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GERMAN “ERINNERUNGSKULTUR” AND THE GAZA WAR

Stefani Engelstein

After the horrific terrorist attack launched by Hamas against Israel on October 7th, 2023, in which at least 1,200 people were killed, a strange conflation emerged. Israel's Foreign Minister Eli Cohen appeared before the United Nations Security Council on October 30th and described Hamas as “the new Nazis.”¹ Four days later, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared in a press conference statement “Never again is now.”² On October 30th, Israel's ambassador to the UN, Gilad Erdan, appeared in front of that body with a yellow Star of David on his jacket, a replica of the stars Jews were forced to wear by the Nazis to which he had the added the words “Never again.”³ The German Chancellor Olaf Scholz had already declared on October 17th, during a state visit to Tel Aviv that “[D]ie Sicherheit Israels und seiner Bürgerinnen und Bürger ist deutsche Staatsräson.”⁴ In a speech at the opening

of a synagogue in Dessau a few days later, Scholz added “Jetzt muss sich zeigen, was ‘Nie wieder!’ bedeutet.”⁵ After Netanyahu's statement, the German government and many other organizations picked up his precise phrasing. On November 9th, the 85th anniversary of what is still known as Kristallnacht or the Night of Broken Glass in English, but now called Reichspogromnacht in German, the German Minister of the Interior Nancy Faeser repeated the phrase, “Nie wieder ist jetzt.”⁶ A demonstration organized by the President of the German Parliament Bärbel Bas together with a coalition under the name “Nie wieder ist jetzt” took place on December 10th, 2023⁷ and

- 1 Eli Cohen: “FM Cohen addresses UN Security Council”, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 24 Oct. 2023, <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/fm-cohen-addresses-un-security-council--24-oct-2023> (All cited online sources last accessed on 15 Aug. 2024.).
- 2 Benjamin Netanyahu: “Statement by PM Netanyahu”, Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, 28 Oct. 2023, <https://www.gov.il/en/pages/statement-by-pm-netanyahu-28-oct-2023>.
- 3 Gadi Zaig/Zvika Klein/Tovah Lazaroff: “Erdan blasts Hamas final solution wearing yellow star at UNSC”, in: *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 Oct. 2023, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-770921>.
- 4 Olaf Scholz: “Pressestatement von Bundeskanzler Scholz anlässlich seines Besuchs im Staat Israel am 17. Oktober 2023 in Tel Aviv”, German Federal Government website, 17 Oct. 2023, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/pressestatement-von-bundeskanzler-scholz-anlaesslich-seines-besuchs-im-staat-israel-am-17-oktober-2023-in-tel-aviv-2230822>. The sentence also now forms a part of the CDU *Grundsatzprogramm*. For the context surrounding its earlier use for the German relationship with Israel by Angela Merkel and Rudolf Dreßler, see Christoph Schult: “Die wahre Geschichte von Merkels Israel-Vermächtnis”, in: *Der Spiegel*, 19 Jan. 2024, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/israels-sicherheit-als-staatsraeson-die-wahre-geschichte-von-merkels-israel-vermaechtnis-a->

- 5 fcbc3d63-33d4-4127-b045-d79186ee8778; Markus Kaim: “Israels Sicherheit als deutsche Staatsräson: Was bedeutet das konkret?“, in: *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 65.6 (Feb. 2015), pp. 8–13. For the longer history and meaning of the term *Staatsräson*, see Josef Isensee: “Die Wiederkehr der Staatsräson”, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18 Sep. 2024, <https://www.faz.net/einspruch/die-wiederkehr-der-staatsraeson-19992960.html>. Isensee differentiates the core reference of *Staatsräson* to the existential conditions of a state from what he sees as its current rhetorical use. He leaves out the unique facets of Germany's self-understanding of its national identity (and hence its non-nationalistic essence) as bound up in a commitment to *Erinnerungskultur*, one of the significant manifestations of which is support for Israel.
- 6 Olaf Scholz: “Rede von Bundeskanzler Olaf Scholz zur Eröffnung der Weill-Synagoge am 22. Oktober 2023 in Dessau-Roßlau”, German Federal Government website, 22 Oct. 2023, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/service/newsletter-und-abos/bulletin/rede-von-bundeskanzler-olaf-scholz-2232566>.
- 7 “‘Nie wieder’ ist jetzt! Nach ihrer Rede im Bundestag besuchte Innenministerin Nancy Faeser die zentrale Gedenkveranstaltung zu den Novemberpogromen”, German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community website, 09 Nov. 2023, <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/DE/2023/11/9nov23.html>.
- 8 “Solidaritätsveranstaltung”, *Nie wieder ist jetzt*, <https://nie-wieder-ist-jetzt-berlin.de/>. Interestingly, while the demonstration is reported as in solidarity “um sich dem zunehmenden Antisemitismus, dem Hass und der Fremdenfeindlichkeit in unserer Stadt und in unserem Land entgegenzustellen,” it is also described by one of the organizers under the title

was attended by 3,200 people, according to police estimates.⁸

What we see here are two linked cases of projection in which, remarkably, official representatives of *both* Israel *and* modern Germany have agreed on the displacement (or the effective extension) of the position of guilt in the Nazi genocide against the Jews onto a third party, namely Palestinians. Before we move on to analyzing the phenomenon, it is important to pause and acknowledge just how odd it is. Both Israel and Germany rigorously and consistently combat attempts to “relativize” the Holocaust through comparisons to other violent persecutions. The attack on Israel by Hamas, while abhorrent, bears no resemblance to German activities during the Holocaust, whether one looks at political structure, methods, context, power distribution, numbers of victims, or any other discernable element. And yet both countries have embraced some form of equivalence, one that has both served Israel, and been accepted by Germany, as a justification for the massive Israeli military response since, which has killed more than 46,000 Palestinians, over 15,000 of them children.⁹ Since October 7th, documented Israeli state violence against Palestinians also includes the targeted bombing of hospitals, schools, and water infrastructure in Gaza,¹⁰ the official inaction that has enabled Israeli settlers to kill more than 600 civilians in the West Bank,¹¹ and the systematic abuse of Palestinian prisoners, including the systematic Israeli use of Palestinian detainees as human shields.¹²

above: “Israel, Kundgebung.”

8 “Tausende demonstrieren in Berlin gegen Antisemitismus”, in: *Zeit Online*, 10 Dec. 2023, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2023-12/demonstration-antisemitismus-berlin-nie-wieder-ist-jetzt>.

9 Kiara Alfonseca: “Number of children missing, separated from families in Gaza may be as high as 21,000: Report”, *ABC News*, 24 June 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/number-children-missing-separated-families-gaza-high-21000/story?id=111365036>.

10 “Press Release: New Study of Satellite Data Shows: Israel’s assault on hospitals, schools, and water infrastructure in the Gaza Strip was not ‘random’”, *FXB Harvard University*, 09 Apr. 2024, <https://fxb.harvard.edu/2024/04/09/press-release-new-study-of-satellite-data-shows-israels-assault-on-hospitals-schools-and-water-infrastructure-in-the-gaza-strip-was-not-random/>.

11 Paul Adams: “‘On verge of an explosion’: Policeman’s killing part of spiraling West Bank violence”, *BBC*, 12 Aug. 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cd735zvg1q9o>.

12 Bethan McKernan et al: “Palestinian Prisoners describe systemic abuse in Israel’s jails. *Guardian* interviews back up reports by rights group B’Tselem, which says jails should now be labelled ‘torture camps’”, in: *The Guardian*, 05 Aug. 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/05/palestinian-prisoners-describe-widespread-abu->

The juxtaposition of the Hamas attack with Nazi genocide only becomes comprehensible in the Israeli context when viewed not as a comparison, but as a felt continuity. Many have accused Israelis of instrumentalizing the Holocaust for political purposes. For a large number of Israelis, however, self-portrayals of a felt connection between the Holocaust and the trauma of October 7th are accurate psychological accounts which motivate political responses. A similar feeling of trauma can be observed among some American Jews, particularly those of the oldest remaining generation. Indeed, the Israeli perception of the conflict with Palestinians has been entangled with responses to the Holocaust since Israel’s founding.¹³ That the Hamas attacks reactivated the earlier trauma of the Holocaust, however, in no way justifies the Israeli military reaction in Gaza. It does point to a second order of motivation for Israeli behavior towards Palestinians that compounds geopolitical issues of land, water, and safety, and has always done so. Recognizing this element of the ongoing current conflict is important for an accurate analysis and for approaching negotiations. In addition, and more saliently for this article, the connection to Holocaust trauma should be of particular significance to German debates about the Gaza war and to national policy towards Israel and the Palestinian territories. Understanding this link should expand the ways in which Germans think through their own role in, and responsibility for, the violent deaths, dispossession, and suffering of Palestinians and the frustration of their aspiration for self-determination. Moreover, a more honest appraisal of the situation in Israel-Palestine should contribute to an understanding of how the war is being misused for political purposes within Germany, purposes that foster both Islamophobia and antisemitism and lead to increased support for the far right.

I am not Israeli, and my knowledge of Israeli culture is at best second-hand. My access to Palestinian per-

se-in-israels-jails; Ronen Bergman/Aaron Boxerman/Adam Sella: “How Israel’s Army Uses Palestinians as Human Shields in Gaza”, in: *The New York Times*, 14 Oct. 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/14/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-military-human-shields.html>.

13 Or indeed earlier. For Zionist comparisons of Palestinians to Nazis in the 1930s, see Nur Masalha: *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of “Transfer” in Zionist Political Thought, 1882–1948*, Washington, D.C. 1992. For the rhetorical conflation of the two immediately after World War II see Ilan Pappé: *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Oxford 2006, pp. 72 f. For the political channeling of this amalgamation, see also Shachar Pinsker: “On Jewish Revenge”, *Aeon*, 17 May 2024, <https://aeon.co/essays/what-role-for-revenge-in-jewish-life-literature-and-culture>.

spectives on the war and on their own history is still more attenuated.¹⁴ As a scholar of German Studies, I am here primarily interested in the German side of the equation. If Israel is beyond the realm of my cultural expertise, I am on firmer ground in German culture, which I study professionally as a Professor of German Studies in the US. I have spent over six of the past thirty years in Germany, in segments varying from 1 to 18 months at a time. While I have lived for much of that time in Berlin, I also spent over a year in Leipzig in 1992–1993 and have lived for a number of months each in Munich and in Cologne as well as visiting many other parts of the country. I am also Jewish, and deeply aware of the ways that what looks like a triangular relationship between Israel, Germany, and Palestine, becomes more complicated when unpacked.¹⁵ Firmly implicated in this constellation and yet ambiguously located are also Israelis outside of Israel, including those in Germany, and Palestinians outside of the Palestinian territories, including those in Germany.

