

# Historical Reckoning Gone Haywire

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A rally in support of Israel and against antisemitism at the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin, May 2021

How do we remember the parts of our histories we'd rather forget? Repression and revision are always options. Few will go as far as Ron DeSantis, who has recast American slavery as a form of trade school, but those who are honest will note the ways their own narratives evolve. Highlighting successes while consigning failures to oblivion is as common as writing a résumé. Nations are hardly less likely than individuals to embellish their pasts. Historians may toil in the archives seeking something like truth, but public memory is a political project whose relationship to fact is more precarious.

So it's not surprising that until quite recently, American schoolchildren learned to recite the beginning of the Declaration of Independence without ever learning that the Founding Fathers ignored African Americans' right to liberty and Native Americans' right to life. Public memory is designed to create identities that people are proud to uphold. Why teach schoolchildren that American realities violated American ideals from the country's inception, which can only cause shame?

The US is hardly unique in preferring a heroic version of its past. Raise children on the Magna Carta and the Battle of Britain and they'll be glad to share in the glory of the British nation. Why confuse them with stories of empire? French schoolchildren can be proud to become citizens of the country that gave the world the Declaration of the Rights of Man; need they be told that it was disregarded a few years after it inspired the revolution in Haiti, whose leader, Toussaint Louverture, was consigned to death in a French prison?

When national failures are too big to ignore, individuals and nations

turn to narratives of victimhood: we would have been heroes had history not run roughshod over our efforts. Some nations vacillate between heroic and victim-based memories—Poland and Israel come to mind. But until very recently, no nation ever based its historical narrative on having been a perpetrator of world-shattering crimes. Who would imagine that this might be a way to construct a national identity?

Over the past few decades, Germany has done just that. It's easy to say that it had no choice, that the atrocities of World War II cried out for expiation. But for forty years very few (West) Germans saw it that way: instead they cultivated a narrative that cast them as the war's prime victims. It was one that mirrored the tales of American defenders of the Lost Cause: we lost the war, our cities were in ruins, our men dead or languishing in POW camps. We were hungry, just barely alive—and on top of it all, the Yankees had the gall to blame *us* for starting the war.

This litany is not entirely false, though it elides the larger perspective that makes such sentiments the dishonest, self-serving apologetics they are. Yet to understand not only today's Germany but the ways in which most states approach the hardest parts of their histories, you must know that the sense of victimhood was felt as deeply and keenly in postwar Germany as anywhere else that endured the devastation of war. What better way to avoid responsibility for others' suffering than to focus on one's own?

On occasion Germans knew they ought to do something to get into the world's good graces. Yet the reparations initially paid to Holocaust survivors and the State of Israel were not only grudging and meager; they were also accompanied by the assumption

that the bill was thereby settled. There would be no need for further acts of remorse. West Germans could leave the years 1933–1945 out of their history classes and keep Nazis in their civil service jobs, so that schools, universities, and government could be staffed by those who were much keener on recalling the bombing of Dresden than the mass murder at Auschwitz.

Few outside Germany knew how unwilling the country initially was to acknowledge its crimes: what most saw was West German chancellor Willy Brandt kneeling in shame before the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial in 1970. Brandt was doing penance for his compatriots, though he himself had nothing to atone for, having left Germany for exile in Norway months after the Nazis took power. To outsiders, his gesture made perfect sense, but most of his fellow citizens were appalled by his apology tour. Their opposition would contribute to the brevity of his term as chancellor. At that time few West Germans were eager to recognize, much less atone for, their nation's crimes. But slowly and fitfully, they began to do so.

East Germany was different. Pastor Martin Niemöller's lines are printed on posters all over the world:

First they came for the Communists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Communist

Then they came for the Socialists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews  
And I did not speak out  
Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me  
And there was no one left  
To speak out for me

It's a nice statement of the idea that if you don't stand up for everyone's civil rights, no one may be there to stand up for yours. But it's often forgotten that Niemöller's lines are also a statement of historical fact: first they *did* come for the Communists, and so on. As a result most of East Germany's political and cultural leaders were committed antifascists. Some had suffered in Nazi concentration camps; others fled for their lives. Many, like the writers Bertolt Brecht, Stefan Heym, and Anna Seghers, returned from exile eager to build an antifascist Germany from the ruins. When the repressions of state socialism were too much to bear, some, like the philosopher Ernst Bloch, left again for the West.

