

Memory Failure: Germany's Commitment to Israel

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In March 1960, Konrad Adenauer, the chancellor of West Germany, met his Israeli counterpart, David Ben-Gurion, in New York. Eight years earlier, Germany had agreed to pay millions of marks in reparations to Israel, but the two countries had yet to establish diplomatic relations. Adenauer's language at their meeting was unambiguous: Israel, he said, is a 'fortress of the West' and 'I can already now tell you that we will help you, we will not leave you alone.' Six decades on, Israel's security is Germany's Staatsräson, as Angela Merkel put it in 2008. The phrase has been repeatedly invoked, with more vehemence than clarity, by German leaders in the weeks since 7 October. Solidarity with the Jewish state has burnished Germany's proud self-image as the only country that makes public remembrance of its criminal past the foundation of its collective identity. But in 1960, when Adenauer met Ben-Gurion, he was presiding over a systematic reversal of the de-Nazification process decreed by the country's Western occupiers in 1945, and aiding the suppression of the unprecedented horror of the Judaeocide. The German people, according to Adenauer, were also victims of Hitler. What's more, he went on, most Germans under Nazi rule had 'joyfully helped fellow Jewish citizens whenever they could'.

West Germany's munificence towards Israel had motivations beyond national shame or duty, or the prejudices of a chancellor described by his biographer as a 'late 19th-century colonialist' who loathed the Arab nationalism of Gamal Abdel Nasser and was enthused by the Anglo-French-Israeli assault on Egypt in 1956. As the Cold War intensified, Adenauer determined that his country needed greater sovereignty and a greater role in Western economic and security alliances; Germany's long road west lay through Israel. West Germany moved fast after 1960, becoming the most important supplier of military hardware to Israel in addition to being the main enabler of its economic modernisation. Adenauer himself explained after his retirement that giving money and weapons to Israel was essential to restoring Germany's 'international standing', adding that 'the power of the Jews even today, especially in America, should not be underestimated.'

Such was the 'unprincipled political gamesmanship', as Primo Levi called it, that expedited the rehabilitation of Germany only a few years after the full extent of its genocidal antisemitism became known. A strategic philosemitism, parasitic on old antisemitic stereotypes but now combined with sentimental images of Jews, flourished in postwar Germany. The novelist Manès Sperber was one of those repulsed by it. 'Your philosemitism depresses me,' he wrote to a colleague, 'degrades me like a compliment that is based on an absurd misunderstanding ... You overestimate us Jews in a dangerous fashion and insist on loving our entire people. I don't request this, I do not wish for us - or any other people - to be loved in this way.' In *Germany and Israel: Whitewashing and Statebuilding* (2020), Daniel Marwecki describes the way that visions of Israel as a new embodiment of Jewish power awakened dormant German fantasies. A report by the West German delegation to the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 marvelled at 'the novel and very advantageous type of the Israeli youth', who are 'of great height, often blond and blue-eyed, free and self-determined in their movements with well-defined faces' and exhibit 'almost none of the features which one was used to

view as Jewish'. Commenting on Israel's successes in the 1967 war, *Die Welt* regretted German 'infamies' about the Jewish people: the belief that they were 'without national sentiment; never ready for battle, but always keen to profit from somebody else's war effort'. The Jews were in fact a 'small, brave, heroic, genius people'. Axel Springer, which published *Die Welt*, was among the major postwar employers of superannuated Nazis.

Figuring Israelis as Aryan warriors – Moshe Dayan was like Erwin Rommel, according to *Bild* – wasn't a contradiction but an imperative for some beneficiaries of the German economic miracle. Marwecki writes that Adenauer made a major loan and the supply of military equipment 'dependent on the Israeli handling of the trial' of Adolf Eichmann: he had been shocked to learn of Mossad's discovery of Eichmann just weeks after his meeting with Ben-Gurion (he didn't know that a German Jewish prosecutor had secretly informed the Israelis about Eichmann's whereabouts) and feared what Eichmann might reveal. He went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that his closest confidant, Hans Globke, wasn't fingered as an exponent of Nuremberg racial laws at the trial. Many sordid details remain locked up in the classified files of the German Chancellery and German intelligence. Bettina Stangneth found enough in the archives to show, in *Eichmann before Jerusalem* (2014), that Adenauer enlisted the CIA to delete a reference to Globke from an article in *Life* magazine. It is also now known that, acting on Adenauer's instructions, a journalist and fixer called Rolf Vogel stole potentially incriminating files on Globke from an East German lawyer at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

