemence of the reaction to Rothberg and Zimmerer's article in *Die Zeit*, "Enttabuisiert den Vergleich!" indicated by the denunciation, sarcasm, and indignation are reminiscent of heresy trials. Outrage replaces sobriety, perhaps exacerbated in social media's capacity to channel and publicize political emotions. We are witnessing, I believe, nothing less than a public exorcism performed by the self-appointed high priests of the *Katechismus der Deutschen*. This catechism has five elements

## THE CATECHISM

1. The Holocaust is unique because it was the unlimited *Vernichtung der Juden um der Vernichtung willen* (exterminating the Jews for the sake of extermination itself) distinguished from the limited and pragmatic aims of other genocides. It is the first time in history that a state had set out to destroy a people solely on ideological grounds.
2. It was thus a *Zivilisationsbruch* (civilizational rupture) and the moral foundation of the nation.
3. Germany has a special responsibility to Jews in Germany, and a special loyalty to Israel: "*Die Sicherheit Israels ist Teil der Staatsräson unseres Landes*" (Israel's security is part of Germany's reason of state)
4. Antisemitism is a distinct prejudice — and was a distinctly German one. It should not be confused with racism.
5. Antizionism is antisemitism.

This catechism replaced a previous one about 2000. The older German catechism was committed to norms of national honor and tradition, and regarded the Holocaust as a historical accident committed by a small group of fanatics, which *Nestbeschmutzer* (soilers of the nest) instrumentalized to dishonor the nation.

Many German families witnessed the scene of generational confrontations during the 1960s and 1970s between this older sense of Germanness and a new one borne by the younger 68er generation. That did not yet mean the 68ers believed in the Holocaust's uniqueness: in their anti-imperialism, many compared the US-led war in Vietnam to Nazi Germany ("USA-SA-SS"). By the 1980s, however, the understanding of the Holocaust as historically special had broken through in the West, and now many leftist and liberal Germans began to understand that being a "good" post-Holocaust subject meant incorporating this belief into their self-understanding and international image.

The new catechism did yet not triumph in the *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s as commonly supposed. It was one episode among others — debates about multicul-

turalism, Goldhagen's controversial book, the *Wehrmachtsausstellung* (Wehrmacht exhibition) and the Holocaust memorial in Berlin — in which conservatives, led by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, fought a rear-guard action in defence of the old one. But, eventually, they too came to understand that the country's geopolitical legitimacy depended on accepting the new catechism thrashed out with American, British, and Israeli elites.

Its five elements have become articles of faith in Germany over the past generation, internalized by tens of millions as the path to national redemption from its sinful past. In short, the catechism implies a redemptive story in which the sacrifice of Jews in the Holocaust by Nazis is the premise for the Federal Republic's legitimacy. That is why the Holocaust is more than an important historical event. It is a sacred trauma that cannot be contaminated by profane ones — meaning non-Jewish victims and other genocides — that would vitiate its sacrificial function. The historian Dan Diner even takes the Holocaust, as civilizational rupture, as substituting the place occupied by God before the Enlightenment. The evidence lies in how the universal significance of the suffering of Jews in this genocide becomes the basis of a new world; but that, according to Diner, remains closed to those who through their “sacred temporal blockage” (he refers to Arabs) remain caught in the past *before* the “sacrifice.” Nazi morality must be negated: instead of “redemptive antisemitism” (Saul Friedländer) — “redemptive philosemitism.”

## A REDEMPTION NARRATIVE

A central role in this Christologically-informed redemptive narrative is also discernible in the “Wiederaufstehung” of the victims. Since unification of the two German states and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the German state has undertaken various measures to “reforest” Germany with Jews. So the discourse about migration of Jews from the former Soviet Union is accompanied by the redemptive narrative in which the Jewish migrants were blended with Holocaust victims to restore the “German-Jewish symbiosis.” Having undergone the most thorough working through of history in history, Germany can once again stand proud among the nations as the beacon of civilization, vouched by approving pats on the head from American, British and Israeli elites.

Keeping the faith requires constant vigilance. Led by a government official with the imposing title of *Beauftragter der Bundesregierung für jüdisches Leben in Deutschland und den Kampf gegen Antisemitismus* (Federal Commissioner for Jewish Life in Germany and in the Fight against Antisemitism) the priests are forever on the lookout for the heresy of antisemitism and signs of the old catechism, like recurring *Schlussstrichdebatten* (debates about drawing a line under the past) Indeed, having symbolically expunged Nazis from the nation-in-redemption in serial scandals about

the Nazi past since the 1960s, the compulsion continues long after they have gone. Now the priests detect new Nazis — like Palestinians and their non-Zionist Israeli friends in Germany and beyond who are experimenting in non-nationalist modes of coexistence. Its most portentous manifestations is the BDS-Beschluss des Deutschen Bundestages (2019) that condemns the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement because — somewhat provincially — it reminded the parliamentarians “of the worst phase in German history.” The resolution and its broad support indicate a consensus that extends from the Antideutschen sect to the AfD. Any alternative paths that Palestinians might pursue to resist the colonization of their land did not appear to concern these politicians because they don’t feel they need Palestinian approval for an ethically upright self-image and their international reputations.

The moral hubris leads to the remarkable situation of gentile Germans lecturing American and Israeli Jews with accusing finger about the correct forms of remembrance and loyalty to Israel. Not that this has prevented them from maintaining discipline, even forcing some conformity from the AfD which, in trying to revive the old catechism, understands the public image necessary to avoid public banishment. Besides, it admires Israel as an anti-Islamic state that tightly regulates migration. So fearful are people in Germany that a contributor to a forum on the Mbembe debate that I published in the *Journal of Genocide Research* insisted that their identity be protected.

But priestly success has provoked a reaction. The purging of heretics has led the liberals who run German cultural institutions to worry that “*die Gedanken*” (thoughts) are not so free after all, and that they might be next. So, in December 2020, they issued the *Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit*, a statement about freedom of expression and the right to criticize Israeli policy. Even if many of them oppose BDS, they don’t think doing so should entail unemployment and exclusion from public life. For the same reasons, some of them also supported the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism to counter the chilling effects of the IHRA definition of antisemitism pushed by the Israeli government.