Still, East Germany did more, at every level, to denazify than its anti-Communist neighbor to the west.<sup>1</sup> More Nazis were tried, sentenced, and removed from office. Memorials were constructed to victims; a new national anthem was composed. In East Germany, school lesson plans, films, and television programs emphasized the evils of Nazism; in West Germany, education and popular culture avoided the subject entirely. In the West May 8, the day the war ended, was called the Day of Unconditional Capitulation; in the East it was celebrated as the Day of Liberation. Of course the East German government instrumentalized its antifascist narrative, which was incomplete and tendentious. But its tenor was one the rest of the world could share. *Nazis were bad, defeating them was good* was never in doubt on one side of the Wall. In the West, by contrast, that simple claim was drenched in ambivalence.

East Germany's repeated references to the number of Nazis in the West German government was dismissed as Communist propaganda, but West Germans knew it was also true. It was one source of the pressure that ultimately pushed West Germany to get more serious about denazifying itself after the US and Great Britain ceased their own feckless denazification programs when the cold war heated up.<sup>2</sup> (Former Nazis were too valuable in confronting the

<sup>1</sup>I am well aware that this claim is contentious. For an argument based on archival sources as well as many interviews, see chapter 3 of my *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); reviewed in these pages by Michael Gorra, November 7, 2019. Relevant also is Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The "Final Solution" in History* (Pantheon, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>See Klaus Bästlein, *Der Fall Globke: Propaganda und Justiz in Ost und West* (Berlin: Metropolis, 2018).

Soviet Union to languish in jail or obscurity.)

But most of the hard work of facing the Nazi past was driven by West German intellectuals, church groups, and students, whose outrage at their Nazi parents and teachers made the 1960s in Berlin rather more violent than they were in Berkeley. Together those groups pushed civil society to a new self-understanding. By 1985, when President Richard von Weizsäcker gave a speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the war's end, there was a nascent consensus: Germans had suffered, but others had suffered more, and their suffering was Germany's fault. This insight was remarkable only for the fact that it was so long in coming, but Weizsäcker's speech promoted a new self-image. Forget the shame of the Treaty of Versailles, the defeat at Stalingrad, and the Potsdam Conference; Germans should no longer view themselves as twentieth-century victims. Their collective identity was now historically unique: Germans would see themselves first and foremost as perpetrators.

A number of books, including one of my own, *Learning from the Germans*, have traced the process by which Germans transformed themselves from victims to perpetrators, but lately it's become fashionable to claim that no genuine transformation took place. The many annual rituals and commemorations of Nazi crimes have been dismissed as "memory theater." Critics charge that personal discussions of guilt and shame rarely penetrate family circles, where most prefer to think that whatever the neighbors may have done, Grandpa was no Nazi. Besides, isn't Germany still a racist society? And why has it focused on Nazi crimes while ignoring the early-twentieth-century genocide of the Nama and Herero peoples in German South West Africa (present-day Namibia)?

There are answers to all these questions, which are usually raised by those too young to remember the outright antisemitism and other forms of racism still publicly acceptable in 1980s Germany. Those who haven't lived through epochal change can hardly view its results as groundbreaking; the results become the new norm. But those of us who remember the days when Germans shamelessly repeated antisemitic clichés while viewing themselves as victims notice dramatic differences.

We also know that for many, the desire to atone for the crimes of their forebears is not a matter of theater but genuine—albeit often helpless. The alacrity with which Germany responded to recent demands to face colonial crimes shows that unlike Britain or France, it has developed a practice of historical reckoning that may have begun with Nazi crimes but can be adapted to others.<sup>3</sup> Those who argue that the reparations for genocide in Namibia or the restoration of stolen art to Nigeria are too little, too late should ask themselves what Spain has done to acknowledge, let alone expiate, the bloodiest colonial regimes in history.

No native German would raise this question, at least not in public. Though

a number of recent articles have argued that Germany can no longer consider itself the "world champion of remembrance," I never met a German who considered herself in such terms, or indeed was prepared to praise the process at all. On the contrary, Germans are their own fiercest critics, the ones most eager to tell you that antisemitism still runs rampant. It's a testament to the sincerity of their efforts at historical reckoning. But as a German saying reminds us, the opposite of "good" is "good intention."