Much to Adenauer's relief, his new Israeli allies protected Globke, keeping up their end of what Marwecki describes as the 'exchange structure specific to German-Israeli relations': moral absolution of an insufficiently de-Nazified and still profoundly antisemitic Germany in return for cash and weapons. It also suited both countries to portray Arab adversaries of Israel, including Nasser ('Hitler on the Nile'), as the true embodiments of Nazism. The Eichmann trial underplayed the persistence of Nazi support in Germany while exaggerating the Nazi presence in Arab countries, to the exasperation of at least one observer: Hannah Arendt wrote that Globke 'had more right than the ex-Mufti of Jerusalem to figure in the history of what the Jews had actually suffered from the Nazis'. She noted, too, that Ben-Gurion, while exonerating Germans as 'decent', made no 'mention of decent Arabs'.

In *Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory and Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany*, Esra Özyürek describes the way that German politicians, officials and journalists, now that the far right is in the ascendant, have been cranking up the old mechanism of sanitising Germany by demonising Muslims. In December 2022, German police foiled a coup attempt by Reichsbürger, an extremist group with more than twenty thousand members, which was planning an assault on the Bundestag. Alternative für Deutschland, which has neo-Nazi affiliations, has become the country's second most popular party, partly in response to economic mismanagement by the coalition led by Olaf Scholz. Yet despite the undisguised antisemitism of even mainstream politicians such as Hubert Aiwanger, the deputy minister-president of Bavaria, 'white Christian-background Germans' see themselves 'as having reached their destination of redemption and re-democratisation', according to Özyürek. The 'general German social problem of antisemitism' is projected onto a minority of Arab immigrants, who are then further stigmatised as 'the most unrepentant antisemites' in need of 'additional education and disciplining'.

Both Judaeophobia and Islamophobia have increased in Germany in the wake of the Hamas attack, Israel's scorched-earth assault on Gaza and the German government's crackdown on public displays of support for Palestine. The German president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, recently urged all those in Germany with 'Arab roots' to disavow hatred of Jews and denounce Hamas. The vice chancellor, Robert Habeck, followed with a more explicit warning to Muslims: they would be tolerated in Germany only if they rejected antisemitism. Aiwanger, a politician with a weakness for Nazi salutes,

has joined the chorus blaming antisemitism in Germany on 'unchecked immigration'. To denounce Germany's Muslim minority as 'the major carriers of antisemitism', as Özyürek points out, is to suppress the fact that nearly '90 per cent of antisemitic crimes are committed by right-wing white Germans.'

Netanyahu, too, has learned from Germany's postwar efforts at whitewashing. In 2015 he claimed that the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem had persuaded Hitler to murder rather than simply expel the Jews. Three years later, after initially criticising a move by the Law and Justice Party in Poland to criminalise references to Polish collaboration, he endorsed the law making such references punishable by a fine. He has since legitimised Shoah revisionism in Lithuania and Hungary, commending both countries for their valiant struggle against antisemitism. (Efraim Zuroff, a historian who has helped bring many former Nazis to trial, compared this to 'praising the Ku Klux Klan for improving racial relations in the South'.) More recently, Netanyahu accompanied Elon Musk to one of the kibbutzim targeted by Hamas, just days after Musk tweeted in support of an antisemitic conspiracy theory. Since 7 October, he has seemed to be reading from the Eichmann trial script. He regularly announces that he is fighting the 'new Nazis' in Gaza in order to save 'Western civilisation', while others in his cohort of Jewish supremacists keep up a supporting chorus. The people of Gaza are 'subhuman', 'animals', 'Nazis'.