## THE OTHER PERSPECTIVE OF MIGRANTS

The German population is also increasingly harder to discipline because of demographic and generational change. Needless to say, migrants to Germany bring their own experiences and perspectives about history and politics that are not going to indulge the self-congratulatory stories Westerners like to tell themselves about spreading civilization over the centuries. For many of them, the article of faith about the Nazi *Zivilisationsbruch* (civilizational rupture) rings hollow, even if they recognize the Holocaust’s undeniably distinctive features. Weren’t vast parts of the globe con-

quered by Europeans and Americans, and millions killed, in the name of Western civilization, including by German colonial authorities?

For increasing numbers of younger Germans, the catechism does not reflect their lifeworld — despite the best efforts of schoolteachers. Like their cohort in the US and elsewhere who marched for Black Lives Matter, many understand that racism against migrants — not just antisemitism — is a general problem. They also observe that Israelis keep electing rightwing governments that entrench the settlement project, thereby ending the illusion of the two-state solution that allows Germans (and Americans) to believe they can reconcile their Zionism with justice for Palestinians. Joining them in Berlin are thousands of young Israelis and Palestinians escaping the nightmare enveloping their homeland. What is more, the democratic anarchy of the internet means the priestly censors cannot control the conversation like in the 1980s and 1990s. Social media enables subaltern public spheres even if speaking back to power remains limited by the cross-party consensus about the catechism.

At the same time, in this age of globalization since the 1990s, German academics joined colleagues abroad in devoting more attention to imperial history and colonial literature because they are not only interested in the thoughts and deeds of white people. “Postcolonial Studies” is too complex an inter-disciplinary field to adequately summarize, but one central point is to understand the metropole and colony as a single unit in which flows of information, people, and culture takes place. Another point is to register how politics was understood in imperial categories until quite recently: in terms of racial hierarchies and historical analogies: imitating Rome, for instance.

Many historians thus regard the insistence that the Holocaust has nothing to do with imperial history as perverse as insisting that antisemitism is utterly distinct from racism. As Claudia Bruns has shown, “Blackness” and “Jewishness” overlapped in the Enlightenment debates about Jewish emancipation in which “colonial” solutions to the “Jewish Question” were proposed, and Wilhelm Marr, the notorious inventor of the term “*Antisemitismus*,” was inspired by the rigid racial hierarchies he observed in his travels in the Americas in the 1850s. Decades later, as Christian S. Davis among others have written, German rule over Africans provided the *Alldeutscher Verband* with the model of racial subjugation, segregation, and oppression. For instance, in the 1890s, these antisemites demanded that Jews be placed under a special alien law at the same time as they advocated that Africans be subject to a separate “native law.” The understanding of the Jewish presence in Germany occurred in the context of a race-conscious worldview in which conquest and colonization of foreign peoples, hierarchies of civilization, progress and decline, survival, and extinction were central elements.

## NOTHING IS “PURE”

In view of these kinds of connections, the language of “relativization” makes no sense. It is theological rather than scholarly. When Michael Rothberg places the Holocaust into relationship with other historical traumas, he does so by showing how this has been a global practice since the Holocaust. Memory is unavoidably constituted by recursive processes of inclusion and exclusion, analogizing and distinguishing. Nothing is “pure.” The Holocaust is part of many histories: of antisemitism, of mass enslavement, of colonial counterinsurgency, or population expulsions, among others.

Combining activism from below and scholarship from above, the *Zeitgeist* has forced a reckoning with colonial legacies in Western countries. How did those objects make their way into museums? Why are those streets named after colonial “heroes” and why do statues of them dot the urban landscape? How did institutions, indeed entire economies, benefit from, and even depend on, the systematic enslavement of Africans? What were European powers doing in Africa and other parts of the world anyway, and should reparations be paid to the descendants of peoples subject to their genocidal campaigns and hyper-exploitation? For Tobias Rapp in *Der Spiegel*, simply asking this question threatens the fundamentals of western civilization.

These developments have provoked the familiar reaction we observe today, which elsewhere I have called “Anxieties in Holocaust and Genocide Studies”: panic that the iconic status of the Holocaust will be diminished as “just another” genocide in history, the sacred sullied by the profane. Some, like Thomas Schmid in *Die Zeit*, even worry about the “general suspicion of the white man.” For the ageing 68er generation, the influence of Postcolonial Studies is tantamount to the barbarian conquest of Rome. A debate about these issues is timely, but the high priests want to conduct it like an inquisition, denouncing heresy and ritually incanting the catechism as a substitute for argumentation.

The fact is that German elites do in fact use the Holocaust to blend out other historical crimes. Consider Claudius Seidl who asked in the FAZ if “War der Holocaust eine koloniale Tat?” (“Was the Holocaust a Colonial Act?”) and in answering in the negative insisted that Germans have a special obligation to Jews because of the Holocaust. He neglected to mention such obligations to Namibians. When they demand reparations, the German envoy Ruprecht Polenz denied them because the Holocaust, he declared, is “incomparable.” Meanwhile, Schmid likewise declared that “Der Holocaust war kein Kolonialverbrechen” (“The Holocaust was not colonial crime”) and that the “‘Global South’ owes an explanation for how it stands for a better development” than the West. No wonder these descendants of victims of the German state, whose capacities for development were smashed by genocidal colonial warfare, experience German memory culture as racist: it posits a hierarchy of suffering, degrees of humanity, and an embarrassing lack of critical self-awareness.

The priests justify this hierarchy by pointing to the apparent empirical uniqueness of the Holocaust: only Jews were killed for the sake of killing, out of hatred alone, while all other victims of genocide were killed for pragmatic reasons. While Nazis may have seen Slavs in colonial terms, they saw Jews through an antisemitic lens, leading to their limitless campaign, unique in history. What is more, so the argument continues, if colonialism was such an important factor, why didn't France and Britain, with their far larger empires, commit a Holocaust?