So it isn't the absence of historical reckoning with the Holocaust but a twist on it that has led today's Germany into a philosemitic McCarthyism that threatens to throttle the country's rich cultural life. In the past three years, German historical reckoning has gone haywire, as the determination to root out antisemitism has shifted from vigilance to hysteria. Every application for grants or jobs is scrutinized for signs. Allegations of antisemitism, regardless of the source, serve as grounds for revoking prizes and job contracts or canceling exhibitions and performances. Although police statistics show that over 90 percent of antisemitic hate crimes are committed by white, right-wing Germans, Muslims and people of color have been the most heavily targeted by media campaigns that have cost several their jobs.

The most astonishing feature of this philosemitic fury is the way it has been used to attack Jews in Germany, including some descendants of Holocaust survivors and the estimated 40,000 Israelis now living there. In the name of atoning for the crimes of their parents and grandparents, non-Jewish Germans publicly accuse Jewish writers, artists, and activists of antisemitism. This makes tenuous sense given that the main thing decades of historical reckoning have taught the Germans about Jews is: *they were our victims*. As the German-Jewish author Nele Polatschek recently wrote, only someone who has suffered and lost at least half their family in the Holocaust is considered a real Jew.

One can go a step further: for Germans, a real Jew is someone whose life is constituted by the Holocaust. Though it's now been a century since the influential Jewish historian Salo Baron decried what he called the lachrymose conception of Jewish history as a never-ending tale of woe, it's the conception to which most Germans hold fast. Hence Jews whose lives are not focused on Jewish suffering are at best puzzling and at worst slightly suspect.

This ignores the entire tradition of Jewish universalism, which is as old as the biblical verse that enjoins Jews to remember that we were strangers in Egypt, and therefore have a special obligation to care for those who are strangers anywhere—even if they happen to be Palestinian. Jewish universalism is the answer to Jewish nationalism. It's the tradition of the prophets as well as the German-Jewish luminaries, from Moses Mendelssohn to Karl Marx to Albert Einstein to Hannah Arendt, whose absence from the Federal Republic is regularly bemoaned. It's easier to put dead Jews' images on postage stamps than to

explore the ideas that made them famous, and Jews who refuse to foreground Jewish suffering do not fit into the postwar lesson plan. According to German logic, such Jews could minimize the importance of the Holocaust, and thereby the Germans' own guilt.

Angela Merkel's 2008 declaration that the security of Israel was part of German *Staatsräson* (national interest) was too vague to be a statement of foreign policy. Did it imply that Germany would send troops to the Golan if Israel were attacked? Such questions were never answered, but her statement expressed an emotion that previous decades had crystallized. It's not uncommon for Germans to refer to their country as the *Täternation* (perpetrator-nation). It seems to follow that Jews constitute an eternal victim-nation. In that case, the only way to wash away the sins of the fathers is to support the potential victim *über alles*.

If this presents a problem for any Jew in particular, it's infinitely more troubling when thinking about Israel, the state that claims to represent them. More than half a century has gone by since that high-tech nuclear power could pass as little David with a slingshot. But Germany's pervasive commitment to historical reckoning has left it with one certainty: *we murdered millions of Jews*. Any issue involving Jews at all will be read through the lens of the German past. As a result, a country governed by a center-left coalition has a foreign policy somewhere to the right of AIPAC.

In 2019 the German parliament passed a resolution declaring that anyone who supported the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement or its goals was antisemitic and hence ineligible to appear at any state-funded theater, museum, lecture hall, or other cultural institution. BDS is a Palestinian-led movement founded in 2005 to oppose the occupation of Palestine by substituting boycotts for terrorism. When the resolution was passed, it had a marginal presence in Germany, where most people still need to be told what the initials represent. But since almost every cultural institution in Germany receives some form of state funding, this amounted to a virtual ban on anyone suspected of proximity to BDS, a concept left entirely murky.

There's no doubt that some BDS supporters are antisemitic. But rather than attempt to determine the extent of a person's involvement in the loosely organized movement, Germans find it sufficient to refer to their own tarnished history. In 1933 the Nazis called for a boycott of Jewish businesses, one of the first discriminatory steps that led to the yellow star and later to Auschwitz. Ergo, proximity to anyone who contemplates any form of boycott against Israel is advocating the first in a series of actions that could end in the gas chamber. Were this chain of reasoning made explicit, its flaws would be apparent. But reason is not much in evidence in current discussions.

