

DISCUSSION FORUM

Holocaust Memory and Postcolonialism: Transatlantic Perspectives on the Debate

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German commemorative culture is clearly in flux. Over the last year or so, a series of seemingly never-ending controversies have made it abundantly clear that, more than seventy-five years after the end of the Second World War, the memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust is not only very much present in contemporary Germany but also remains deeply contested. The list of controversies is familiar to everybody who has followed German public debates over the last three years: first the debate over the planned appearance of the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe at the 2020 Ruhr-Triennale in the spring of 2020; then the publication of the German translation of Michael Rothberg's book *Multidirectional Memory* in March 2021 and the heated controversy around A. Dirk Moses's "catechism" blog article a few months later; and finally, the recent debate about antisemitism at the *documenta* art exhibition curated by an Indonesian artist collective.¹

Although all of these controversies addressed specific issues and featured a wide array of participants and voices, they nevertheless also shared some similarities and featured common concerns. All of them centered on—explicitly or implicitly—a dominant German commemorative culture as it had emerged in the aftermath of unification in the 1990s. This official commemorative culture entailed the assumption of the historical singularity of the Holocaust and, as a result, a special German responsibility to fight all manifestations of antisemitism and to display a basic solidarity with Israel. To be sure, the debate featured a wide variety of opinions as to how firmly established and widely accepted this dominant memory culture really was—while some criticized it as increasingly ossified or as a quasi-secular religion, others categorized German commemorative culture as a tenuous achievement at best that continuously needed to be defended against critics from the left and from the right. Still, the latest set of controversies surrounding German commemorative culture matched in intensity the first "Historians' debate" of the 1980s, which had established the notion of the Holocaust's singularity against conservative apologetic memories that sought to equate the victims of Germans with German victims.

Yet the "Historians' debate 2.0" of the 2020s featured, as Michael Rothberg has noted, a significantly wider cast of characters than the first historians' debate of the 1980s.² Whereas

¹ For a chronology of the debate see Thierry Chervil, "'Historikerstreit 2.0.' Eine Chronologie," June 20, 2021 (<https://www.perlentaucher.de/essay/historikerstreit-2-von-achille-mbembe-zu-a-dirk-moses-eine-chronologie.html>); Thierry Chervil, "'Historikerstreit 2.0.' Zweiter Teil," June 20, 2021, (<https://www.perlentaucher.de/essay/die-debatte-ueber-a-dirk-moses-katechismus-der-deutschen.html>).

² Michael Rothberg, "Comparing Comparisons: From the 'Historikerstreit' to the Mbembe Affair," *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, September 23, 2020 (<https://geschichtedergegenwart.ch/comparing-comparisons-from-the-historikerstreit-to-the-mbembe-affair>); Michael Rothberg, "Lived Multidirectionality: 'Historikerstreit 2.0' and the Politics of Holocaust Memory," *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1316–29.

the protagonists of the *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s were exclusively senior male historians (and philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas), the participants of the more recent debate were often younger, nonwhite (Mbembe, the Ruangrupa or Taring Padi collective) and also non-German scholars working at US universities. More than anything else, the recent debates have thus illustrated the ongoing globalization of German commemorative culture. The memory of National Socialism and the Holocaust is no longer a purely German affair but, increasingly, an issue of global concern. One aspect of the debate has been precisely this increasing criticism of German commemorative culture by commentators from abroad as overtly nation-centered and hence somewhat provincial and narrow. By contrast, German participants defended the achievements of German memory and its contribution to the democratic political culture of the Federal Republic.³ That said, there were also many crosscurrents, with participants on both sides of the Atlantic taking a wide variety of positions.