This vengeful rhetoric from a damaged fortress of the West is echoed in Europe and America. White nationalists have long identified with Israel: an ethnonational state that violates international legal, diplomatic and ethical protocols with its language of ethnic homogeneity, unwavering policy of territorial expansion, extrajudicial killings and demolitions. Today, an extreme manifestation of what Alfred Kazin, writing in his private journal in 1988, called 'militant, daredevil, fuck-you-all Israel' also serves as a palliative to many existential anxieties within the Anglo-American ruling classes. In *Our American Israel* (2018), Amy Kaplan described the way an American elite projects its fears and fantasies onto Israel. But the state-enforced philosemitism that shapes Germany's relationship to Israel belongs to another order of convulsion and ferocity.

Shortly before the Hamas offensive, Israel secured, with American blessing, its largest ever arms deal with Germany. The *Financial Times* reported in early November that German arms sales to Israel have been surging since 7 October: the figure for 2023 is more than ten times as high as the previous year. As Israel began to bomb homes, refugee camps, schools, hospitals, mosques and churches in Gaza, and Israeli cabinet ministers promoted their schemes for ethnic cleansing, Scholz reiterated the national orthodoxy: 'Israel is a country that is committed to human rights and international law and acts accordingly.' As Netanyahu's campaign of indiscriminate murder and destruction intensified, Ingo Gerhartz, the commander of the Luftwaffe, arrived in Tel Aviv hailing the 'accuracy' of Israeli pilots; he also had himself photographed, in uniform, donating blood for Israeli soldiers.

In a more unnerving illustration of the postwar German-Israeli symbiosis, the German health minister, Karl Lauterbach, approvingly retweeted a video in which Douglas Murray, a mouthpiece of the English far right, claims that the Nazis were more decent than Hamas. 'Watch and listen,' retweeted Karin Prien, deputy chair of the Christian Democratic Union and education minister for Schleswig-Holstein. 'This is great,' Jan Fleischhauer, a former contributing editor at *Der Spiegel*, wrote. 'Really great,' echoed Veronika Grimm, a member of the German Council of Economic Experts. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which in 2021 'outed' five Lebanese and Palestinian journalists at *Deutsche Welle* as antisemites, with equally flimsy evidence exposed the Indian poet and art historian Ranjit Hoskote as a calumniator of Jews for comparing Zionism with Hindu nationalism. *Die Zeit* alerted German readers to another moral outrage: 'Greta Thunberg openly sympathises with the Palestinians.' An open letter from Adam Tooze, Samuel Moyn and other academics criticising Jürgen Habermas's statement in support of Israel's actions provoked an editor at the *Frankfurter*

Allgemeine Zeitung to claim that Jews have an 'enemy' at universities in the form of postcolonial studies. *Der Spiegel* ran a cover picture of Scholz alongside his claim that 'we need to deport on a grand scale again.'

'German officials,' the *New York Times* reported – belatedly – in early December, 'have been combing through social media posts and open letters, some going back over a decade.' State-funded cultural institutions have long penalised artists and intellectuals of Global South ancestry who show any hint of sympathy for Palestinians, retracting awards and invitations; the German authorities are now seeking to discipline even Jewish writers, artists and activists. Candice Breitz, Deborah Feldman and Masha Gessen are just the latest to be 'lectured', as Eyal Weizman put it, 'by the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators who murdered our families and who now dare to tell us that we are antisemitic'.

What then of Germany's much lauded culture of historical memory? Susan Neiman, who wrote admiringly of Vergangenheitsbewältigung in *Learning from the Germans* (2020), now says she has changed her mind. 'German historical reckoning has gone haywire,' she wrote in October. 'This philosemitic fury ... has been used to attack Jews in Germany.' In *Never Again: Germans and Genocide after the Holocaust*, which examines the German response to mass killings in Cambodia, Rwanda and the Balkans, Andrew Port suggests that their 'otherwise admirable reckoning with the Holocaust may have unwittingly desensitised Germans. The conviction that they had left the rabid racism of their forebears far behind them may have paradoxically allowed for the unabashed expression of different forms of racism.'