## THE COLONIALISM OF THE NATIONAL SOCIALISTS

As I argue in my new book, *The Problems of Genocide*, these familiar objections are based on a faulty reading of history. They ignore the fact that the Nazi empire 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. This meant the utopian ambition of autarchic territorial control over resources and the elimination of inner security threats. Many Germans blamed Jews and the Left for defeat in 1918, and ever since the Nazis regarded Jews as an enemy people who imperilled the projected empire because of their perceived affiliation with the international ideologies of liberalism and communism.

This may appear as unprecedented to the priests, but historians know that eliminating entire groups in paranoid and vengeful security campaigns against “hereditary enemies” is a common pattern in world history. Hitler and other leading Nazis studied these patterns in ancient and modern empires in crafting a ruthlessly modern version to house a reborn German people after the degradation of military defeat.

Like Rome and the ancient Germans, the new German Reich would save also European civilization from “Asiatic barbarism”: from the “threatening storm of the inner-Asian East, this eternal, latent danger for Europe.” This was indeed a historical German mission, Hitler continued in November 1944: “For centuries, the old Reich, alone and with allied forces, had to mount its struggle against the Mongols and later the Turks to protect Europe from a fate that in its outcome would look exactly like Bolshevization today.” Orientalism was intrinsic to an enduring tradition of German Occidentalism.

Those who fled the Nazis, including Jewish émigré scholars, appreciated these connections very well. Over a decade before Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon wrote about the subject, they understood that the Nazis were importing into Europe the style of rule that Europeans had employed in governing their empires. Not for nothing did Raphael Lemkin, who coined the genocide concept in 1944, define it in terms of colonization — replacing populations with settlers — and Franz Neumann, in his *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (1942) called Nazism a “racial imperialism” that sought to integrate the population by promising it the spoils



of “world conquest,” meaning “reducing the vanquished states and their satellites to the level of colonial peoples.”

## IT'S TIME FOR INCLUSIVE THINKING

The new German catechism takes historical justice to consist in a transaction between identifiable and stable *Völker*: instead of murdering Jews, Germans should be nice and welcoming. This philosemitism continues to view Jews in Germany as guests, not fully German, and the Jewish community as representing a foreign state, Israel. While this connection is cherished by the German political class, it asks Muslim migrants not to identify with Muslims abroad lest that foster Jihad. Redeeming the *Zivilisationsbruch* has empowered it to proclaim a new civilizing mission that sees the problem of migrants’ “imported antisemitism” as solvable with Holocaust education rather than identifying racism of all kinds with the conflation of the German *Volk* and political citizenship. One wonders how these migrants regard Germany’s sense of historical justice if it means defending a military dictatorship over Palestinians for over half a century.

To be sure, the catechism served an important function in denazifying the country. It is good that a Holocaust memorial exists in Berlin. But the country has changed. Not only has the catechism outlived its usefulness; it imperils the very freedom that Germans ostensibly prize. In its *völkisch* assumptions and fetishization of European civilization vs the Asiatic barbarians, the catechism is riddled with contradictions revealed by new German and non-German voices. The time has come to set it aside and renegotiate the demands of historical justice in a way that respects all victims of the German state and Germans of all kinds.

## BAD MEMORY

Responsa, *Jewish Currents*, 2023.

Sometime in the 2000s, a group of mostly Turkish women from an immigrant group called Neighborhood Mothers began meeting in the Neukölln district of Berlin to learn about the Holocaust. Their history lessons were part of a program facilitated by members of the Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, a Christian organization dedicated to German atonement for the Shoah. The Neighborhood Mothers were terrified by what they learned in these sessions. “How could a society turn so fanatical?” a group member named Nazmiye later recalled thinking. “We began to ask ourselves if they could do such a thing to us as well ...whether we would find ourselves in the same position as the Jews.” But when they expressed this fear on a church visit organized by the program, their German hosts became apoplectic. “They told us to go back to our countries if this is how we think,” Nazmiye said. The session was abruptly

ended and the women were asked to leave.

There are a number of anecdotes like this in anthropologist Esra Özyürek's *Subcontractors of Guilt*, a recently published study of the array of German Holocaust education programs dedicated to integrating Arab and Muslim immigrant communities into the country's ethos of responsibility and atonement for Nazi crimes. As Özyürek shows, those who pass through these programs often draw connections their guides do not intend — to nativist violence in contemporary Germany, or to the bloody circumstances they fled in Syria, Turkey, and Palestine. For many Germans, the anxieties these historical encounters stoke for migrants are, in Özyürek's words, the "wrong emotions." One German guide who leads concentration camp tours recalled being "irritated" by members of immigrant tour groups voicing the fear that "they will be sent there next." "There was a sense that they didn't belong here, and that they should not be engaging with the German past," the guide said. To be really German, they were supposed to play the part of repentant perpetrators, not potential victims.

This expectation has become the basis for what scholars Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz have called the "migrant double bind." In this paradigm, the core of contemporary "Germanness" is found in a certain sensitivity to antisemitism, conferred through a direct, likely familial relationship to the Third Reich. Migrants and racialized minorities are expected to assume the perpetrators' legacy; when they fail, this is taken as a sign that they do not really belong in Germany. In other words, in a paradox typical of the upside-down dynamics surrounding Jews, Arabs, and Germans in contemporary Germany, a questionably conceived anti-antisemitism has become the mechanism for keeping Germanness Aryan.

In a paradox typical of the upside-down dynamics surrounding Jews, Arabs, and Germans in contemporary Germany, a questionably conceived anti-antisemitism has become the mechanism for keeping Germanness Aryan.