In addition, functioning as significant drivers of the response in the German national context, are the idea and memory of Jews as victims of the Holocaust, as well as the friction between this ideation and the real Jews who necessarily fail to match up with that idea and memory by virtue of being contemporary, alive, and complex. There are 16 million Jews worldwide, and they are extremely diverse in nationality, culture, and opinion. Fewer than half are Israeli. Approximately 186,000 are German.¹⁶ Indeed, in ways I will work through in this article, the fixed image of Jewish identity in the German public imaginary both as a victim group and as a nationality, and the anxiety associated with the actual ambiguities of Jewish identity seem to motivate current suppression of free debate and expression in Germany. In spite of the official explanation of such restrictions of free speech as countermeasures to antisemitism, these mechanisms instead feed antisemitism in ways I will discuss.

14 I would encourage readers to seek out and read Palestinian perspectives, which are less widely disseminated in Germany than Israeli responses, and some of which I will cite.

15 This statement is not meant as a critique of the excellent book by Sa'ed Atshan/Katharina Galor: *The Moral Triangle: Germans, Israelis, Palestinians*, Durham, N.C./London 2020, which takes this particular constellation of populations living in Berlin as its frame. Here, however, I am interested in teasing apart the way that the image of Jews in the German imaginary, as well as the reality of Jews who may be either German or Israeli or both or neither, complicates our understanding of German reactions to Israeli decisions.

16 "Mitgliederzahlen: Judentum", *REMID*, https://remid.de/info_zahlen/judentum/.

Finally, many Christian Germans conflate the community of Palestinians in Germany with the much larger, diverse Muslim population of 3.5 million in Germany, assuming a single group with a unified perspective whom they see as a disquieting or even threatening presence. In this context, analyzing German responses to the Gaza war helps diagnose a set of problems within German culture that are currently contributing to a disturbing level of support for the extreme right.

The questions I am asking here amount to the following: why has Germany—at least at the level of political discourse and media coverage—embraced the view that the Israeli war in Gaza amounts to a war against Nazism—which is the clear implication of the governmentally endorsed phrase, "Nie wieder ist jetzt"—and why has it done so in a form so vehement that it can be understood, in ways I will explain below, as a form of antisemitism itself. I do recognize that the actual views of the German public may not accord with the views most frequently heard in public; indeed, the invisibility of the political views of the German population at large is part of the problem with the current suppression of discussion. In addition, German consensus opinion—the one that dominates policy, public statements, and medial outlets—has shifted over the course of the spring and summer, with increased acknowledgment of Palestinian suffering and loss of civilian lives. In spite of these incremental adjustments over time, *acceptable* public discourse in Germany, that is, public discourse that does not provoke a backlash, remains extremely one-sided and focused on the Israeli right to self-defense.

I. VERGANGENHEITSBEWÄLTIGUNG OR ERINNERUNGSKULTUR

Germany is a country that has made so-called memory culture, *Erinnerungskultur*, or in the older expression, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, coming to terms with the past, a central part of its self-understanding. Naturally, over 75 years across two German countries (or three, depending on whether one views reunified Germany as a new state or a continuation of the West German Federal Republic) and across 16 states, approaches to the past have varied. The full historical complexity of the topic far exceeds the scope of this article. My goal here is to illuminate the way that Germany's methods for addressing the past have contributed both to a current impasse in accurately assessing the Israeli war in Gaza and to a problematic restriction of speech about it within Germany.

After a brief look at the terminology, I will proceed by engaging with three conceptual constellations that will lead towards a consideration of the present situation. The first of these knots involves the self-directedness of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in West Germany and of *Erinnerungskultur* in post-reunification Germany, which has viewed the process as a matter of conscience or empathy, and thereby reinforced the boundaries around identity-groups of victims and perpetrators in problematic ways.¹⁷ Second, I will move on to the related and complex issue of defining Judaism and Germanness, and how such definitions contributed to problematic views of Israel in both the former West and East Germany and then in current German culture. And third, I will look at the ways that democracy, which continues to be a source of anxiety in Germany given its role in the establishment of Nazi rule, has been hemmed in by laws restricting free speech and a continued reliance on consensus culture. The counterproductivity of these supposed remedies against a populist resurgence of fascism has not been sufficiently discussed, but in light of the rise of the AfD and right extremism, it is high time to do so. These steps will lead me to conclude that the particular process of addressing the past has resulted in an insufficient understanding and acceptance of the diversity of Jewish identity, an insufficient understanding and acceptance of the diversity of German identity, and a lack of recognition of Germany’s contribution to ongoing injustice—and current war crimes—against Palestinians.

The term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was so ubiquitous in the 1990s when I first started travelling to Germany that a 1998 American tour book of Germany facetiously included the word in the glossary of helpful German “Basic Expressions” alongside *Bitte*, *Danke*, *Entschuldigung*, and *Wieviel kostet...?*¹⁸ If the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* seemed to be everywhere in the 1990s and 2000s, with peaks around 1992

and 2007, it is noteworthy that the popularity of the expression *Erinnerungskultur*, which only started to appear in the mid-1990s, topped out in 2006—the year in which Germany’s hosting of the *Fußballweltmeisterschaft* led to a resurgence of visible German expressions of national pride—at almost twice the highest level that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ever achieved.¹⁹ The difference between the two terms is significant: the first literally means something like “wrestling down the past.” It is problematic not only in the dominance implied by any possible success in the endeavor, but also because the goal would seem to be a victory that would end the process and lay it to rest. Philosophers from Theodor Adorno to Susan Neiman have long preferred *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung*, working through the past, with its implication of an unending process, as the more appropriate activity. Indeed, in her book *Learning from the Germans*, Neiman simply uses *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* for the process in which Germans have been engaged.²⁰ I would insist, however, that it is important to be alert to how a society describes and therefore understands the priorities of its own culture rather than projecting preferred forms. The fact that Germans used the word *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* when referring to its reflections on the Holocaust rather than *Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung* suggests the predominant role of the hope for resolution and redemption as a motivating factor. The beginning of the switch to *Erinnerungskultur* might be traced to the famous 1985 speech in which Richard von Weizsäcker, president of the Federal Republic of Germany from 1984–1994, both reflected and contributed to a new historical understanding of the Nazi period by calling Germany’s defeat a “Befreiung” for the first time.²¹ While this new framing clearly situated Nazism as an evil, it also distanced the ideology from traditional German culture, and explicitly excused average Germans from direct involvement in genocide, allowing Germans

17 Angelika Timm notes that precisely the question of “personal guilt and responsibility” was avoided in East Germany in favor of questions of government structure—fascist vs. communist (Angelika Timm: “Ideology and Realpolitik: East German Attitudes towards Zionism and Israel”, in: *The Journal of Israeli History* 25 [2006], pp. 203–222, here p. 204). The GDR was, on the other hand, far more consequential in removing former Nazis from positions of power than West Germany.

18 Måns O. Larsson (ed.): *Let’s Go Germany 1998*, New York 1998. Let’s Go was a company run by Harvard undergraduate students from 1960 to 2020, who also wrote all of the tour guides for an audience in the same age group. The guides tended to foreground intellectual engagement with culture and had a sense of humor.

19 This data comes from Google Ngram Viewer, which culls it from books digitalized within Google Books. It may therefore diverge from data taken from other sources, such as newspapers, magazines, or journals.

20 Theodor W. Adorno: *Eingriffe. Neun kritische Modelle*, Frankfurt a. M. 1963, pp. 125–146; Susan Neiman: *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil*, New York 2019. It is interesting to note that *Aufarbeitung* is the preferred term for working through the East German past.

21 Richard Weizsäcker: “Gedenkveranstaltung im Plenarsaal des Deutschen Bundestages zum 40. Jahrestag des Endes des Zweiten Weltkrieges in Europa”, German Federal President website, 08 May 1985, https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/DE/Richard-von-Weizsaecker/Reden/1985/05/19850508_Rede.html?nn=129626; see Max Czollek: *Desintegriert euch!*, München 2018, pp. 20–23.

to count themselves among the victims of Nazism. In this same speech, Weizsäcker also declared “Es geht nicht darum, Vergangenheit zu bewältigen. Das kann man gar nicht.” Weizsäcker stressed instead the importance of integrating memory into the cultural fabric even through the progression of new generations.²² While he defined memory as a kind of task, that task remained adamantly individual, an internalization of historical truth and a dialogue with oneself “im Stillen” about one’s own “Verstrickung” in past crimes. Memory for him was a question of personal mourning in the service of future collective reconciliation. Weizsäcker did not use the expression *Erinnerungskultur*, which first emerged in the 1990s, but this framing is instructive for understanding the purpose of the task it describes, namely one that frees Germans by enabling their reconciliation with Nazism’s victims, to whom they also belong. The idea is no longer to vanquish the past, but to turn it into a German strength, a sign of German ethical rehabilitation that can be carried forward.