In Berlin the word "apartheid" can get you canceled faster than the N-word will get you canceled in New York. Unlike the N-word, "apartheid" is not a racist slur but a technical juridical term denoting different legal

systems for different peoples. In Israel and the US, legal scholars are still debating whether it applies to those parts of Israel that are within the Green Line, but most agree that it's a perfectly accurate description of conditions in the West Bank. Israeli human rights organizations, along with Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have argued for the use of the term. When Amnesty released "Israel's Apartheid Against Palestinians" in 2022, however, its German chapter publicly distanced itself from the report and refused to discuss it.

Germans who recoil at the term are not thinking of the occupied territories, which few of them have ever seen. The word "apartheid" makes some Germans think of the boycott of South Africa; more often they think of Nazi posters on Jewish shop windows: *Don't Buy from Jews*. Frozen images of past shame prevent them from thinking clearly about the present, even when former Israeli ambassadors, outraged over the recent legislation limiting the authority of the country's Supreme Court, urge their German colleagues that the time for boycott has come: the German government should, at the least, stop inviting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his cabinet and holding joint events as they have in the past.

It's rare that such appeals reach the German media, since detailed reporting from Israel is inversely proportional to the country's place in the German psyche. During the brief but deadly Israeli war on Gaza in 2021, *The New York Times* printed photos of the sixty-seven children killed there on its front page. The German press, by contrast, was captivated by a demonstration against the war in Gelsenkirchen in which some (predominantly Muslim) citizens shouted antisemitic obscenities. Where Jews are at issue, Germans think first of themselves: *Is there (still) antisemitism in Germany?*

So it's unsurprising that in the weeks after Israel elected the most right-wing government in its history, German media were focused on alleged antisemitism in Munich. In November 2022 two Jewish university students charged that a play was antisemitic. Rejecting the director's offer to host another performance at which the alleged antisemitism could be discussed, the students threatened to demand that the city withdraw the Metropol Theater's funding if the play wasn't canceled. It was duly canceled, and a debate began.

The play in question, *Birds*, was written by the Lebanese-Canadian author Wajdi Mouawad in consultation with the distinguished historian Natalie Zemon Davis, who is Jewish. It tells the story of two graduate students who fall in love in the Columbia University library. What makes them a modern Romeo and Juliet is the fact that Eitan, a young geneticist, is descended from Holocaust survivors, while Wahida, a young historian, describes herself as an Arab of Moroccan descent. The story of their romance becomes the story of family trauma: the young man's father, who is vociferously hostile to any liaison between Jew and Arab, turns out to be an adopted Palestinian. The ending echoes *Nathan the Wise*, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's eighteenth-century plea for religious tolerance, which was the first

<sup>3</sup>See Thomas Rogers, "The Long Shadow of German Colonialism," *The New York Review*, March 9, 2023.

play the occupying Red Army allowed to be performed in Berlin's bombed-out ruins after the war.

How could this story be construed as antisemitism too dangerous to be performed on a German stage? The government-funded antisemitism watchdog RIAS provided an explanation. The play, it charged, depicts Jews with negative characteristics. It shows Jews who are neurotic and Jews who are racist. It portrays a Holocaust survivor who makes a joke about surviving. On such grounds, RIAS would presumably ban Philip Roth, Woody Allen, and even Heinrich Heine.

But as the organization's critique becomes more detailed, its methods become clearer. The fact that the Jewish student is a geneticist is antisemitic because "the combination of genetics, Jews, and Germany makes one think of Nazi euthanasia and the Shoah." His father's remark that he wouldn't like to be a Palestinian "recalls Hermann Goering's statement after Kristallnacht that 'I wouldn't like to be a Jew in Germany today.'" The report continues for seventeen single-spaced pages, but the form of the critique is clear: if a claim about Jews makes a German think about Nazis, it is ipso facto antisemitic. The trouble is, almost any claim about Jews makes Germans think about Nazis.

Davis wrote an article refuting the charges of antisemitism and concluding with the suggestion that the critics had a "restrictive, frightened and heartless view of what it is to be a Jew." RIAS responded by calling her a BDS activist, a charge that has no basis at all. The debate continued for months, as some endorsed Davis's plea to let the play be performed so that audiences could judge its content for themselves, and others urged that artistic freedom should never take precedence over fighting antisemitism. This begs the question of whether the play is actually antisemitic, but the allegation is enough, in today's Germany, to put fear in the heart of anyone whose work is publicly funded. After much deliberation, the Metropol Theater decided to excise a few of the lines that had provoked the critics and reprise the play. After all, theaters regularly cut parts of plays they produce; how else could you get an audience to sit through *King Lear*?