These dynamics are largely absent from the mainstream story about memory culture in Germany, which in recent decades has cemented its reputation as a paragon of national reckoning. For *The Atlantic's* December 2022 cover story, poet and scholar Clint Smith traveled to Germany to see for himself what the country's atonement process might teach the United States about confronting its own history of racist atrocity. In the piece's final line, he appears to give the Germans an A for effort: "It is the very act of attempting to remember that becomes the most powerful memorial of all." Smith is far from the only one to come away impressed by Germany's example; from Canada to Britain to Japan, observers have looked to Germany as a model for how to contend with their own nations' crimes. As Andrew Silverstein reports in this issue, Spanish memory activists seeking to jump-start their country's internal reckoning with the violence of Francisco Franco's fascist dictatorship have

adopted the German practice of installing “Stolpersteine,” or remembrance stones, in the street.

Germany’s commitment to memory is undeniably impressive; no other global power has worked nearly as hard to apprehend its past. Yet while the world praises its culture of contrition, some Germans — in particular, Jews, Arabs, and other minorities — have been sounding the alarm that this approach to memory has largely been a narcissistic enterprise, with strange and disturbing consequences. The leftist German Jewish writer Fabian Wolff argued in a viral 2021 essay that Germany’s attachment to the past had diminished the space for Jewish life in the present: Germans have no place for “Jewish life [that] exists outside their field of vision and their way of knowing,” he wrote, or for “Jewish conversations about Jewish issues [that] have a meaning beyond and apart from what these Germans themselves think or would like to hear.” German Jewish poet and public intellectual Max Czollek’s polemic against German memory culture, *De-Integrate!*, came out in English this year and is reviewed in this issue by Sanders Isaac Bernstein. The book draws on German Jewish sociologist Y. Michal Bodemann’s concept of the “Theater of Memory,” a coinage meant to describe the role of German Jews in a narrative that is less about making amends to victims of genocide than about redeeming perpetrators and their descendants. As Bodemann wrote in 1991 of the expectation placed on Jews in the recently reunified German state: “Irrespective of their personal orientations, beliefs or histories, Jews in their bodily presence were to represent the new German democracy and as such execute ideological labor.” Jews have played this part all too well, Czollek argues, allowing Germans who once shrank from expressions of nationalism, afraid of what they might do with it, to feel that they have earned its return. The result is a libidinous explosion of nationalist sentiment, which Czollek sees in events ranging from the disturbing 2017 success of the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in parliament, to the seemingly more benign flag-waving fervor around Germany’s hosting of the 2006 World Cup.

That these post-unification desires for national identity play out against Germany’s immigrant population — especially Arabs and Muslims — is unsurprising. As the number of asylum seekers from the Middle East surged in the 2010s, so did the far-right violence against them; the deadliest such attack to date occurred in 2020, when a gunman killed nine people with migrant backgrounds in the city of Hanau, explicitly targeting locations he assumed to be frequented by non-Germans. In a manifesto he called for the “complete extermination” of many “races or cultures in our midst.” Although the German state has denounced such extremism, it allows nonwhite “Others” into its polity on highly limited, subordinate terms. As we write this, the Berlin police have once again cited antisemitism concerns to issue preemptive bans on protests in support of Palestinian prisoners and in honor of Nakba Day,

when Palestinians mark their expulsion by Zionist forces during the State of Israel's founding. (Recently, the police admitted that those arrested at last year's banned protests were targeted for wearing keffiyehs or displaying the colors of the Palestinian flag, reminiscent of similar crackdowns on the flag within Israel.) What is clear is that Germans tightly control the shape of both Jewishness and Palestinian-ness within their borders — a state of affairs that belies the supposedly humanizing effects of Holocaust memory.

We are neither the first to discuss these dynamics nor are we directly in their blast radius. But we write in solidarity with German Jewish leftists who — because yesterday's Germans massacred them and today's Germans erase them — have been marginalized in their attempts to organize, as well as with minoritized populations who face state-sanctioned repression under the guise of responsible historical stewardship. We write to alert our American readership to the ways in which Germany has become a primary political battleground in the fight over what Jewishness means now — and how that affects Palestinians across the globe. And we write in an attempt to speak directly to Germans, to share how these matters have struck the editors of one Jewish magazine dedicated simultaneously to Jewish life, Palestinian freedom, and Holocaust memory — a magazine where W.E.B. Du Bois published his 1952 dispatch from the Warsaw Ghetto and where Nazi hunter Charles R. Allen Jr. penned exposés on Reich members harbored by the US government. In short, the current state of German memory culture appears to us as a double-sided coin of farce and tragedy.

In short, the current state of German memory culture appears to us as a double-sided coin of farce and tragedy.

Germany took its time becoming an icon of remorse and reconciliation. Initially, as the nation rushed to rebuild after the war, the zeitgeist, especially in West Germany, tended toward denial: The novelist W.G. Sebald credited the country's remarkable regeneration to “the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state, a secret that bound all Germans together in the postwar years.” In this period, both East and West Germany had to contend with the horrifically awkward fact that support for the Nazi Party had remained high among the general population until Hitler's defeat rendered it unspeakable. West Germany responded largely by sweeping it under the rug, “rehabilitating” most Nazis and reintegrating them into society. East Germany did not run from the legacy of the Nazis, committing to frequent public commemoration of their crimes, but it largely followed the practices of the Soviet Union — the young country's chief political and economic sponsor — by memorializing victims of fascism in general, rather than specifically acknowledging a genocide of Jews. It also welcomed former lower-ranking Nazis into the fold of the republic's newer antifascist identity. Later generations of Germans, including some

radicals of the 1960s and '70s, washed their hands of the problem in a different way, forging a guilt-free political identity out of the fact that they were born after the rise of Nazism.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, amid a growing worldwide interest in memorials and the rise of “memory studies,” German activists began to push for more acknowledgment of the Holocaust. In the face of a reticent conservative government, leftist organizers staged dramatic actions, like occupying concentration camp sites and hosting a symbolic archaeological “dig” on the grounds where Gestapo headquarters once stood, to push Germany to provide public education in such places. During the reunification process at the end of the decade, what had begun as a grassroots effort became official state policy.