The timing of the transition to *Erinnerungskultur* creates a linguistic break between the activities of the two German states under the older term, and that of reunified Germany under the newer. However infelicitous the earlier term, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, I would suggest that the associations of the newer word are still more problematic. *Erinnerungskultur* does not include on its face any implication of difficulty, struggle, or guilt. *Erinnerungskultur* no longer conjures up the past as a burden, but instead presents its resolution as an integral aspect of the current culture, packaged for complacency, self-congratulation, and export.²³ Indeed, much of the world sees Germany as a model of a uniquely moral stance towards an abhorrent past from which other cultures could learn. I want to acknowledge that the very attempt to accept responsibility for national atrocities is rare and deserves respect—it has mine. However, judging the success of an endeavor requires understanding its goals, and from the beginning, the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and the activity it designates were nonspecific

and stretchy concepts. After all, the “past” in question refers elastically to the entire phenomenon of Nazism, the Holocaust, and the Second World War. It therefore includes the election of a warmongering, anti-Semitic, and racist leader who became a dictator, the embrace by a large percentage of the population of authoritarianism, and the participation by a large percentage of the population in a genocide of Jews, as well as that of Sinti and Roma, and in the mass murder of those who were gay, handicapped, psychologically ill, or political opponents. In addition to a murderous ideology, society also endorsed and participated in a war of conquest and domination. I review these familiar facts here simply to call to mind the wide variety of issues at stake. What could it mean to *bewältigen* this *Vergangenheit*, to wrestle it down? What work would a *memory culture* need to accomplish to count as having dealt with it successfully? Is it a question of accepting the moral responsibility for one’s own direct participation, immediately after the war, or, later, of internalizing a retroactive understanding of responsibility as a national heritage? Is the point to combat conditions that led to these crimes and/or to their public acceptance? To do what might be possible to improve the lives of the survivors or their descendants, given the impossibility of true compensation?²⁴ Should attention be focused on strengthening democracy and free speech? On resisting the pull of authoritarian or consensus ways of thinking and relating to others? Of building empathy for Jews and other victim groups? Of re-thinking the definition of German nationality in new ways that undermine the assignation of individuals to an outsider status within society? Should the emphasis be on feeling or judging? justice or reconciliation? ethics or religious injunctions? Moreover, who should decide and what interests should propel the decision?

II. THE PROBLEMS WITH EMPATHY AS A METHOD OF ADDRESSING THE PAST

In considering these complicated questions, it is of central importance to remember that the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* not only developed almost entirely without input from the victims of the Holocaust, but also that in the case of Jews, it depended on their

22 Weizsäcker himself did not use the expression *Erinnerungskultur*, but spoke at length about the necessary work of memory, of *Erinnerung*, even for Germans born after the end of the war.

23 Berthold Grzywatz recounts a number of terms circulating in the 1990s in addition to *Erinnerungskultur*, such as *Erinnerungspolitik*, *Geschichtspolitik*, and *Vergangenheitspolitik*; cf. Berthold Grzywatz: “Zeitgeschichtsforschung und Geschichte der NS-Verfolgten in der deutschen Nachkriegspolitik”, in: *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 11 (2000), pp. 1012–1036, here pp. 1013 f.

24 One of the particular problems of reparations in Germany has been the fact that the German word—*Wiedergutmachung*—literally means “to make good again.” The term is offensive on its face and encourages Germans to think about the benefits of payments as far more effective at alleviating guilt than appropriate.

imaginary absence. I call this absence imaginary not only or even primarily because there was in fact a small Jewish community in both Germanys even at its absolute ebb in the years after the Holocaust, but also and most importantly because *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was envisioned in East Germany as a collective political manifestation that rendered Judaism inconsequential to the process and in West Germany as a communally guided, but nonetheless individual self-correction. In the West, the community in question was that of the perpetrators and, in subsequent generations, their descendants. Rather than being understood as relational and focused on real world social interactions, or on introducing more expansive concepts of nationality and belonging, or on rejecting consensus modes of interaction, in other words, it concentrated on questions of conscience, and primarily on correcting a presumed lack of empathy for victims, often framed as the failure to love one’s neighbor.²⁵ The words that arise here most frequently in public discourse are *Mitleid* (sympathy), *Mitgefühl* (empathy), and *Nächstenliebe* (love of one’s neighbor), the last of these very often modified by the word ‘Christian,’ so *christliche Nächstenliebe*. Generations of German schoolchildren, for example, have heard first-person accounts by survivors invited to speak to them, an element of education thought to be of such significance that for the last decade, the approaching end of the natural lifespan of the survivor generation has been experienced as an educational crisis in Germany.²⁶ In contrast, the death of the last generation of perpetrators, which necessarily took place around a decade before that of the youngest survivors, went entirely unremarked in German public media and political records. To my knowledge, only

Max Czollek has called attention to this odd asymmetry, in his groundbreaking book *Desintegriert euch!*²⁷ The death of the perpetrator generation had serious consequences, however.

The first mass movement of West German culture towards acknowledging and repudiating the crimes of the Holocaust was integrated with the student movement and anti-Vietnam war movement of the ’68 generation. It was, in other words, a generational conflict guided at least as much by outrage at the complicity of the previous generation as by sympathy for the victims. While the pedagogical need for this outrage has been passed over in absolute silence in official public discourse, a portrait of the evildoer continued to be supplied by TV culture, particularly in the extremely popular *Krimis*, or crime and police procedurals, which for decades regularly recycled plots based on old and new Nazi crimes, and on the ongoing influence of Nazis in society. The crisis in the death of the perpetrator generation was nowhere more visible than in the 8:15 prime time slot focused on unmasking *perpetrators* and holding them accountable, a word that unites past Nazi crimes to whatever current fictional crime was on the evening’s agenda. One could observe these double-perpetrators migrate from positions of power to retirement to wheelchairs and old-age homes, before they finally began to fade out of circulation. In the absence of a dichotomous figure onto whom outrage can be projected, curating sympathy is a complicated operation that can easily go awry. The survivors begin to look less like the victims of authoritarianism, which forms a reliable target for naturally rebellious teenagers, and more like the tools of conformity, as the memory of Nazis fade and the only power structures in sight are those of school and social authorities. The desire to rebel is then no longer reliably directed against fascists, but drifts towards a stance against the enforced consensus of the sympathy itself.

Even without the reciprocal timeline problem, however, the structure of sympathy harbors its own significant drawbacks. The aging survivors have long frozen the image of Jews in Germany into a disappearing past. Moreover, presented as *representative* Jews, they reinforce the notion of Jews as eternal victims. The dependence on survivors’ testimony recently reached a macabre extreme with the creation of an Artificial Intelligence system called Testimony 360 in which students can interact through 3d virtual visors

25 This emphasis was related to the resurgent role of both the Catholic and Protestant churches in the FRG after the war, in spite of the complicity of both Protestantism and Catholicism with Nazism. Religious diversity had decreased significantly as a result of the Holocaust and the Nazi suppression of smaller religious communities (cf. Antonius Liedhegener: “Nachkriegszeit”, in: Volkhard Krech/Lucian Hölscher [eds.]: *Handbuch der Religionsgeschichte im deutschsprachigen Raum*, Bd. 6.1: *Die Kirche in der Gegenwart. Zwischen Revolution und Restauration*, Paderborn 2015, p. 136), while the splitting off of East Germany led to a more significant presence of Catholicism in the FRG than in the earlier Weimar Republic; cf. Michael E. O’Sullivan: “Religion, Modernity, and Democracy in Central Europe: Toward a Gendered History of Twentieth-Century Catholicism”, in: *Central European History* 52 (2019), pp. 713–730.

26 For just one of hundreds of such comments, see the preamble to a guest contribution to the *Tagesspiegel* of Claudia Roth, the Minister of Culture and Media: “Erinnerungskultur neu aufstellen”, in: *Tagesspiegel*, 15 Feb. 2024, <https://www.kulturstaatsministerin.de/SharedDocs/Namensbeitrag/DE/2024/2024-02-15-gastbeitrag-gedenkkultur.html>.

27 Czollek: *Desintegriert Euch!* (fn. 21), p. 173.

with artificially responsive survivor avatars based on real but deceased persons and able to answer questions by drawing on a large database.²⁸ Such technology can perpetually freeze Jews into this role as phantasms of victimhood, necessarily segregated from living observers by a metaphysical, digital divide. The task given to the students or to the generations of Germans born after the Holocaust has not been to participate in anti-fascist and diversity-embracing ways of living, but instead to memorialize a unique and petrified event. This event cannot even be allowed to generate lessons for the present through analogies because of the socially punishable risk of “relativizing,” a problem to which I will return. Jews, in the German imaginary inculcated by this education, are and always were “Mitmenschen”²⁹ or “auch Menschen” rather than simply people. They do not appear as agents, but instead as the needy potential victims of violence and discrimination that hover as an atmospheric precondition. They thereby present a test of empathy to the Christian protagonists of German memory culture.

Framing the problem of antisemitism as one of insufficient *Christian* love of one’s neighbors situates the Christian church—of whichever denomination—as the proper location for solidifying ethics in public discourse and reifies Christianity as the foundation of the ethical state. The conflation of ethics with Christianity implies that the problem with Nazi Germany when it committed genocide against primarily non-Christians was that it was *not Christian enough*, that the state must become more strongly associated with the Christian religion to ensure ethical behavior towards Jews and other Others. Those who are not Christian—primarily Muslims in Germany’s current demographics—are thus automatically stigmatized by the suspicion that they are less capable of responsible, ethical citizenship, reversing the burden one would expect to correlate with descent from the perpetrators.³⁰ The reference to Christian love of one’s

neighbor becomes truly infuriating, however, when one realizes that the injunction to love your neighbor as yourself originates in the Jewish Bible, with Leviticus 19:18. It has been *jüdische Nächstenliebe*, Jewish love of one’s neighbor, for a thousand years longer than Christianity has existed. It was of course Jewish love of one’s neighbors when the Jews Mark (12:29–31), John (4:21), and Matthew (25:40) quoted Leviticus in their gospels.

This flipping of reasonable suspicion with respect to the capacity for civic responsibility, away from the descendants of the perpetrators and towards those who would have been victimized by Nazis is firmly ensconced in the German judicial system through the so-called principle of state neutrality with respect to religion. This statute has been interpreted by the courts as barring judges and even volunteer lay mediators—who are chosen by the communities they represent—from *wearing* religious symbols while practicing their duties in the courtroom.³¹ Wall-hangings, however, are unaffected. The ruling thus prevents Muslim women in headscarves and Jewish men in yarmulkes from serving as representatives of state justice in courtrooms that are, however, decorated with crucifixes throughout Bavaria. What is defined as *neutrality* by a society establishes the norm from which deviation is defined as *abnormal*. The ruling exemplifies a blindness of the Christian German establishment to its own discriminatory bias, while the absence of visible difference on the bench, in its stark contrast to the diversity of the population the judiciary branch is responsible for judging, turns the unmarked into a visible marker of bias. The point can be made more explicitly. Shortly after the court ruling in 2020 that the recent 2024 ruling upheld, I found myself in a long conversation with a German man at a garden party in Berlin. He conceded that anyone could have an invisible bias, but insisted it was reasonable to ban a visible propensity to bias, which he perceived

28 Cf. Reuters: “Testimony 350: KI soll Erinnerungen von Holocaust-Zeitzeugen lebendig halten”, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20 Jun. 2024, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/wirtschaft/kuenstliche-intelligenz/testimony-360-ki-soll-erinnerungen-von-holocaust-zeitzeugen-lebendig-halten-19803761.html>. While the system was developed in the United Kingdom and was merely reported in the German press, the interest speaks to a view of survivors as Jewish representatives necessary to elicit sympathy, rather than turning the attention of students to the fact that approximately 200,000 Jews make up part of Germany’s vibrantly diverse population.