This goes some way to explaining the widespread indifference in Germany to the fate of the Palestinians, and the conviction that any criticism of Israel is a form of bigotry (a stance that negates Germany's own historic support of many UN resolutions against Israeli infractions). Port could have strengthened his argument by discussing Germany's failure fully to acknowledge, let alone pay reparations for, its first genocide of the 20th century: the mass killings by German colonists in South-West Africa between 1904 and 1908. Port also gives too much credit to German memory culture, which maintained an appearance of success only because the German ruling class had, until recently, less occasion to expose its historical delusions than, for instance, the Brexiteers dreaming of imperial-era strength and self-sufficiency.

In reality, official attempts to bolster Germany's image in the present by denouncing its past have faced much domestic resistance. Rudolf Augstein, the founder and editor of *Der Spiegel* and another early patron of former Nazis, remarked in 1998 that Berlin's Holocaust Memorial was designed to satisfy American 'East Coast' elites. Historical memory is too volatile to be fixed by political and cultural institutions; it always seemed implausible that a collective moral education could produce a stable, homogenous attitude across the generations. There are too many other factors determining what is remembered and what is forgotten, and the German national subconscious is burdened by a century of secrecy, crimes and cover-ups. Speaking at Weimar in 1994, Jurek Becker, a rare Jewish novelist who lived in both East and West Germany, blamed the resurgence of violent neo-Nazism in unified Germany on the Nazis who, indulged and even embraced by Cold Warriors, had continued to flourish in West Germany:

They saw to it that the look back at the Nazi past turned out as mild as possible, not brutal, and where it was possible they tried to prevent it ... They supported one another mutually and supplied influence for one another. They prevented the progress of those who had seen through them. They said that not *everything* had been bad in those days, you couldn't throw out the baby with the bathwater. Sometime or other they got the idea of asserting that fascism had simply been the answer to the *real* crime of our epoch, to

Bolshevism.

Many well-placed men worked to compromise West Germans' understanding of their complicity in the Third Reich. Franz Josef Strauss, a veteran of the Wehrmacht in the 'bloodlands' of Eastern Europe who became Adenauer's defence minister and later prime minister of Bavaria, thought that the 'task of leaving the past behind us' was best accomplished by defence deals with Israel. Ralf Vogel, who claimed that 'the Uzi in the hand of the German soldier is better than any brochure against antisemitism,' now seems an early exponent of this mode of leaving the past behind – what Eleonore Sterling, a survivor of the Shoah and Germany's first female professor of political science, was by 1965 calling 'a functional philosemitic attitude' that replaces 'a true act of understanding, repentance and future vigilance'. Frank Stern's unsparing diagnosis in *The Whitewashing of the Yellow Badge* (1992) holds true today: German philosemitism, he wrote, is primarily a 'political instrument', used not only to 'justify options in foreign policy', but also 'to evoke and project a moral stance in times when domestic tranquillity is threatened by antisemitic, anti-democratic and right-wing extremist phenomena'.

This is not the first time invocations of Staatsräson have been used to conceal democratic deformations. In 2021, for example, while pursuing defence deals with Israel, Germany challenged the right of the International Criminal Court to investigate war crimes in the Occupied Territories. In mid-December, with twenty thousand Palestinians massacred and epidemics threatening the millions displaced, *Die Welt* was still claiming that 'Free Palestine is the new Heil Hitler.' German leaders continue to block joint European calls for a ceasefire. Weizman may seem to exaggerate when he says that 'German nationalism has begun to be rehabilitated and revived under the auspices of German support for Israeli nationalism.' But the only European society that tried to learn from its vicious past is clearly struggling to remember its main lesson. German politicians and opinion-makers are not only failing to meet their national responsibility to Israel by extending unconditional solidarity to Netanyahu, Smotrich, Gallant and Ben Gvir. As völkisch-authoritarian racism surges at home, the German authorities risk failing in their responsibility to the rest of the world: never again to become complicit in murderous ethnonationalism.

Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory and Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany

by Esra Özyürek.

Stanford, 264 pp., £25.99, March, 978 1 5036 3556 2

Never Again: Germans and Genocide after the Holocaust

by Andrew Port.

Harvard, 352 pp., £30.95, May, 978 0 674 27522 5

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