This national embrace of memorial was not without self-interest: To show itself fit to enter the community of Western European nations, a new, reunified Germany set out to prove, over the next two decades, that it had sufficiently repented. Germans even coined a new word — *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* — to name the process of “coming to terms with the past” that has become a linchpin of German national identity. Seeking to bolster its claim to penitence, the newly reunified country trumpeted a “Jewish renaissance” driven largely by immigration from the former Soviet Union — an influx of Jews that, as the scholar Hannah Tzuberi has put it, became the “most valuable guarantor of [Germany’s] democratic, liberal, tolerant character.” In 2005, the nation made this commitment visible and material by erecting the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, a vast field of stark concrete slabs in the center of Berlin. (The memorial was largely the result of lobbying by Lea Rosh, a German who swapped her first name, Edith, for a Jewish one, and who was later criticized for stealing a tooth from the Belzec concentration camp to put in a column at the memorial.) As a result of this extensive performance of public contrition, “Germany is finally equipped to assume the leadership of the EU; for even beyond its economic hegemony, it has its cards in order also from the human rights viewpoint,” the historian Enzo Traverso remarked sarcastically in *Jacobin* last year. “Today [Holocaust memory] has become the sign of a new political normativity: market society, liberal democracy, and (selective) defense of human rights.”

But Germany’s performances of repentance have their limits. They do not extend, for example, to the genocide the German colonial army committed in Namibia against Herero and Nama people between 1904 and 1908, killing tens of thousands. Germany did not officially apologize for those bloody acts until 2021 and has not agreed to pay meaningful reparations to descendants of the victims. If the new German identity relies on isolating the Holocaust as a shameful aberration in national history and nullifying it via solemn remembrance, there is little room for the memory of colonial violence in the nation’s self-mythology. Genocide scholar Dirk Moses named this

approach the “German catechism” in a 2021 essay that sparked heated debate.<sup>8</sup> “The catechism implies a redemptive story in which the sacrifice of Jews in the Holocaust by Nazis is the premise for the Federal Republic’s legitimacy,” wrote Moses. “That is why the Holocaust is more than an important historical event. It is a sacred trauma that cannot be contaminated by profane ones — meaning non-Jewish victims and other genocides — that would vitiate its sacrificial function.”

Accordingly, Germany now sees its post-Holocaust mandate as encompassing not a broader commitment against racism and violence but a specific fealty to a certain Jewish political formation: the State of Israel. Germany has relied on its close diplomatic relationship to Israel to emphasize its repudiation of Nazism, but its connection to the Jewish state goes even further. In 2008, then-chancellor Angela Merkel addressed the Israeli Knesset to declare that ensuring Israel’s security was part of Germany’s “Staatsraison,” the state’s very reason for existence. If asked why it is worth preserving a German nationalism that produced Auschwitz, Germany now has a pleasing, historically symmetrical answer — it exists to support the Jewish state.

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To that end, in recent years, Germany’s laudable apparatus for public cultural funding has been used as a tool for enacting a 2019 Bundestag resolution declaring that the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement targeting Israel is antisemitic. Although the resolution is technically nonbinding, its passage has led to an unending stream of firings and event cancellations, and to the effective blacklisting of distinguished academics, cultural workers, artists, and journalists for offenses like inviting a renowned scholar of postcolonialism to speak, tweeting criticism of the Bundestag resolution, or having attended a Palestinian solidarity rally in one’s youth. A network of antisemitism commissioners — a system explored in this issue in a feature by Peter Kuras — has been deputized to monitor such offenses. These commissioners are typically white, Christian Germans, who speak in the name of the Jews and often playact Jewishness on a public stage, posing for photo ops in yarmulkes, performing Jewish music, wearing the uniform of the Israeli police, and issuing decrees on who is next in the pillory. When they tangle with left-wing Jews in Germany, canceling their events and attacking them as antisemites in the pages of various newspapers, they suggest what Germany’s antisemitism commissioner Felix Klein has said directly: That the Jews are not being sensitive enough to what antisemitism means to the Germans — that, in fact, these Jews do not understand antisemitism at all. In a perverse twist, the fact that the Germans were the most successful antisemites in history has here become a *credential*. By becoming the Jews’

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<sup>8</sup>*Ed.*: This text is included in this anthology.

consummate protectors, Germans have so thoroughly absorbed the moral lessons bestowed by Jewish martyrdom that they have no more need for the Jew except as symbol; by the logic of this strange supersessionism, Germans have become the new Jews. This is not only a matter of rhetorical authority on Jewish matters but is also often literal, as this self-reflexive philosemitism has led to a wave of German converts to Judaism. According to Tzuberi, “The Jewish revival is desired precisely because it is a German revival.”

If Jews are negated by this formulation, Palestinians are villainized by it. Last year, when the German state banned Nakba Day demonstrations, only days after the murder of Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, police justified this suppression by claiming, in a familiar racist trope, that protesters would not have been able to contain their violent rage. Indeed, in Germany Palestinian identity itself has become a marker of antisemitism, scarcely to be spoken aloud — even as the country is home to the largest Palestinian community in Europe, with a population of around 100,000. “Whenever I would mention that I was Palestinian, my teachers were outraged and said that I should refer to [Palestinians] as Jordanian,” one Palestinian German woman speaking of her secondary school education told the reporter Hebh Jamal. Palestinianness as such has thus been stricken from German public life. In *The Moral Triangle*, a 2020 anthropological study of Palestinian and Israeli communities in Germany by Sa’ed Atshan and Katharina Galor, many Palestinians interviewed said that to speak of pain or trauma they’ve experienced due to Israeli policy is to destroy their own futures in Germany. “The Palestinian collective body is inscribed as ontologically antisemitic until proven otherwise. Palestinians, in this sense, are collateral damage of the intensifying German wish for purification from antisemitism,” wrote Tzuberi.