29 Weizsäcker: “Gedenkveranstaltung” (fn. 21).

30 According to the German Federal Office for Migration

and Refugees (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, BAMF), between 5.3 and 5.6 million Muslims currently live in Germany who were themselves born in a country defined by BAMF as primarily Islamic or had a parent born in such a country; cf. BAMF: “Muslimisches Leben in Deutschland 2020”, BAMF website, 28 Apr. 2024, <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Forschung/Forschungsberichte/fb38-muslimisches-leben.html>. Germany does not collect demographic information on Muslim religious affiliation separate from migration.

31 Charlotte Hoppen: “Schöffin darf in Verhandlung kein Kopftuch tragen”, *Legal Tribune Online*, 10 May 2024, <https://www.lto.de/recht/nachrichten/n/olg-hamm-5ws6442-kopftuch-verbot-schoeffin-amtsenthebung-streichung-schoeffenliste>.

a headscarf to constitute, from the courtroom, so that petitioners before the court could feel confident in the nonpartisanship of the bench. After failing to convince him that a lack of diversity made a systemic German bias visible, I finally asked why he thought I should be more comfortable with a legal system that had weeded out all—or at least most—potential judges *other than* the grandchildren of Holocaust perpetrators.

A further visible manifestation of this set of associations was the linking of the Holocaust to a failure of *Gastfreundlichkeit* that became a prevalent motif with the first wave of Syrian refugees into Germany in 2015. Before the eventual and ongoing backlash against these non-European, Muslim refugees, there was a fleeting outpouring of sympathy and support for fleeing families. A significant number of Germans met arriving refugees in train stations with flowers and with teddy bears for refugee children in a phenomenon popularized as a sign of German *Willkommenskultur* and *Gastfreundlichkeit*—a culture of welcome and hospitality. This impulse can only be applauded, but when projected backwards as a lens through which to view the Holocaust, it loses its appeal. Jews were not guests; they had established communities in German-speaking lands by the fifth century. It is worth remembering that Jewish communities and Jewish culture precede Christian communities and Christian culture in German-speaking areas by several centuries as a result of the long *durée* of local conversions from pantheism to Christianity.

III. WHAT IS JEWISH? WHAT IS GERMAN? WHERE DOES ISRAEL FIT IN?

Christian West Germans since the Holocaust have retained an adherence, with varying degrees of self-awareness in the matter, to this idea that Christianity is an essential element of Germanness. This Christian group—which did represent the vast majority of the winnowed German population in the decades immediately following the Holocaust³²—took it upon themselves to invent their own one-sided form of internal-looking, non-relational absolution, dependent primarily on internalizing empathy for a group defined and frozen in its role as victims and as Others. The acts of definition required for this process were undertaken unilaterally by those engaged in it. That is, it was

non-Jewish Germans who established the parameters of what it meant to be German, to be Jewish, to be antisemitic, and to be successfully rehabilitated within the dynamic that would come to be called *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* and, more recently, *Erinnerungskultur*. The boundaries of the group called German in the postwar period was taken over from Nazi determinations—not least because they delineated the subset of Germans who had escaped Nazi extermination campaigns. Between 1945 and the passage of a new citizenship law enabling naturalization in 2000, German citizenship could be inherited and it could be restored to those from whom it had been stripped by the Nazis or to their descendants, but it could not be extended to others. The new law of 2000 expanded citizenship to include those born in Germany or residing in Germany under certain conditions for certain durations. Since this expansion, newer citizens and their descendants have continued to be distinguished from the descendants of previous citizens through a series of shifting linguistic formulations. The use of the word “German” continued to designate exclusively the latter group for more than a decade after the new citizenship laws, and was supplemented by new terms such as “Germans with a migration background” (*Deutsche mit Migrationshintergrund*). When referring to specific groups, and using the largest group of new citizens as an example, it was common to hear “German citizens with Turkish heritage” (*deutsche Staatsbürger türkischer Herkunft*) or “Turkish fellow-citizens” (*türkische Mitbürger*)³³ before the much newer introduction of terms such as “German Turks” (*Deutsch-Türken*), which remains significantly more common than “Turkish Germans” (*türkische Deutsche*). Finally, in the last few years, as the word *German* has slowly begun to be applied to citizens regardless of background, a new term has arisen to designate not the newcomers, but rather the portion of the population with a longer generational history of citizenship, namely *Biodeutsche*, or ‘organic Germans.’ *Biodeutsch* was selected as the annual German Un-word of the Year for 2024 by a jury of linguists and journalists.³⁴ While originally used tongue-in-cheek,

32 See Liedhegener: “Nachkriegszeit” (fn. 25) for the reduction in the diversity of religious denominations (p. 136) and for the strengthened role of the church in the postwar period (pp. 135–142).

33 Forms of these terms (*jüdische Mitbürger*, *Deutsche jüdischer Herkunft*) have also been used to describe and segregate German Jews, as in Adenauer’s 1951 and 1960 speeches. In fact, it is only in the past several years that the words *Juden* and *Jüdinnen* have regained German usage, although only in the plural. It is still considered rude to refer to an individual as a *Jude* or *Jüdin*, a sign of their continued derogatory inflection to most Germans.

34 The selection of an “un-word” that has entered public use and reveals “discriminatory, stigmatizing, euphemistic, misleading, or degrading language use” has taken place since 1991. See the website and press release for this year’s selection by the organi-

the formulation has caught on widely and is worrisome given the continuity of its association with a Nazi *blood and soil* ideology of autochthony.

Classroom exercises focused on bringing students to accept German responsibility for genocide rest on the implicit assumption that the students are descendants of the perpetrators, when the fact is that some—just as German—are descendants of the victims and many more—also equally German—are immigrants or the children or grandchildren of immigrants who are themselves the target of discrimination.³⁵ It is reasonable to expect all those living in Germany to be significantly knowledgeable about the Holocaust and to condemn it. However, there is a kind of perversity in the complex dynamic by which the direct descendants of perpetrators often suspect newer arrivals, collectively, of antisemitism or insufficiently robust commitment to *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, thereby disputing their ability to be or to become German.³⁶ It allows for a displacement of the earlier policing of German identity against Jews to a newer policing against—predominantly—Muslims, without recognizing this policing as a continuation—rather than a reversal—of a problematic definition of nationality that also contributed to the Holocaust. Of course, to call this consequence a *perversion* and to state that it *allows* for the exclusion of Muslims is to confuse cause and effect. It is the commitment, conscious or not, to policing a homogenous German identity that drives this dynamic and that plays a large role in the German response to the Israeli war on Gaza to which I am slowly coming.

The question of nationalism was addressed by *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* primarily through its stigmatization on both sides of the German-German border. While West Germany encouraged an embrace of a broader European identity, East Germany located itself within an international communist alliance. The expectation that a state should exist without any form of acceptable positive relationship to it on the

part of its citizens is not, however, sustainable. In the context of Europe, other countries in the European Union have retained independent national identities alongside the European communal one. Moreover, cold-war juxtapositions made forms of affect-driven identifications impossible to avoid, while both Germans and then the reunified Germany have continued to compete in international sporting competitions, generating fan enthusiasm. It is not surprising that it was during a World Cup competition, in 2006, that individual Germans began waving the flag again in large numbers after decades in which such nationalist behavior was frowned on. I am no apologist for nationalism, but I would suggest that the main problem with the German approach is posing nationalism as a yes or no question. Treating nationalism as an ill to be constrained or, in the case of the growing right wing, a good to be encouraged, is in both cases to evade the deeper and truly pressing need to address the *definition of the nation*, i. e. to critically explore the way *nationality* had been understood and to seek new ways of identifying as German. An engagement with nationality as a flexible rather than fixed concept is essential to understanding the Nazi period's concept of Germanness not only as a dangerous model, but also as an egregiously flawed *choice* that curtailed other possible ways of identifying as German. Only through this lens can we clarify the interrelations and intersections of Germanness and Jewishness, i.e. the openness of identities to each other that pernicious forms of nationalism have always denied. I have for example occasionally encountered Germans who took it to be particularly horrifying that Jews were targeted and murdered by Germans in spite of the fact that these Jews "glaubten, dass sie Deutsch waren," or even in one person's memorable formulation, "den Deutschen das Kompliment machten, dass sie sich für Deutsche hielten." I have yet to engage in discussion with a German who proffered to be particularly moved that Jews were targeted by Germans in spite of the fact that they *were* German.

In the contemporary situation of ongoing immigration and migration, such an understanding of nationality as capable of embracing the wide diversity of the German population is imperative. Until such diversity is recognized as a strength rather than a cause for anxiety, Germany will remain increasingly vulnerable to right-wing extremism. One alternate model which has received some attention over the past decades is *Verfassungspatriotismus*, constitutional patriotism,

zation Unwort des Jahres at <https://www.unwortdesjahres.net/>.

35 33 % of residents in Germany today have at least one parent who was not a German citizen at birth (half of these residents are currently German citizens); cf. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung: "Bevölkerung mit Migrationsintergrund", *kurz&knapp*, 24 Apr. 2024, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/61646/bevoelkerung-mit-migrationshintergrund/>.