Mouawad ended the debate by insisting that the theater produce the play in its entirety or not at all. It was not performed. But the oddest element of the story did not come into the discussion. Three years before the scandal erupted, *Birds* was playing to enthusiastic reviews in fourteen German cities, after celebrated performances in France, Canada, and Israel. "Drama of the Hour" is the title of a 2019 German review, which assures readers that the play will remain onstage for many years, since it contains everything a director could wish for. In 2020 the German state of Baden-Württemberg awarded Mouawad its first European drama prize.

Some recent developments in German politics explain how the culture changed so quickly. In 2017 the Alternative for Germany (AfD) became the first far-right party since the war

to receive enough votes to enter parliament. It was driven by the anti-immigrant fervor that drives other far-right parties in Europe and America, as well as one very German issue. AfD leaders criticized the historical reckoning now central to civic education as a "guilt cult." Seen in the light of Germany's history, they declared, the twelve-year Nazi reign was "a speck of birdshit." Decent Germans were understandably alarmed.

In its alarm, the government made a series of errors. The first was to establish a federal office to combat antisemitism, which was quickly followed by offices at the state level. None of the commissioners was raised as a Jew, though one converted soon after his appointment; most have little understanding of Jewish complexity or tradition. (The federal commissioner was photographed marching with one of the Christian Zionist groups whose mission is to ignite an apocalypse in the promised land that will either convert or obliterate the Jews. His participation was innocent; he simply saw an Israeli flag and assumed he should join.) To compensate for their unfamiliarity, the commissioners rely on two sources for information about Jews, Israelis, and Palestinians: the Israeli embassy and the Central Council for Jews in Germany, one of the more right-leaning Jewish organizations in the world. Even more importantly, they rely on what they've learned from Germany's decades-long historical reckoning, which views all matters Jewish through the prism of German guilt.

This makes Germany vulnerable to all kinds of manipulation, and its second great error came in 2019. Inspired by Steve Bannon, with whom AfD leaders meet regularly, the radical right adopted a strategy now common to right-wing parties from Dallas to Delhi. Racism toward other groups can be covered up by denouncing antisemitism and swearing support for any Israeli government. After all, anyone who does *that* can't be a Nazi. In 2020 Netanyahu's oldest son, Yair, appeared as the poster boy for an AfD advertisement calling the European Union an "evil, globalist" organization and hoping that "Europe will return to be free, democratic, and Christian." To further refute suspicions of neo-Nazism, the AfD began trying to recruit Jews in Germany, including me, with tales of murderous Muslims. Far more successful was their 2019 proposal to parliament: BDS should be banned from Germany.

As a political strategy, it was brilliant, for it left the other German parties aghast. When the AfD entered parliament, they declined to be seated next to its deputies and were in principle against anything the AfD proposed. Yet how could they allow the AfD to outshine them in philosemitism? Their solution was to unite in support of the resolution banning anyone "close to BDS" from speaking, exhibiting, or performing in state-funded venues. Unlike the AfD's resolution, this slightly different one seemed compatible with constitutional protections for freedom of speech, though every court in which it was challenged declared it unconstitutional.

Unconstitutional or not, the resolution is regularly deployed. Its first victim was the internationally renowned Judaic scholar Peter Schäfer, who was

pushed to resign as director of Berlin's Jewish Museum after Netanyahu complained about him to Germany's minister of culture. More recently, it was used to fire Matondo Castlo, a twenty-nine-year-old German of Congolese origin, from his job as the host of a children's TV show. His crime? Attending an ecological festival for children in the West Bank.

The more conditions worsen in Israel/Palestine, the more ardently German media seek instances of antisemitism to condemn. In July 2023 Netanyahu's successful undermining of the Israeli justice system was duly—albeit briefly—noted in the major newspapers. But what really filled German airwaves in the weeks that followed were reports about what should have been at most a minor scandal, when a young German journalist, Fabian Wolff, acknowledged that, contrary to what he'd assumed, he was not Jewish.

There's nothing more German than the wish to be Jewish. Shortly after the war many Nazis invented Jewish identities to avoid detection, as brilliantly described in Edgar Hilsenrath's satirical novel *The Nazi and the Barber* (1971). More often, the wish was less a matter of opportunism than of longing. Who wouldn't rather have victim-blood than perpetrator-blood in their veins?