The ever-vigilant Germans are correct that antisemitism is on the rise in Germany — but its source is right-wing, white Germans. As in the US, the data affirms that no other group comes close to perpetuating the same amount of anti-Jewish activity. The AfD still sits in parliament, where they have pushed to curb Holocaust memorialization. The Covid-19 pandemic has sparked a loud, conspiratorial anti-vax movement that blames you know who. Meanwhile, more and more right-wing extremists are filling the ranks of the German police, the armed forces, the intelligence services, even the Bundestag. This does not seem to worry Germany’s antisemitism crusaders. For them, this is nothing compared to BDS, which makes Palestinians — and Muslims more broadly — the focal point of conversations about antisemitism. Officials speak casually of the “imported antisemitism” arriving with migrants from the Middle East. As Özyürek argues in *Subcontractors of Guilt*, the Germans have “offload[ed] the general German social problem of antisemitism onto the Middle Eastern-background minority.” The commendable liberalization of citizenship laws in Germany, which

made it easier for immigrants to obtain German citizenship, has contributed to these dynamics, sparking an anxiety about Germanness that has resulted in the aforementioned “migrant double bind,” in which white Germans (or “bio-Deutsch” as they’re revealingly called in German) reinscribe their belonging through a specific performance of anti-antisemitism. The method of repudiating a racist past has become a mechanism for extending it into the future.

Germany is not the only place where anti-antisemitism efforts have gone utterly awry. In fact, Jewish communal organizations across the globe have pursued similar measures with similarly illiberal results. For the philosopher Elad Lapidot, author of *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism*, such campaigns are inherently limiting. Lapidot argues that the well-intentioned desire to combat the idea of Jews as a distinct race with inherent biological characteristics has resulted in a taboo on discussing Jews as sharing any characteristics at all, whether religiously, culturally, politically, or otherwise. “The Jewish collective posited by anti-antisemitic discourse constitutes existence without essence, community without qualities,” he wrote in *Tablet* in 2021. “Anti-antisemitism tries to fight antisemitism by denying that Judaism exists.” It is only fair to acknowledge that, globally, it is Jews who are most often the drivers of this self-effacing work, as well as of the pro-Israel politics that almost always accompany it; if the Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland, the largest federation of Jews in Germany, were the primary agents of anti-antisemitism policy in Germany, things would likely be no better. But there is something worth examining in the particular fervor with which Germans have taken to the task, an annihilative echo in how the substance of Jewishness and Palestinianness is being actively drained through the pageant of anti-antisemitism. Only Germans — their guilt, their shame, their overcoming, their secret pride — are three-dimensional figures in this schema.

German philosemitism is revealed as another vehicle for supremacy, preferable precisely because of its anti-racist veneer.

German philosemitism is thus revealed as another vehicle for supremacy, preferable precisely because of its anti-racist veneer. Germany’s crushing embrace of the Jewish community within its borders, with or without the participation of Jews, secures the German self-image as a moral arbiter while casting the country’s guilt onto Arabs and Muslims. This works similarly on an international level, where Germany’s Staatsraison is linked to protection of the Jewish state. Not for nothing did Mathias Döpfner, CEO of the media and technology company Axel Springer, recently synthesize, without a hint of irony, the phrase “Zionismus über alles” — Zionism above all. These words allude to the erstwhile first line of the German national anthem, “Deutschland Über Alles,” now officially stricken from the song due to its association with Nazi Germany. We might refer to this form of displaced nationalism —



in which Germans enact their national aspirations via Jews and the State of Israel — as replacement supremacy: a process by which national supremacy is preserved through its projection onto a surrogate state.

The implications of this analysis are obviously threatening to the German national self-conception. We are aware, moreover, that these conclusions will be difficult to countenance in Germany in part because they incorporate a critique of the Israeli state — a position that is already profoundly marginalized. Even Czollek, who has made his name by calling out German nationalism, has actively refused to incorporate criticism of Israel into his schema, a position that has surely helped secure his warm reception in German cultural life. It will take bravery for German citizens and leaders alike to begin re-interrogating the contours of German memory culture — not in spite of what they owe to the Nazis' victims, Jewish and otherwise, but because of it. Such a reexamination may begin to restore some meaning to Jewishness, and some humanity to individual Jews, in the German psyche. It might also do the same for Palestinians, whose families remain under the yoke of Israeli oppression even as their identities are erased by German policy. Only by undertaking such an effort could Germany hope to offer a powerful repudiation, not just of its own nationalist impulse, but of the ethnonationalist project that it currently protects in Israel. After all, the Jewish supremacy that currently resounds from the hilltop settlements to the halls of Knesset is in part a German legacy, a perverted lesson of the Shoah.

All of this will require a different mode of engagement with memory and its prescriptions for the present. In *Reconsidering Reparations*, the philosopher Olúfemi O. Táíwò offers an alternative to turning to a fixed idea of the past in order to determine what justice looks like now. Instead, Táíwò calls for a “constructive view” of reparations that “respond[s] both to today’s injustices in distribution and the accumulated result of history’s distributive injustices.” He asks: “What if building the just world was reparations?” This forward-looking framework requires above all an attunement to the structure of supremacy, and an awareness that its targets and its expression might expand or change. In the '80s and '90s, Germans called for a reckoning. They organized candlelit vigils, formed historical research groups, and occupied Nazi-era buildings in order to ensure they were preserved as evidence. Today, an inclusive German people must harness that spirit anew, grabbing these processes away from the state and state-funded institutions if need be, and rerooting them in the fight against supremacy in all its guises. The work of remembering is never complete. In a process fixed to a receding past, this may begin to feel like an albatross; Germans might understandably be tempted to declare themselves finished. Yet perhaps there is not only obligation but also release in discovering that memory can be a terrain of world-building, too.

# GERMANY IS A GOOD PLACE TO BE JEWISH. UNLESS, LIKE ME, YOU'RE A JEW WHO CRITICISES ISRAEL

Deborah Feldman, *The Guardian*, 2023.