36 Esra Özyürek has investigated the problems inherent in this educational dynamic at great length; cf. Esra Özyürek: *Sub-contractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory & Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany*, Stanford 2023.

advocated by Jürgen Habermas.³⁷ While it is possible to embrace the civic freedoms offered by a particular political arrangement intellectually and even to feel affective pride in it, such a view alone is not sufficient to build community, as Habermas himself recognizes, but rather depends on communal bonds of some other kind to function. Habermas looks to other cultural institutions for the establishment of these bonds.³⁸

A stronger model, I would suggest, would be to understand the multiple components of society as contributing to a culture that *becomes* German in this ongoing process, without losing its multiplicity. A number of German voices have been raised in favor of similar possibilities recently under the name of radical diversity or of postmigrant plurality, including those of Leah Carola Czollek, Gudrun Perko, Naika Foroutan, and Max Czollek.³⁹ There is a need for alternatives both to appeals to religious communities and the hope that they will preach tolerance and to a common core of cultural history to build a minimal foundation for civic affection. First, thinking of Wittgenstein’s family resemblance, one could note that ties develop through diverse kinds of similarities, sympathies, and contacts. Affection for a political constitution needn’t be ruled out of this list—my grandfather, an emigrant to the United States, exemplified an affective relationship to the American structure of governance and reacted by teaching his grandchildren an impressive array of sentimental (never militaristic) patriotic songs. Many more intersections are necessary to create an affective fabric, and in a diverse community, difference itself is one of the most significant. Difference is a shared experience in any diverse environment, and, if embraced, becomes a robust site for community building. Similar ideas have circulated in the United States for a long period. While they have never stopped encountering resistance, the concept of cultural strength in acknowledged and welcomed multiplicity

does provide a recognized anchor in the US for understanding culture as a non-unitary although shared dynamic of ongoing contact.

The long delay in confronting one of the basic pillars of Nazi ideology, namely the definition and meaning of being German, has allowed problematic views of nationality to persist: past Jewish victims and currently present Muslims and Jews continue to be viewed as guests, while Christian Germans frequently see themselves as the determining agents of degrees of welcome. One can see this tendency clearly in the frequent linguistic dichotomy of “Germans” and “Jews.” For example, on the government website for the Educational Service of Berlin and Brandenburg, there is a link to a program at the Fritz Bauer Institut, the institute for the history and impact of the Holocaust, entitled “‘Geheime Reichssache’?—Was die Deutschen im Reich über den Holocaust wussten.” The program, intended for schoolchildren from the ages of 8–19, lists the goal that “Anhand verschiedener Quellen setzten sich die Schüler*innen mit der Frage auseinander, was die deutsche Bevölkerung über den Holocaust wissen konnte,” a description that casually equates the German population with the non-Jewish German population.⁴⁰ One sees a similarly hardened boundary between Jews and Germans in materials distributed by the German Embassy to German Departments at universities and colleges in the US publicizing an German educational program in 2021. That year, the Embassy provided a link to an online exhibit curated by the Leo Baeck Institute called the *Shared History Project: 1700 Years of Jewish Life in German-speaking Lands*. While the curators of this exhibit were very careful to refer to the groups involved as *Jews* and their *non-Jewish neighbors* in *German-speaking lands*⁴¹ the Embassy instead stated that the exhibit recounted the “complex narrative of Jews and their relationship with their

37 Dolf Sterberger first suggested the idea of *Verfassungspatriotismus* in 1959, but it is far more closely associated now with Habermas, who has advocated it for decades; cf. Jürgen Habermas: *Die postnationale Konstellation: politische Essays*, Frankfurt a. M. 1998.

38 Political theorist Tine Stein discusses the history of *Verfassungspatriotismus* and objections; cf. Tine Stein: “Gibt es eine multikulturelle Leitkultur als Verfassungspatriotismus? Zur Integrationsdebatte in Deutschland”, in: *Leviathan* 36.1 (2008), pp. 33–53. A deep engagement with this debate lies outside the scope of this essay.

39 Lea Carola Czollek and Gudrun Perko established the Institut Social Justice & Diversity in 2005 and renamed it Institut Social Justice & Radical Diversity in 2019; cf. Institut Social Justice & Radical Diversity website, <https://institut-social-justice.org/uber>.

40 The well-researched report and lesson plan by Wolf Kaiser has the goal of uprooting the myth that “die Deutschen” were not aware of the genocide taking place, and I appreciate both this goal and the research involved. It is important to note, however, that language has real-world effects and stripping German Jews of their Germanness when describing what “Germans” knew extends both the estranging of German Jews from their fellow Germans and the inability to recognize Germanness as non-uniform; cf. Wolf Kaiser: “‘Geheime Reichssache’?—Was die Deutschen im Reich über den Holocaust wussten”, Unterrichtsmodul 03, ed. by Fritz Bauer Institut, Frankfurt a. M. 2020, https://www.fritz-bauer-institut.de/fileadmin/editorial/publikationen/paedagogik/unterrichtsmodule/UM-03_Kaiser.pdf.

41 Cf. “Shared History: 1700 Years of Jewish life in German-speaking lands”, Leo Baeck Institute website, <https://www.lbi.org/projects/shared-history/>.

German neighbors” (mass email communication June 2nd, 2021). In this formulation, the Embassy not only grants a national identity to “Germans” across a 1700-year history, in spite of the fact that a nation by that name has only existed for the past 154 years, but it clearly segregates these ahistorically nationalized Germans from the Jews living in the same region for as long a period.

If Germanness remains a contested concept, Judaism is at least as difficult to define. While Jewish religious laws codify the inheritance of Judaism through maternal descent except in cases of conversion, Jews themselves have no consensus view on how to understand what Jewish identity consists of. On this, as on most issues, the saying applies, *Ask two Jews, get three opinions*. The complications are exacerbated by Judaism’s essentially anarchic organizational structure. There are no priests and no pope—the word Rabbi means teacher and is a title of community respect rather than one of God-granted authority. There are certainly many hierarchies within Judaism historically, starting with the misogyny of Jewish orthodoxy, which it shares, of course, with the several orthodoxies of its monotheistic relatives, Christianity and Islam. But there is no concept of representation within the religion or the community that transcends the plurality of Jewish individuals, and still less of Jewish denominations. The members of any given, single synagogue might be comfortable with their Rabbi or a different designated and elected official speaking for their community, but in the United States, for example, any person who plays such a role is likely to begin any message by acknowledging the diversity of even this single community. The German deference to that most German of institutions, the *Zentralrat der Juden*, runs directly against the cultural resistance to consensus within Judaism itself. While the *Zentralrat* often presents itself as representative, any German media outlet that cites its president would do well to wonder what the relationship is between the views its president expresses and those of other Jewish Germans or of Jews residing in Germany, both in and out of the official communities that make up its constituency. It is a very convenient institution, however, for those Christian Germans seeking short cuts to absolution on the basis of clearly regulated, authorized, and achievable rituals and opinions.

The problem of determining the boundaries of Jewishness for the purposes of memory work was already evident early in the postwar period. Under the Nazis, Jewishness was defined as a race. I have myself written about the history of this development, the way that

the discourse of race overlapped with that of culturally, linguistically, and religiously defined *Völker* through the shared mechanism of genealogy.⁴² Philologists felt their institutional power, which was dominant in the early nineteenth century, waning in the later nineteenth century and were envious of the cultural authority that was shifting in the direction of biology. The racial categories promulgated by biologists and physical anthropologists enjoyed a vast degree of cultural legitimacy by the mid-nineteenth century. Philologists, hoping to reclaim some of that authority, adopted the language of race for the categories of culture that rested on the genealogical transmission of religion and language, categories that at the time were focused on a contrast posited between families named *Semitic* and *Aryan*. Antisemites in Germany and elsewhere were all too eager to watch the *völkisch* and the racial forms of classification merge, a process aided by the reliance of both on descent and by the fact that both systems entwined physical with mental attributes from the beginning. This history is important to keep in mind while thinking about the meaning of *Leitkultur*. It may look like an acceptable alternative to racial and ethnic concepts of the essence of a nation, but the virulent categories of Aryan and Semitic also emerged first as cultural classifications. Like *Leitkultur*, they were understood to be transmitted genealogically and hence also strongly tied to long familial histories of descent in ways that functioned as forms of exclusion. While the *Leitkultur* is portrayed as potentially open to newcomers committed to assimilating to it, it can be used as a cudgel against newer citizens because it is combined with assumptions about their ability or willingness to do so. I would argue, however, that as long as the focus is on whether immigrants assimilate, the wrong model is in place. It is time to question the presumptions of superiority involved in the expectation that immigrants should conform to a longer German tradition; the alternative would be to hold up a cultural ideal in which differences would remain in dialogue with each other, reciprocally influential without the goal of homogeneity.⁴³

42 Cf. Stefani Engelstein: *Sibling Action: The Genealogical Structure of Modernity*, New York 2017, pp. 210–259.

43 In an interesting article from 2006, Stein discusses a set of three possible approaches to state communities that also arise in this article, namely *Verfassungspatriotismus*, *Leitkultur*, and *Multikulturalismus*. She argues that the three are necessarily coextensive to a certain extent: *Verfassungspatriotismus* rests on other institutions to form the affective bonds that are necessary to build the trust on which the constitution depends; the *Leitkultur* provides such affective bonds through shared norms that can be envisioned as more minimal than the definition of the term put forward by conservative politicians, and, finally, the existence of

After the Holocaust, the disentanglement of the word race from the definition of Jewishness was not immediate, as one can see in the language of the *Grundgesetz* from 1948. There Article 3, paragraph 3, now quite controversial in its wording, reads, “Niemand darf wegen seines Geschlechtes, seiner Abstammung, seiner Rasse, seiner Sprache, seiner Heimat und Herkunft, seines Glaubens, seiner religiösen oder politischen Anschauungen benachteiligt werden.”⁴⁴ From today’s perspective, it is clear that many of these designations could apply to Jews, an identity which includes aspects of belief (*Glaube*), religious viewpoint (*religiöse Anschauungen*), and descent (*Herkunft*), although not necessarily all three for all members. Nonetheless, at the time of the writing, the clearest injunction against antisemitism would have rested in the barring of discrimination on the basis of race.⁴⁵ As it eventually became culturally unacceptable to use racial designations in Germany, the question of how to define Jews became an urgent one within German culture. Israel’s own definition of itself as the Jewish homeland provided a simple alternative—the mapping of Jewish identity onto a nation that granted self-determination to a *Volk* and eventually consolidated this identity into a nationality. This shift in West German thinking was facilitated by the similarities of the older and newer formulations. Like a race as the term was understood by and before the Nazis, nationality in Europe since the nineteenth century has been classically understood to be linked to descent as the foundation of group affiliation. The transition from thinking of Jews as a race to considering them a Volk-Nation seems to have been a reasonably smooth one, particularly because the specific geographical territory to accompany such

an idea had become a concrete reality, and one that enabled a clear conceptual and physical separation of Jews from Germans. While West Germany was an early supporter of Israel, things were quite different in East Germany, which saw in Zionism a continuation of nationalism that socialism, with its internationalism, stood against. Nonetheless, in both Germanys, whether for or against, the Israeli state was seen as an expression of Jewish nationalism.⁴⁶ In both states, moreover, Jewishness was segregated from German identity. In West Germany, Jews were defined by past victimhood and expropriated to Israel. In East Germany, the antisemitism of the Stalin years in the early 1950s reduced both the number and visibility of Jews, while general disapproval of religion exacerbated the invisibility of Jewish communities.