The fundamentally transnational nature of the debate pointed to recent shifts in German commemorative culture and reflects, at least in part, the changing dynamics of globalization. Historian Sebastian Conrad has diagnosed the current moment as the displacement of a nationally specific memory—Memory 1—with an increasingly globalized memory—Memory 2.⁴ It is not by accident that one of the leading questions that ran through the aforementioned controversies consisted of the comparison (and, importantly, the interrelationship) between European colonialism and imperialism, on the one hand, and National Socialism and the Holocaust, on the other. The debates thus negotiated the question of how to relate what Charles Maier had called already two decades ago the two “narratives of moral atrocity” of the twentieth century, namely imperialism and the Holocaust.⁵ This debate over how to conceptualize the relationship of European colonialism and the Holocaust (as well as the ways in which they have been and are remembered) was never just a purely academic issue but rather of eminent political significance. Although many of the historiographical questions at the heart of the current debate, such as the “singularity” thesis or the significance of the colonial experience for the Holocaust, have been the subject of previous debates, the renewed political and emotional charge of these historical questions resulted from a changing present: the increasing awareness of a multicultural society in Germany, as well as a renewed global sensibility to racist oppression of nonwhite groups in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd in 2021.⁶ The significance of the German past and its myriad cultural meanings, as these controversies make clear, now also extend to Afro-Germans or Muslim immigrants. Their relationship to the history of the Holocaust or to National Socialism is necessarily a different one than the one formulated by the ethnic white German perpetrator collective (or “Germans with a Nazi background,” as the artist Moshtari Hilal and political geographer Sinthujan Varatharajah called it provocatively in the spring of 2021).⁷

The goal of this discussion forum is not to rehash the arguments that have already been exchanged repeatedly, often in a heated and rather polemical fashion. Instead, the forum seeks to provide a set of analytical perspectives on these debates and, in so doing, to assess

³ Most vehemently in Saul Friedländer, Norbert Frei, Sybille Steinbacher, Dan Diner, und Jürgen Habermas, *Ein Verbrechen ohne Namen. Anmerkungen zum neuen Streit über den Holocaust* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2022).

⁴ Sebastian Conrad, “Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter. Warum die Vergangenheitsdebatte gerade explodiert,” *Merkur* 867 (August 2021): 5–17.

⁵ Charles Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” *American Historical Review* 105, no. 3 (2000): 807–31.

⁶ On the history of these debates, see, for example, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 28–61, and Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, “Hannah Arendt’s Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz,” *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (2009): 279–300.

⁷ “Wer ist für Sie ein Mensch mit Nazihintergrund? Interview mit Moshtari Hilal und Sinthujan Varatharajah,” March 2, 2021 (<https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/identitaetspolitik-sind-weisse-deutsche-menschen-mit-nazihintergrund-a-5da7ce95-d83c-46c5-874f-8efb0cb26d7c>).

their larger significance. The forum also seeks to provide a multifaceted and pluralist perspective on these debates within Germany and, in so doing, hopefully render them more intelligible for a non-German audience. It seeks to address, contextualize, and, at times, criticize what could be considered the peculiarities of a German debate on the peculiarities of German history. With one exception, the participants in the forum live and teach outside of Germany, though some of them grew up in Germany. They therefore also provide the perspectives of outsiders, or of insiders as outsiders. Although this cast of characters might bias the forum against German participants in the debate, it reflects the increasingly transnational nature of the debate. German memory is simply no longer just the business of German commentators.

Another goal of this forum is to elevate the debate from increasingly unproductive polemics in newspapers and magazines to a more scholarly and, hopefully, more nuanced discourse. It seeks to reestablish some basic requirements of scholarly discourse that appear to have been gradually lost in the public debate. This includes the obligation to represent an opponent's argument in the strongest possible and most accurate fashion as well as an honest competition over the best and most persuasive arguments. And though historical interpretation is always shaped by political attitudes, it is also important not to reduce serious historical arguments to their alleged political functions.

In this spirit, I invited five colleagues to comment on specific aspects of the recent memory debates. Although I supplied a set of questions for all of them to address, each participant ultimately chose to adopt a specific and ultimately different focus. Mark Roseman's contribution offers a very focused intervention on central questions in the historiographical and commemorative debate itself, whereas Anne Berg's article provides a contextualization—and critique—of the broader public debate. Dirk Rupnow's article highlights contemporary Germany's nature as a multicultural and immigrant society as an essential context for the debates about German memory, and Damani Patridge's contribution pleads for a transnational perspective and emphasizes the deficits of a nation-state-centered commemorative culture, especially for noncitizens. And finally, Wolf Gruner's and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum's article analyzes more recent controversies in light of their academic socializations in East and West Germany, thus introducing an often-neglected German-German dimension to the debate. Their varying *foci* notwithstanding, the contributions provide a clear sense not only of the vibrancy of recent German memory debates but also of what is at stake in these debates, both politically and historiographically. Because no matter what specific position the contributors adopt, they all share a strong conviction of the persistent significance of a German past that will not pass for our own troubled present.

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