I've lived in Germany for nearly a decade now, but the only people with whom I've ever been able to discuss the conflict in the Middle East are Israelis and Palestinians. Germans tend to cut off any attempt at constructive conversation with the much-favoured phrase *that topic is much too complicated*. As a result, the understandings I've reached about the geopolitical developments of the past three decades are the result of private conversations, safely tucked away from the judgmental eyes of a German society eager to lecture us on how any criticism of Israel is antisemitic.

I have also discovered that a transactional relationship defines the public representation of Jews in Germany – and it obscures the views of an unseen majority of Jewish people who don't belong to communities financially supported by the German state, and don't constantly emphasise the singular importance of unconditional loyalty to the state of Israel. Because of the enormous power the official institutions and communities wield, non-affiliated voices are often silenced or discredited, replaced by the louder ones of Germans whose Holocaust-guilt complexes cause them to fetishise Jewishness to the point of obsessive-compulsive embodiment.

When I recently published a book about this widespread displacement of Jewish people in Germany by single-minded opportunists, the reaction was indicative: a journalist writing for a German Jewish newspaper put it all down to Israel-hatred and my supposed post-traumatic stress as a woman who had left the ultra-orthodox community. The spectre of Jewish heritage is consistently leveraged for power, because Jewishness itself is sacred and untouchable.

Like most secular Jews in Germany, I am accustomed to the aggression directed toward us by the powerful state-backed entity of "official Judaism". Theatre performances receiving standing ovations in New York and Tel Aviv are cancelled in Germany at its behest, authors are disinvited, prizes are withdrawn or postponed, media companies are pressured to exclude our voices from their platforms. Since 7 October, anyone criticising the German response to the horrific attacks of the terror organisation Hamas has been subjected to even more marginalisation than usual.

When I observed how Palestinians, and Muslims in general, in Germany were being held collectively liable for the Hamas attacks, I signed an open letter<sup>9</sup> along

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<sup>9</sup>Ed.: This letter is included in this anthology.

with more than 100 Jewish academics, writers, artists and thinkers, in which we asked German politicians not to remove the last remaining safe spaces for people to express their grief and despair. There was immediate backlash from the official German Jewish community. On 1 November, just as I was about to appear on a TV talkshow with the vice-chancellor, Robert Habeck, I was sent a screenshot of a post in which the same German Jewish journalist who attacked my book publicly discussed fantasies about me being held hostage in Gaza. It stopped my heart cold.

Suddenly, everything was clear to me. The same people who had been demanding that every Muslim in Germany condemn the Hamas attacks in order to receive permission to say anything else at all were fine with civilian deaths as long as the victims were people with opposing views. The German government's unconditional support for Israel doesn't only prevent it from condemning the deaths of civilians in Gaza – it also allows it to ignore the way dissenting Jews in Germany are being thrown under the same bus as they are in Israel.

The people who were horrifically murdered and defiled on 7 October belonged to the left-leaning, secular segment of Israeli society; many of them were activists for peaceful coexistence. Their military protection was forfeited for the sake of radical settlers in the West Bank, many of whom are militant fundamentalists. For many liberal Israelis, the state's promise of security for all Jews has now been exposed as selective and conditional. Similarly in Germany, the protection of Jews has been interpreted selectively as to apply solely to those loyal to the rightwing nationalist government of Israel.

In Israel, the hostages held by Hamas are seen by many as already gone, a necessary sacrifice relevant only insofar as they can be used to justify the violent war that the religious right has been waiting for. For Israeli nationalists, 7 October was their own personal Day X, the beginning of the fulfilment of the eschatological biblical prophecy of Gog and Magog, the arrival of a war to end all wars, and end all foreign peoples. Many of the families of the victims of 7 October, who have called for an end to this cycle of horror and hate and violence, who have begged the Israeli government not to seek revenge in their name, are not heard in Israel. And since Germany sees itself as unconditionally allied with Israel as a result of the Holocaust, those with power and influence in its society seek to establish similar conditions for its public discourse at home.

Some of the hostages held by Hamas have German citizenship, so when I asked a politician from Germany's governing coalition what the government's position was on those people, I was shocked when his response, in private, was: *Das sind doch keine reinen Deutschen*, which translates to: well, those aren't *pure* Germans. He didn't choose from a host of perfectly acceptable terms to refer to Germans with dual citizenship, he didn't even use adjectives such as *richtige* or *echte* to refer to them not

being full or proper Germans — instead, he used the old Nazi term to differentiate between Aryans and non-Aryans.

Publicly, that same centre-left politician trumpets Germany’s pro-Israel stance in the media at every opportunity, but simultaneously appears to dog-whistle to the antisemitic far right by framing Germany as powerless but to accept Israel’s demands, even if the result of its bombardment is massive loss of civilian life in Gaza.

Is it any surprise that Jews in Germany worry that the country’s obsession with Israel has more to do with the German psyche than their own sense of safety and belonging?

Earlier this month, Habeck recorded a statesman-like video on antisemitism, in which he assured Germans that he recognised that the protection of Jewish life was of primary importance. Many interpreted it as a bid to boost his leadership credentials; certainly it was a clear attempt to occupy a rhetorical space that the chancellor, Olaf Scholz, and other important ministers such as Annalena Baerbock have conspicuously and concerningly left empty.

I didn’t plan the 10-minute speech I directed at Habeck during my TV appearance, but something happened as a result of that terrible screenshot; I threw out the script and said it all, with my heart now beating so fast I could hear it in my ears, my breath short and my voice shaky. I said everything that had been in my heart and on my mind: despair at this never-ending war and our powerlessness in the face of its horrors; fear of the collapse of our civilisation because of the increasing weakening of the value system holding it together; grief about the divisiveness of a discourse rupturing bonds between friends, family and neighbours; frustration at the blatant hypocrisy used to silence critical voices; and yes, my disappointment in Habeck himself, who had been such a beacon of hope for voters like me in his unconventional path to political success.

I thought of the Holocaust survivors who had raised me and the lessons I had learned from the literature of survivors such as Primo Levi, Jean Améry, Jorge Semprún and many others, and I implored the vice-chancellor to understand why the only legitimate lesson to be learned from the horrors of the Holocaust was the unconditional defence of human rights for all, and that simply by applying our values conditionally we were already delegitimising them.