After the war, the majority of Jewish Holocaust survivors, about 400,000, went to Palestine in its final years as a British Mandate or to the new state of Israel,⁴⁷ while about 140,000 emigrated to the US.⁴⁸ Very few survivors originally from Germany, Austria, or countries further east were willing or felt able to return to their original homes, and many of those who did were met by hostility and violence.⁴⁹ It is worth considering the complications Germany escaped through this mass emigration. A population trained for decades in a virulent antisemitism and that had largely participated in genocide against Jews could not have been enthusiastic about integrating survivors on a massive scale into either of the new German states. Stolen Jewish real estate had been redistributed when it still stood after bombing campaigns. I have repeatedly

diversity of some type is presupposed in any society and need not constitute discrete, parallel societies. The article, however, also exposes the limits of this argumentation in its repeated return to commitments said to be shared by all religions (50) to supply the common norms and affection in question and in its reliance on a retreat to a minimal, shared core. While I agree that members of a society need to agree to respect the constitution of the state, I would suggest a more robust understanding of the way that civic affect can arise out of accepted multiplicity and diverse kinds of contact.

44 A concerted attempt to change the language of race in this passage failed in February 2024.

45 It is instructive that in a speech on the occasion of a Holocaust Memorial Gathering at Bergen-Belsen on February 2, 1960, Konrad Adenauer spoke of the categories of *Volk*, *Nation*, *Rasse*, and *Glauben* to indicate Jewish identity; cf. Konrad Adenauer: “Gedenken an die Opfer des Terror-Regimes”, 02 Feb. 1960, https://www.konrad-adenauer.de/media/Adenauer/Quellen/Reden_und_Erklarungen/Reden/1960-02-02_Rede_Bergen-Belsen.pdf.

46 Israel facilitated and continues to facilitate this understanding by envisioning and representing itself as the homeland for Jewish people. The relationship between this national conception of Judaism, on the one hand, and religious or cultural understandings, on the other hand, remains contested within Israel, however, while Jews who live in other places may feel various degrees of connection to Israel without understanding Jewish identity as national.

47 Dalia Ofer lists 373,852 Holocaust survivors immigrating to Israel between its founding on May 8, 1948 and the end of 1952 and 100,000 immigrating between 1946 and the founding, but other figures in the article suggest some overlap between the two numbers and comprehensive statistics are otherwise hard to come by. Ofer notes some of the reasons for this; cf. Dalia Ofer: “Holocaust Survivors as Immigrants: The Case of Israel and the Cyprus Detainees”, *Modern Judaism* 16 (1996), pp. 1–23, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/21994>.

48 Cf. Beth Cohen: *Case Closed: Holocaust Survivors in Post-war America*, New Brunswick, N.J./London 2007.

49 Cf. Arieh J. Kochavi: *Post-Holocaust Politics: Britain, the United States, and Jewish Refugees, 1945–1948*, Chapel Hill/London 2001.

heard Germans characterize Palestinians, who were driven from their homes in 1948 by Jews seeking a homeland, as unwelcoming or unempathetic towards these Jewish refugees, echoing the language of *Ver-gangenheitsbewältigung* discussed above. It would be reasonable to ask how either Germany would have reacted to a proposal to establish a Jewish homeland in, for example, Bavaria or Saxony, driving an equal number of residents—approximately 750,000—out of homes and off property. Or how either state would have reacted to a reparations program that functioned by distributing properties scattered throughout their territories to Jewish survivors. Such a plan would have been more directly justified, however, than dislocating Palestinians—even in the absence of the violence that actually accompanied it. It is worth contemplating, in other words, that the establishment of Israel directly relieved Germans from territorial losses and retributive violence by subjecting Palestinians to these losses and to this violence instead. When Palestinians hold signs at demonstrations in Berlin that read “Free Palestine from German guilt” their reasoning is indisputable.⁵⁰

The embrace of Israel as a new state, as the proper place for Jews, and as a designation for Jewish identity solved a number of problems for Germans at once: material, psychological, and conceptual. It allowed for continuity in the idea of Jews as a people distinct from Germans and other Europeans, as inassimilable, and as essentially foreign. Moreover, supporting Israel’s right to exist was fully reconcilable with antisemitism of any degree, while nonetheless allowing the supporter to claim the high ground within a West German milieu.⁵¹ Seeing any remainder of Jewish identity outside of Israel as anything other than an Israeli diaspora (rather than a European one), was fundamentally threatening to this newly established set of linked understandings. Two seemingly unrelated and pernicious consequences follow from this constellation, first, the antisemitism of denying Jews their multiple identities, and second, the anti-Palestinianism of refusing to acknowledge the Nakba.

The mistaken identification of Jewishness as a nationality, which equates being Jewish with being Israeli, is a form of antisemitism, as noted in both the

Jerusalem Declaration on antisemitism and the IHRA Working Definition of antisemitism.⁵² This conflation segregates Jews from their fellow citizens in whatever country other than Israel they happen to live, and calls into question this national identity—as Germans, for example, or as Americans; it raises suspicions about their loyalty and undermines their rights. It is conceptually related to the much harsher Nazi laws stripping Jews of their German citizenship. Moreover, the deep internalization of this equation and the decades-long societal investment in support for Israel as a kind of alibi has led to a situation that can only be described as extremely dangerous for the security of democracy in Germany and exclusionary for the approximately 200,000 Palestinians living in Germany. Most immediately, by supporting Israel with money, arms, and—still more significantly—international legitimacy, Germany carries complicity for Israel’s current and ongoing mass killings of Palestinian civilians.

IV. ANTISEMITISM, RESTRICTED SPEECH, AND SECOND-DEGREE GERMAN GUILT

The crowds that greeted Syrian refugees in the early days of the Syrian civil war make visible the pressure under which many non-Jewish Germans live to exteriorize their desire for exculpation. Such a desire is by no means a bad thing. On the contrary, I have a great deal of respect for it. In the United States, we could do with much more widespread consciousness of the national atrocities of genocide against Native Americans and of enslavement, accompanied by an attempt to grapple ethically with its ongoing consequences. While others have expressed concerns about the performativity of memory culture in Germany, I would affirm that no ethical engagement is entirely free of the desire also to be perceived as ethical, nor is there a reason to condemn this desire, a point Adam Smith already made in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

50 Cf. Charlotte Wiedemann: “Nakba und deutsche (Un-) Schuld”, in: *taz*, 14 Jul. 2022, <https://taz.de/Erinnerungskultur/15864163/>; Sarah El Bulbeisi/Julia Neumann: “Wir haben es mit Tabus zu tun”, in: *taz*, 27 Nov. 2023, <https://taz.de/Palaestinerinnen-in-Deutschland/!5972938/>.

51 Of course, there were leftist West German milieus which were anti-Israeli, but neither the pro nor con position ruled out antisemitism, just as neither entailed it.

52 The main weaknesses of the IHRA definition lie (1) in a form that is vague (“certain perception...which may be”), (2) in its location of antisemitism in a perception rather than a reality (“Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews”), and (3) in a too broad expansiveness about when critique of Israel crosses over into antisemitism. The Jerusalem Declaration is both conceptually clearer and allows explicitly for political considerations of justice in the region of Israel and Palestine; cf. Stefanie Schüler-Springorum/Uffa Jensen: “Der Dissens in der Antisemitismusforschung”, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26.05.2022, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/karriere-hochschule/politisierte-wissenschaft-der-dissens-in-der-antisemitismusforschung-19732243.html>.

Memory culture becomes problematic, however, when the self-oriented nature of performance and self-righteousness overtakes the difficult work of understanding the political and historical realm in which one acts. We see repeatedly what Michal Bodemann has called *Gedächtnistheater*, commemoration theater, and Max Czollek has referred to as *Versöhnungstheater*, reconciliation theater.⁵³ It is a small but significant and problematic step from participating in this theater to policing its mechanisms. If supporting Israel fulfills this psychological and social need, for example, then any disruption of the understanding of Israel’s role will immediately threaten the attainment of relief from guilt involved in the support. Should the public view of Israel’s ethical status sink, the psychological payoff of voicing support also sinks and, in the most extreme case, the self-evaluation of one’s investment of support over a lifetime threatens to reverse its valance. In other words, the cost to the self-perception of many Germans in confronting Israel’s current war crimes is very high, so high that they find themselves disinviting Jewish intellectuals, revoking prizes awarded to Jews, and accusing Jews of antisemitism so as not to have to relinquish the regimented identifications on which their own self-understanding as anti-fascist and anti-antisemitic are based.⁵⁴

The antisemitic undertones of the German equation of Jews with Israelis have broken out into the public realm in two different ways since October 7th, 2023. First, many Germans who recognize Israeli war crimes extend blame to Jews who are not Israeli through conflation of the two groups. This kind of antisemitism is sometimes visible in pro-Palestinian, left-wing demonstrations, although it would be wrong to assume that it is a dominant position or that its presence excuses society from considering the moral issues involved in the military campaign in Gaza. This form of antisemitism also exists more quietly when Germans ask Jews to defend Israeli policy simply because they are Jewish. Meanwhile, the mainstream of German society represented by the political parties, the media, the granters of prizes, fellowships, and visiting residencies, namely, those who refuse to acknowledge or who underplay war crimes being

committed in Gaza, are treating Jewish opponents of Israel’s actions to a uniquely German form of hostility all the more vicious for being so conceptually confused. Even before the statements that have led to her most recent vilification in Germany, Judith Butler described the situation so:

“I find that the press coverage is aggressive and actually anti-Semitic towards me. Because many Germans believe that unconditional support for Israel is full and final proof that they themselves are not anti-Semitic, they attack anyone who stands for justice in Palestine. The Jewish anti-Zionist is thus open season for anti-Semitism. Some Germans give themselves full permission to treat me as Jew in sadistic and disdainful ways, including gross caricatures, because I am not a Zionist. It is as if I am exempt from the German self-prohibition on antisemitism because I am not a Zionist, and they are excited to have permission to attack a Jew. In other words, this Jew is one that Germans feel free to hate.”⁵⁵

I would argue that Butler’s interpretation conflates two different strands of antisemitism. In one case, classic German antisemitism continues to exist alongside a pro-Zionist perspective, enabling German antisemites to feel that they have honorably washed their hands of the past and to enjoy social acceptance.