Wolff's inclination to believe his late mother's vague references to supposed Jewish ancestors was hardly unusual; there are Germans who have become synagogue leaders and even rabbis by doing something similar. Wolff's fatal flaw, for the German media, was to become a left-wing Jewish universalist, criticizing the Israeli government and writing essays about Tony Judt and Isaac Deutscher. The fury with which every major newspaper attacked him had nothing to do with the fact that he'd imagined himself to have Jewish ancestry, like many a German before him, but with the fact that he had criticized Israeli policies from this position.

For Germans, expressing indignation over German misdeeds is easy. Those tempted to indignation over Jewish ones will fear that the rage is atavistic, born of antisemitism they must have inherited. Though it's hardly compatible with his own theories of communicative action, Germany's grand old philosopher Jürgen Habermas has said it in print: Germans of his generation have no right to criticize Israel, which has not exactly encouraged younger Germans to speak out. Emily Dische-Becker, the Jewish director of the German branch of Diaspora Alliance, a small NGO devoted to fighting antisemitism as well as the misuse of antisemitism allegations, told me that most Germans cannot bear to face the truth: "They wanted Israel to be the happy ending to the Holocaust. They can't accept the fact that there is no happy ending."

The cases I've described are by no means exhaustive, simply exemplary. A new example of philosemitic repression reaches me every other week. Diaspora Alliance has verified fifty-nine cancellations—of discussions, performances, exhibitions, or jobs—in the past two years. What can't be verified are those that stay behind closed doors. Juries would violate their commitments to confidentiality if they re-

vealed how often someone was denied a prize or a job because of allegations of antisemitism by one third-rate blogger or another that were never proved. I know of four cases involving prominent figures that never became public. Nor can one count the numbers of those who self-censor before they are charged, or of those who ran into trouble but refrained from going public for fear of further reprisal.

While threats to slash funding for left-leaning groups continue, another kind of scandal began in late August 2023, when the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* revealed that Bavaria's lieutenant governor and finance minister, Hubert Aiwanger, was connected to a venomous pamphlet in 1987, when he was a teenager. It featured a mock competition to "find the greatest traitor to the Fatherland," with the first prize being "a free flight up the chimney at Auschwitz," the second being "a lifelong stay in a mass grave," and so on. Whether Aiwanger wrote the pamphlet himself, copies of which were found in his schoolbag, or it was written by his older brother, as he claimed, may never be known, since his answers to subsequent questions were so evasive that few took them seriously. National leaders of left-leaning parties called for his resignation.

Had Aiwanger expressed genuine shame or regret, the affair would have ended quietly. Who among us repents nothing they did at the age of seventeen? But even worse than the flyer was Aiwanger's reaction. Painting himself as both a victim of the liberal press and a rebel against what supportive politicians called a "collective guilt neurosis" and a "poisonous moralism," he remained defiant, even as former classmates reported further examples of his use of Nazi language and symbols in high school. *Die Zeit* compared his reactions to the charges against him to how Donald Trump has behaved.<sup>4</sup> Aiwanger's small party, Free Voters, quickly gained 5 percent in the polls preceding the upcoming state elections in October.

Unlike Matondo Castlo, the Congolese-German who lost his job after visiting a Palestinian children's festival, or Nemi El-Hassan, a Palestinian-German doctor whose appointment to host a science television show was canceled despite her convincing expression of regret for attending an Islamist demonstration nine years earlier, Aiwanger kept his position. And although plenty of German politicians and journalists were outraged by the Bavarian governor's refusal to dismiss him, others argued that it was the only option. Political martyrdom would only create more support for his increasingly right-leaning party. "Enough with the guilt business" is the kind of instinct that draws votes, and not just in Bavaria. A Facebook photo of the governor holding a small sign saying "We remember" was resurrected. Posting in English is a dog whistle for his voters: *we know how*

<sup>4</sup>Mariam Lau, "Jetzt mal im Ernst," *Die Zeit*, August 21, 2023. See also Mariam Lau, "Söders Wette," *Die Zeit*, September 7, 2023. The politicians quoted—Björn Hocke of the AfD and Friedrich Merz, current leader of the opposition Christian Democratic Union, who is widely expected to run for chancellor in 2025—are not minor figures.

we must speak to the foreigners, but we know what we think in Bavaria. Germany's federal antisemitism commissioner proposed that Aiwanger make a visit to the Dachau memorial site. The only source of comfort in this wretched affair was the fact that the people who run the site told him not to come.