At some point, I told him, “You are going to have to decide between Israel and Jews.” Because those things are not interchangeable, and sometimes even contradictory, as many aspects of Jewish life are threatened by unconditional loyalty to a state that only sees some Jews as worthy of protection.

I don’t think he was expecting my speech. But he tried his best, responding that while he understood that my perspective was one of admirable moral clarity, he felt that it was not his place as a politician in Germany, in the country that committed

the Holocaust, to adopt that position. And so, at that moment, we arrived at a point in German discourse where we now openly acknowledge that the Holocaust is being used as justification for the abandonment of moral clarity.

Many Germans, including me, had pinned their hopes on Habeck. We saw him as the little guy, one of us, a dreamer and a storyteller, someone who went into politics because he thought he could change it — but instead, it seems to have changed him. He has, it seems, adopted the same transactional approach as all the German politicians who came before him. And if he won't talk to us, who will?

While far-right parties such as Germany's AfD and France's National Rally seek to whitewash decades of Holocaust denial and ethnic hate with the convenient unconditional embrace of Israel (because why would Nazis have a problem with Jews who are far away?), we can now see how deluded we all were in thinking that this kind of moral equivocation hadn't arrived at the very heart of liberal society. The statements of the far-right AfD and the centre-left government in the German parliament's debate last week on the country's historical responsibility towards Jews were so similar that I couldn't for the life of me tell them apart.

## **FREEDOM FOR THE ONE WHO THINKS DIFFERENTLY**

Various, *n+1*, 2023.

We, the undersigned Jewish writers, academics, journalists, artists, and cultural workers living in Germany, are writing to condemn a disturbing crackdown on civic life in the wake of this month's horrifying violence in Israel and Palestine.

There is no defense for the deliberate targeting of civilian life. We condemn without reservation the terrorist attacks on civilians by Hamas. Many of us have family and friends in Israel who have been directly affected by this violence. We condemn with equal force the killing of civilians in Gaza.

In recent weeks, regional and city governments across Germany have banned public gatherings with presumed Palestinian sympathies. Canceled demonstrations include those named "No conflagration in the Middle East," "Youth against Racism," and "Solidarity with the civilian population of Gaza." The ban extends to gatherings planned by Jews and Israelis, including one called "Jewish Berliners against Violence in the Middle East." In an especially absurd case, a Jewish Israeli woman was detained for standing alone in a public square while holding a sign denouncing the ongoing war waged by her own country.

The police have offered no credible defense of these decisions. Virtually all of the cancellations, including those banning gatherings organized by Jewish groups,

have been justified by the police in part due to the “imminent risk” of “seditious, anti-Semitic exclamations.” These claims, we believe, serve to suppress legitimate nonviolent political expression that may include criticisms of Israel.

Attempts to defy these arbitrary restrictions are met with indiscriminate brutality. Authorities have targeted immigrant and minority populations across Germany, harassing, arresting, and beating civilians, often on the flimsiest of pretexts. In Berlin, the district of Neukölln, home to large Turkish and Arab communities, is now a neighborhood under police occupation. Armored vans and squads of armed riot police patrol the streets searching for any spontaneous showing of Palestinian support or symbols of Palestinian identity. Pedestrians are shoved and pepper-sprayed at random on the sidewalk. Children are ruthlessly tackled and arrested. Those detained and arrested include well-known Syrian and Palestinian activists. Schools have banned Palestinian flags and keffiyeh, and although these objects are legally permitted in public, to possess one invites police violence and arrest. Earlier this year, Berlin police officers admitted in court that in suppressing protests they have targeted civilians who “stood out” for wearing the colors of the Palestinian flag or scarves associated with Palestinian solidarity. A preponderance of filmed evidence suggests that this remains the case, and that racial bias plays a significant role in the targeting of suspects.

These infringements of civil rights are taking place almost entirely without comment from Germany’s cultural elites. Major cultural institutions have silenced themselves in lockstep, canceling productions that deal with the conflict and de-platforming figures who might be critical of Israel’s actions — or who are simply Palestinian themselves. Such voluntary self-censorship has produced a climate of fear, anger, and silence. All this is done under the banner of protecting Jews and supporting the state of Israel.

**As Jews, we reject this pretext for racist violence and express full solidarity with our Arab, Muslim, and particularly our Palestinian neighbors. We refuse to live in prejudicial fear. What frightens us is the prevailing atmosphere of racism and xenophobia in Germany, hand in hand with a constraining and paternalistic philo-Semitism. We reject in particular the conflation of anti-Semitism and any criticism of the state of Israel.**

At the same time that most forms of nonviolent resistance on behalf of Gaza are suppressed, acts of violence and intimidation are also taking place: a Molotov cocktail thrown at a synagogue; Stars of David drawn on the doors of Jewish homes. The motivations for these indefensible anti-Semitic crimes, and their perpetrators, remain unknown. It is clear, however, that Germany’s refusal to recognize a right to grieve the loss of lives in Gaza does not make Jews safe. Jews were already a vulnerable minority population; some Israelis report they are afraid to speak Hebrew

on the street. Bans on demonstrations and their violent enforcement only provoke and escalate violence. We also contend that the perceived threat of such assemblies grossly inverts the actual threat to Jewish life in Germany, where, according to the federal police, the “vast majority” of anti-Semitic crimes — around 84 percent — are committed by the German far right. If this is an attempt to atone for German history, its effect is to risk repeating it.

Dissent is a requirement of any free and democratic society. Freedom, wrote Rosa Luxemburg, “is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.” As our Arab and Muslim neighbors are beaten and silenced, we fear the atmosphere in Germany has become more dangerous — for Jews and Muslims alike — than at any time in the nation’s recent history. We condemn these acts committed in our names.

We further call on Germany to adhere to its own commitments to free expression and the right to assembly as enshrined in its Basic Law, which begins: “Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority.”



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