55 Anna-Lena Scholz: “Unease over Judith Butler”, *Zeit Online*, 24 Nov. 2023, <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/2023-11/judith-butler-israel-hamas-university-english/komplettansicht>. Disapproval of Judith Butler has grown even stronger in Germany since she called the Hamas attacks “an uprising” and “an act of armed resistance” on March 3rd, 2024 in a lecture in France; cf. Vincent Noce: “Judith Butler pulls out of Pompidou lectures after Israel-Hamas comments”, *The Art Newspaper*, 04 Apr. 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/04/04/judith-butler-pulls-out-of-pompidou-talks-after-israel-hamas-comments>. Some excerpts from the event are posted online as well; cf. Judith Butler: “October 7 was an act of armed resistance”, *Middle East Eye*, 06 Mar. 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFjYFonN3ZI>. It is worth calling attention to the fact that in this same speech, she called the October 7th attacks “anguishing” and she earlier wrote at length about her grief over them; see Scholz: “Unease over Judith Butler” (fn. 55). She has also referred to Hamas’s actions as “atrocities.” For hostile responses to Butler in the German press see Jürgen Kaube: “Kindermord als Form des Freiheitskampfes”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung online*, 03 Mar. 2024, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/judith-butler-beschoenigt-hamas-massaker-kindermord-als-freiheitskampf-19568312.html> and Matthias Trautsch: “Adorno-Preise ist Judith Butler wohl nicht zu nehmen”, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung online*, 04 Apr. 2024, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/rhein-main/frankfurt/adorno-preis-ist-judith-butler-trotz-antisemitismus-vorwurf-wohl-nicht-zu-nehmen-19631090.html>.

53 The two terms have different emphases, but both illuminate the centrality of public displays of contrition for purposes that extend from an experience of personal exculpation to international signals of responsibility; see Michal Bodemann: *Gedächtnistheater. Die jüdische Gemeinschaft und ihre deutsche Erfindung*, Hamburg 1996; Max Czollek: *Versöhnungstheater*, München 2023.

54 I will return below to this series of attacks on Jewish intellectuals and organizations.

For such a person, it's open season on anti-Zionist Jews, as Butler notes. Others, however, may have poured themselves more deeply into the intent of combating antisemitism and used Zionism as a way to do so. Such Germans are sincere and may feel that they deserve recognition for good behavior, if not in fact appreciation and gratitude, from the Jews they encounter. In both of those cases, it is the proscribed role of real, live Jews to confirm for these Germans their successful atonement, to certify their moral rectitude. The experience of confronting Jews who instead seek from Germans acknowledgement that Israelis are perpetrating mass murder, a set of war crimes that a significant number of Jewish critics are willing to call a genocide in its own right, is profoundly disorienting.⁵⁶ It elicits shock and hostility. This reaction is a form of antisemitism, because it delegitimizes Jews as independent judges of the world around them, understanding them instead in terms of group allegiance. Moreover, it subordinates Jews to the paternalistic protection of non-Jewish Germans who claim custodianship over Jewish lives while acting out their own psychological need. Both the protective attitude towards Israel and the hostility towards its Jewish critics are patronizing and turn Jews into means for self-serving ends.

Justice not only towards Palestinians, but also towards Jews, would require a different approach, namely an honest appraisal of the situation. Se'ed Atshan and Katharina Galor record in findings from their 2017–2018 interviews of Germans, Palestinians, and Israelis in Berlin that “while many Germans believe that Palestinians should be excluded from the German political imagination and sense of moral responsibility, this is changing with time. More Germans, particularly young Germans, are open to alternatives that create space for Palestinian sensibilities and viewpoints.”⁵⁷ Of course, there has been German engagement with injustice towards Palestinians in the past as well. East Germany supported a Palestinian state and never officially recognized Israel, while leftists of the '68 generation, like current student protesters, viewed

Palestinians as victims of Israeli colonialism. Then as now, critique of Israel was susceptible to being combined with antisemitism, without being so in all cases. More recently, Germany has been one of the largest donors of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian territories for decades alongside its support for Israel. Nonetheless, Atshan and Galor found that “the majority of Germans [they] spoke to, including highly educated and informed individuals, were unfamiliar with the term or concept of ‘Nakba’”⁵⁸ and that there was a great deal of disagreement over any kind of German moral responsibility towards Palestinians.⁵⁹

Beyond the basic responsibilities towards human rights, any argument about special German responsibility towards the Palestinians would seem at first glance to run through Germany's relationship to Israel, both in terms of current support and in terms of the history of its founding. Germany's support of Israel takes the form both of arms—Germany is the second largest supplier of arms after the United States—and, very significantly, of public international justifications of Israeli policies. Moreover, while Jewish Zionism and the British Balfour Declaration of intent to create a Jewish and a Palestinian state on the territory of the British Mandate of Palestine predate the Holocaust, Israel's actual creation in 1948 represented both an international and a Jewish reaction to the genocide and mass displacement of the Holocaust. In this sense, the current intractable competition for land, water, and legitimacy is a direct outgrowth of Nazi genocide.⁶⁰

There is, however, another salient connection between the Holocaust and Israeli policy towards Palestinians that has been entirely neglected in German considerations of Israel/Palestine. This argument is not geopolitical but follows the temporal logic of trauma. It requires recognizing the Holocaust as a phenomenon that exists on a time axis that extends into the present and the future. Actions do not cease to have consequences when those actions cease, and the Holocaust continues to generate repercussions in the current moment. As William Faulkner wrote, “The past

56 Jewish critique of the massive destruction of life, health, and homes in Gaza is not a sign of amnesia about the Holocaust. On the contrary, the history of the Holocaust has more than one effect on descendants and on other Jews. I have pointed out that for some, “never again” is a defensive stance; it can also be directed towards combatting injustice against other populations, or both simultaneously. The fact that fellow Jews are carrying out the military operations against Palestinians brings the familiar German imperative into play, *Wer schweigt, stimmt zu*.

57 Atshan/Galor: *The Moral Triangle* (fn. 15), p. 82

58 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

59 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 85–87. The Nakba, Arabic for “catastrophe”, refers to the often violent displacement of Palestinians as Israel became a state. In addition to the 750,000 Palestinians who lost their homes, massacres were committed against Palestinians and villages emptied and destroyed; cf. Pappé: *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (fn. 13) and Masalha: *Expulsion of the Palestinians* (fn. 13).

60 Cf. Wiedemann: “Nakba und deutsche (Un-)Schuld” (fn. 50)

is never dead. It’s not even past”,⁶¹ a quote echoed by Christa Wolf as the opening line of *Kindheitsmuster*: “Das Vergangene ist nicht tot; es ist nicht einmal vergangen.”⁶² My claim here is that the specific contours of Israeli militarism towards the Palestinians belong in a direct chain of responses to the horrors of the Holocaust. This argument cannot be equated with the view of many Israelis that the Holocaust provides a justification for the necessity of a Jewish state, nor with the view that the Holocaust justifies the most extreme measures in responding to terrorism by extreme Palestinian groups. These claims have been labelled by critics an instrumentalization of the Holocaust for political purposes. Here, I want rather to call attention to the roots of the mindset that governs Israeli political and military decisions within the geopolitical situation of Israel/Palestine. In doing so, I do not seek to excuse or exculpate, but to understand both in the interest of knowledge and in the hopes that knowledge can facilitate change. Given the current imperviousness of the Israeli government and a majority of Israelis themselves to concern for the safety of Palestinian civilians, I believe change needs to proceed through international pressure, which Israel’s strongest allies, namely Germany and the US, are in the best position to apply.

A third of the members of Israel’s founding generation were Holocaust survivors, and another 10 % had fled Germany between 1933 and 1939.⁶³ Israel was

therefore founded to a significant degree by people deeply traumatized by having experienced torture and expulsion themselves, by the murder of their families, and by the destruction of their communities, often with the participation not only of foreign units, but also of their own neighbors. During the Holocaust, there were courageous Jewish uprisings and Jewish participation in partisan fighting against German units, but such armed action existed in stark disproportion to German military strength. There was no realistic prospect for Jews to successfully protect themselves or each other. Not only the direct trauma inflicted on survivors, in other words, but what we often call survivors’ guilt was endemic in the new state of Israel. This psychological state is often shrugged aside, but the experience of helplessness—the inability to save loved ones—lingers as extreme, existential insecurity. The tenet *never again*, which in Germany refers at its most explicit level to a promise not to repeat antisemitic genocide, became for many Jewish founders of Israel a commitment never to be caught unprepared to defend oneself and one’s community with lethal force, never to be surprised by an unexpected attack. As Gilad Erdan told the UN Security Council on October 30th, 2023, “We walk with a yellow star as a symbol of pride, a reminder that we swore to fight back to defend ourselves.”⁶⁴ This commitment includes a resolve to act with as much advanced intelligence and advanced violence as necessary to prevent threats against Israelis from being enacted in the first place, although this intention clearly failed on October 7th, 2023. While this offense-as-defense disposition was a response to the actions of Germans, it has not been deployed against Germans. Rather, the threat of retribution, of difficult integration, or of aggression understood as self-defense was removed from Germany with the departure of the survivors, relieving the perpetrators of many of the possible consequences of their actions. In the new context of the state of Israel, threats came from an entirely different population. And yet the Israeli response was primed by their recent trauma. From the very beginning, Israelis redirected their hostility towards Germany against the Palestinian population whose legitimate desire to protect their own homes, their communities, and their own lives stood in direct contradiction to the desire of Israelis to consolidate a Jewish majority in the new country.⁶⁵

61 William Faulkner: *Requiem for a Nun. Novels, 1942–1954*, New York 1994, pp. 471–664, here p. 535.

62 Christa Wolf: *Kindheitsmuster*, Darmstadt/Neuwied 1979, p. 9. Czollek also turns to this quote by Wolf and also connects it to American race relations, in his case by putting it in dialogue with James Baldwin; cf. Czollek: *Desintegriert euch!* (fn. 21), p. 20 f. Noticing that Wolf is quoting Faulkner brings in the interesting twist that both quotes Czollek discusses originate in the US context, which means that Wolf herself has already embedded her novel on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in this international conversation. The withholding of an explicit citation on Wolf’s part demonstrates that productive analysis can simultaneously fit distinct situations on their own terms while they also weave together aspects of their contexts. We could also note here that multidirectional memory, to draw on Michael Rothberg’s concept, does not begin with the Holocaust, but rather that human atrocities that can be put into dialogue stretch further back and range across the globe.