What can we learn from Germans' efforts to confront their country's criminal history? Four years ago, I believed they could serve as a model for other countries trying to face their own failures and working to construct more honest versions of their histories. The model was never perfect, but no nation had ever tried anything like it. How could the Germans hope to get everything right?

The past three years, however, have left me repeating a line my sorely missed friend and colleague Tony Judt liked to quote: "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" The facts have changed so dramatically in Germany that I now suspect the most we can learn from it is a warning. To be sure, only the AfD would suggest returning to the days before Germans acknowledged that they were the perpetrators of World War II, just as only white supremacists hang on to the narrative of the Confederacy as a hapless victim. But since the overdue recognition that America should face the dark sides of its history took hold, many voices have suggested that there *are* nothing but dark sides to American history.

There's no question that the right-wing campaign to ban from American classrooms anything that might cause discomfort is dangerous. Anyone

should be proud to belong to a nation whose heroes include Martin Luther King Jr. and Toni Morrison, two writers whom several school boards have banned. Along with a history of profound injustice, the United States has a long history of people who fought against it. Without examples of brave men and women who worked together to make progress toward justice, we will never have the will to make more. Those who cannot acknowledge past histories of progress are doomed to cynicism or resignation. Portraying all of American history as an engine of white supremacy, or all of German history as irrevocably poisoned by antisemitism, is bound to provoke backlash, and it already has. But even if it didn't, it wouldn't be true—and isn't the demand for historical reckoning itself a demand for truth?

This was brought home to me by Bryan Stevenson, whom I interviewed while writing *Learning from the Germans*. Stevenson is the founder of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, commonly known as the Lynching Memorial, conceived after he witnessed examples of Germany's historical reckoning. When I visited him in Montgomery he told me, among other things:

You should be proud of those white Southerners in Mississippi and Louisiana and Alabama who argued in the 1850s that slavery was wrong. There were white Southerners in the 1920s who tried to stop lynchings, and you don't know their names.

Stevenson thinks that commemorating those names would help the US turn from shame to pride:

We could actually claim a heritage rooted in courage, and defiance of doing what is easy, and preferring what is right. We can make that the norm we want to celebrate as our Southern history and heritage and culture.

Recalling that visit some years later makes me think of those Germans whose narrative of their history is so unremittably bleak that they refuse to recognize any progress in it and insist that their country's attempt to reckon with its crimes has been a specious farce. This simplistic thesis fails to identify the flaws in German memory culture. Part of the problem is structural. When citizens demand that their nations face their racist pasts, which are said to ensure that racist policies persist, they seek a change in national consciousness. And when they are largely successful, as they have been in Germany, they want the change in consciousness to lead to changes in policies. Dates and events that were once gladly forgotten are now enshrined as official memorial days. Kristallnacht, the 1944 attempt to assassinate Hitler, the liberation of Auschwitz, and other milestones are regularly commemorated, some at the federal and others at the state level, featuring solemn politicians wearing yarmulkes, an aging Holocaust survivor, and at least one klezmer musician.

But government policies are... government policies. They aren't sensitive to subtlety. If not exactly based on algorithms, they run the danger of being based on formulas that easily become ossified and au-

tomatic. That's what happened to the GDR's doctrine of antifascism.

One result of the formulaic approach to historical reckoning is the tendency to view groups that have been oppressed as if they spoke in a monolithic voice forever fixed on their own oppression. If Germany considers only those Jews who focus on antisemitism to be authentic, America is in danger of viewing only those people of color who view racism as the source of every evil to be genuine. The lachrymose conception of Jewish history isn't far from the Afropessimist view of history propounded by writers like Frank B. Wilderson III. Is there a way to acknowledge racism and antisemitism without reducing those who experience them to eternal victims?

Ultimately it should be possible to examine historical crimes with care and nuance, though we know these qualities are in short supply. One lesson Americans can learn from the Germans is how badly things can go wrong when care and nuance are missing. The past few years have seen an enormous reckoning with America's racial history, yet the reckoning with its political history has not yet begun, despite the efforts of professional historians. The systematic and violent suppression of the labor movement that outlived McCarthyism left Americans with fewer rights than the citizens of any comparably wealthy democracy. Examining America's forgotten political history is a crucial part of working toward a future in which the pursuit of happiness might become a reality for all. But for that we need to preserve a notion of progress—along with the knowledge that it rarely proceeds in a straight line. ●

## Israel's Origins and Revolutions: An Exchange

To the Editors:

Joshua Leifer ["Whose Constitution, Whose Democracy?," *NYR*, May 11] writes that in the 1947–1948 period, "Zionist forces were fighting a war of expulsion" against "the Palestinians." This is not inaccurate—except that omission sometimes is inaccuracy.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War began on May 15, 1948—the day after Israel declared independence—when Egypt bombed Tel Aviv and five Arab armies invaded Israel. Their goal was not a Palestinian state (which the partition plan sought to establish), and certainly not a binational one. Their goal, openly and proudly proclaimed, was to crush the institutions of the Yishuv and kill the people who built it. Abd al-Rahman Azzam Pasha, head of the Arab League, promised that the coming invasion would be a "war of extermination"—this, less than three years after the last miserable remnant had been liberated from the death camps. (The 1948 war was preceded by a shorter civil war between Palestinians and Jews in 1947, which the historian Benny Morris notes was characterized by "vicious cycles of terror and retaliation.") The Israelis were fighting a war of conquest, but also one of survival.

The origin of a war is usually regarded as of some importance in understanding it. World War II began on September 1, 1939, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland. The Iraq War began on March 20, 2003, with the US bombing campaign and invasion. The latest iteration of the Ukraine War

began on February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded and partially occupied its neighbor. Only in the case of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War are the original aggressors and their annihilationist program erased or, at best, considered irrelevant.

And no, this is not to deny the catastrophe of the Nakba or to "excuse" it, whatever that might mean. It is to say that radically incomplete history is bad history, which is the handmaiden of bad politics.

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To the Editors:

Joshua Leifer's "Whose Constitution, Whose Democracy?" aptly frames Israel's eternal dilemma between a privileged national Jewish identity and liberal democracy. However, Leifer is mistaken, or lacks critical context, on two important points, which does an injustice to the potential of Israel to become democratic.

First, he dismisses the draft constitution written by Dr. Leo Kohn beginning in 1947 as merely an attempt to codify Jewish supremacy while projecting liberal democracy. Kohn's constitution did establish the Jewish national character and homeland, but the bulk of the text is an unambiguous commitment to liberal democratic values and institutions. Israelis can only envy the progressive and comprehensive nature of that constitution today. Leifer argues that Kohn's true aim is evident in the opening words of the preamble, "We, the Jewish people." (In fact, Kohn's draft begins with "We, the sons of Israel.")

It is unfortunate that Leifer does not venture beyond the preamble. The very first articles of Kohn's constitution establish the country's name and, to be sure, reiterate that all Jews would be allowed to settle in the homeland. But Article 2 states: "Israel is a sovereign, independent, democratic republic," going beyond the Declaration of Independence, which never used the term "democracy." Article 4.1 establishes that "there will be one law for all residents of Israel. The state will not discriminate between people based on race, religion, language or sex." Article 4.2 states, "All citizens of Israel will have equal civil and political rights." The next items in Article 4 prohibit discrimination in public office and property expropriation without compensation. Palestinian Arabs in Israel, then living under a cruel military regime in place for approximately the next twenty years, while their land and prop-

erties were summarily plundered, could have had a very different history under such a constitution.

Critically, Kohn's constitution also provided immediate citizenship for all non-Jews who had been subjects of "the land of Israel" prior to the constitution—something the state would fail to do for another four years in practice. Arabs in Israel were left with little recourse, vulnerable to life under draconian colonial laws rather than regular Israeli laws for citizens.

The second point relates to the modern era, where Leifer repeats a damaging and historically incorrect narrative favored by Israel's illiberal populist right wing. In this view, former Supreme Court chief justice Aharon Barak singlehandedly devised and implemented the pernicious "constitutional revolution" of the 1990s. Leifer observes that Barak declared a "constitutional revolution" in 1995; in fact, Likud's then justice minister Dan Meridor used the term in 1992, in his enthusiasm after the Knesset passed critical human rights legislation—as Meridor has repeatedly reminded Israelis. Worse, Leifer mistakenly attributes one of the most significant bases for the constitutional changes to Barak, quoting the justice's 1995 decision that established judicial review of legislation:

A law could violate the rights protected by the Basic Laws only if, Barak wrote, it "befits the values of the State of Israel, it was passed for a worthy purpose