63 Nazi Germany originally facilitated Jewish emigration to Palestine; cf. Jewish Virtual Library: “Haavara”, *Jewish Virtual Library*, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/haavara>. Beginning after the formation of the State of Israel and the Arab-Israeli war that followed hundreds of thousands of Jews were expelled from Arab countries, many of whom fled to Israel. The number of Jew who settled in Israel after fleeing Arab lands exceeded the number of Holocaust survivors and made up 30 % of the Israeli population by 1951;

cf. Ada Aharoni: “The Forced Migration of Jews from Arab Countries”, in: *Peace Review* 15 (2003), pp. 53–55.

64 Cf. “UN Security Council meets on Israel-Palestine crisis; nowhere safe in Gaza”, *UN News*, 30 Oct. 2023, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/10/1143002>.

65 Cf. Pinsker: “On Jewish Revenge” (fn. 13); Bashir Bashir/

The founding of Israel, known to Palestinians as the *Nakba*, the catastrophe, displaced more than 750,000 people from their lands and homes and was accompanied by Israeli massacres of Palestinians in several towns, as well as the destruction of hundreds of Palestinian villages. There has been violence and hatred on both sides, and they have currently reached an unprecedented level. But Germany has a responsibility to understand that not only the geopolitical situation in which both groups find themselves, but also the psychological disposition from which Israeli Jews have made and continue to make choices in responding to the neighbors whom they dispossessed, are both direct outgrowths of the violence imposed upon them by Germany. Palestinians are the victims of Israelis, but they are also the secondary victims of the German genocide against Jews. German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, in becoming *Gegenwartsbewältigung*, must extend to these present consequences of the German past and to the present German attitudes for which it is responsible.⁶⁶

Instead, Germany has recently witnessed an attempt at state reeducation and the repression of free expression. The clearest victims of state repression have been the approximately 200,000 Palestinians living in Germany, who have found their marches in solidarity with family members in Gaza sometimes forbidden and, when allowed, lined with police in full riot gear.⁶⁷ Arrests of those who chant or carry signs deemed to be “volksverhetzend” are common, although what counts as such is not consistent or

predictable. News coverage, when the protests are covered at all, has focused on the most controversial signs and chants, or on outbreaks of violence, however small the proportion of demonstrators participating in it. Palestinians, who have been criminalized for concern over the very lives of their family members, have also represented the least visible and least contested targets of state control.

On the other hand, demonstrating students and the faculty members supporting their right to demonstrate have been the most contested targets of state repression. When students were arrested in May for occupying an area of the Freie Universität Berlin, several hundred faculty members signed an open letter in support of their right to protest. The letter carefully abstained from taking a position on the war in Gaza itself. News coverage after the incidents was primarily devoted to diverse views on the intervention of university faculty, and secondarily on the student demonstrations themselves. The faculty who signed the letter found themselves targeted by the Ministry for Education, which attempted to find ways to criminalize their support for free speech and looked into whether signatories could be de-funded. After emails were leaked to the ARD television program *Panorama*, the Minister of Education Bettina Stark-Watzinger fired the State Secretary Sabine Döring rather than assuming responsibility herself and in spite of the fact that the emails leaned heavily on her own criminalizing language towards the signatories.⁶⁸ The number of links in this chain shows just how deeply censored not only support for the Palestinian population is, but even support for those who support the rights of others to support the rights of the Palestinian population. Public debate demonstrates increased acceptance at each step up this chain. In other words, as vulnerability to police intervention increases, the willingness of the media to report and of the population to show support decreases. Or, stated differently, attention and support is disproportionately directed towards those least likely to have a recent family background of immigration. The slight stirrings in the frozen debate occur not at the level of expressing ideas about the Israeli military activities in Gaza, and civilian violence against Palestinians in the West

Amos Goldberg: “Introduction”, in: idem (eds.): *The Holocaust and the Nakba. A New Grammar of Trauma and History*, New York 2019, pp. 8–14, on the tendency of Israelis in the period immediately after the expulsion of Palestinians to recognize echoes of their own, different expulsion from their communities in Europe.

66 The term was first used by Daniel Kahn to emphasize that it was various futures that were lost in the Holocaust, and their loss that needs to be dealt with in the present; cf. Daniel Kahn: “Gegenwartsbewältigung. Getting Drunk on the Past in Berlin and Sobering up in Yiddishland”, in: Charlotte Misselwitz/Cornelia Siebeck (eds.): *Dissonant Memories Fragmented Present: Exchanging Young Discourses between Israel and Germany*, Bielefeld 2009. Max Czollek made the term more familiar through his books *Desintegriert euch!* (fn. 21) and *Gegenwartsbewältigung*, München 2020, in which he argued that *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* was always a way of blaming a previous generation rather than taking responsibility for current manifestations of anti-semitism and racism. I am here expanding on both of these thoughts to suggest a need to deal with current consequences of the Holocaust as well as continuities of ideology in the widest sense.

67 Cf. El Bulbeisi/Neumann: “Wir haben es mit Tabus zu tun” (fn. 50).

68 Cf. Emma Tries: “Stark-Watzinger stark in der Kritik”, in: *taz*, 11 June 2024, <https://taz.de/Reaktionen-auf-veroeffentlichte-E-Mails/!6013421/> and BMBF: “Abschrift des internen Mailverkehrs im BMBF”, *NDR Panorama*, 11 June 2024, <https://www.ndr.de/fernsehen/sendungen/panorama/download1200.pdf>.

Bank, but rather at the level of whether, where, and how such debate should be permitted.⁶⁹

To understand just how irrational German insistence on consensus on this issue has become, one need only look at the Jewish public thinkers who have been defamed as antisemitic by the press, by public institutions, and by private institutions. It is in this bizarre manifestation, in which culturally Christian Germans attack Jews in the press for antisemitism, including direct descendants of Holocaust victims, often vehemently and with personal vitriol, that the full failure of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* becomes clear. Those treated in this way include the diverse thinkers Masha Gessen, Judith Butler, Jonathan Glazer, Susan Neiman, Michael Rothberg, and Nancy Fraser. While I do not agree with every individual claim or argument made by the thinkers above (each of whom makes their own distinct arguments), I will insist that not one of them can be called antisemitic under any reasonable definition of that term. Many non-Jews have also been targeted in inappropriate ways for criticizing Israel, including Adania Shibli (discussed in Ivana Perica’s article in this issue), Kamila Shamsie, Sharon Dodua Otoo, Ghassan Hage, and others. I mention the Jewish thinkers here first not in order to elevate their voices on this issue above those of Palestinians, but because the accusations that these Jews are antisemitic, with its concomitant insistence that the *descendants of the perpetrators* have a greater right to define antisemitism than Jews themselves do, illuminates the particular failures of *Erinnerungskultur*. The policing of views on the war in Gaza represents most problematically a failure to recognize war crimes perpetrated against a vulnerable and enclosed Palestinian population denied even the opportunity to remove themselves from the line of fire. It has also legitimated an increase in Islamophobia and anti-immigrant hostility in Germany, expressed both in policy and in culture at large. And, as I hope has become clear, this reaction to the Gaza war also represents a nation-wide outbreak of antisemitism of a uniquely German sort, one that equates Israel with Judaism, and in the process both delegitimizes Jewish voices by purporting to speak for and instead of them for their own good, and fails to grant Israelis themselves agency by refusing to credit the facts

69 These discussions can be quite insightful, as in Teresa Kolumbia Beck: “Sprechen in Zeiten des Gaza-Kriegs: Welche Aufgaben haben Kultur- und Wissenschaftsinstitutionen?,” *Deutschlandrundfunk Essay & Diskurs*, 07 July 2024, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/sprechen-in-zeiten-des-gaza-kriegs-100.html>.

as they unfold, by refusing to acknowledge Israeli decisions for what they in fact are.

V. CONCLUSIONS

I began by asking why Germany embraced a conflation between the October 7th attacks by Hamas and the Holocaust. I have argued that this slippage allows a deflection of German guilt and responsibility for the Holocaust onto a third party—Palestine outside of Germany and immigrants and migrants at home—relieving Germans of that guilt in the process. This mechanism is enabled by a failure to sufficiently distinguish Israeli identity from Jewish identity. This failure reveals problematically genealogical understandings of nationality and facilitates an avoidance of memory work in favor of the easier gesture of automated support for a specific, faraway nation. Finally, the culture onto which German guilt is deflected, namely Palestinian culture, is itself conflated with all Muslims, so that the censure of Hamas can be weaponized against Muslims in Germany, whatever their background or beliefs, allowing a continuity in policing the boundaries of a homogenous German identity.

In rejecting the claims of equivalency that I have traced here, I would not endorse a strict moratorium on drawing connections between discrete atrocities. There is a difference between a totalizing and unhistorical equation such as “Hamas are the new Nazis,” on the one hand, and careful and specific analogies, on the other. “Never again” is a useless mantra if memory cannot allow us to resist new configurations of violence through the recognition of shared elements and hence shared ethical responsibilities. Analogies are always partial and are productive for that reason. In this case in particular, Michael Rothberg’s insistence that “histories are implicated in each other” so that the “only way forward is through their entanglement” needs to be heeded.⁷⁰ This process is essential if complacent memory culture is to become effective memory work.

Germany is undoubtedly in a complicated situation when it comes to criticizing a majority Jewish country that defines itself as the Jewish homeland. However, I argue that Germany has an obligation to undertake a more comprehensive engagement with those unsavory elements of the past that it has so far left out of

70 Michael Rothberg: *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, Calif. 2009, p. 313.

its memory work, elements that therefore continue to mold its present in problematic ways. These include nationalist definitions of both German and Jewish identity, ongoing exclusions of groups other than Jews, and an insufficient tolerance for dissensus. Not only new thinking, but also new social and political practices are called for. Germany's current stance endangers the future safety of Israelis, makes it complicit in the deaths of Palestinians, provokes antisemitism, and weakens its own democracy.