A New German Historians' Debate? A Conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg (Part I)

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Rothberg about

and memory of the Holocaust and colonialism. Part one explores the central issues at stake in the latest debates and their relation to the German Historians' Debate of the 1980s. Part two engages the relationship of minorities to official Holocaust memory in a diversifying Germany, the role of scholarly positionality, and the relationship between scholarship and activism.

In recent years, several U.S.-based scholars have found themselves at the center of fierce public debates in Germany about the history and memory of the Holocaust and its relation to colonialism and other forms of historical violence. Contributing editor Jonathon Catlin put three scholars in conversation to explore these debates from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Sultan Doughan, an anthropologist, is the Dr. Thomas Zand Visiting Assistant Professor in Holocaust Pedagogy and Antisemitism Studies at Clark University. Her research on civic education programs for people from migrant backgrounds in contemporary Germany investigates these practices as strategies for incorporation into the secular nation. A. Dirk Moses is the editor of the Journal of Genocide Research and *Frank Porter Graham Distinguished Professor of Global Human Rights History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In May 2021 he published "The German Catechism," a critique of aspects of German Holocaust memory culture that set off a new round of debate. Michael Rothberg is Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and the 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in*

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Jonathon Catlin: A series of debates about the memory of the Holocaust and colonialism have roiled the German public sphere the past two years. Some have dubbed this the "Historikerstreit 2.0," a name that suggests a relitigating of the original "historians' debate" set off by the conservative German historian Ernst Nolte in 1986. This framing has been criticized for a number of reasons. For one, the present debate has been fueled not primarily by historians, but by journalists generating hot takes. The scholars involved have mostly been foreign, with the notable exception of the German historian of Africa Jürgen Zimmerer, who shares many of your positions. Protagonists such as Achille Mbembe—a leading African intellectual whose disinvitation from a German literary festival in April 2020 was a major flashpoint—and you, Michael, are not part of the historical guild, but cultural or political theorists. Gavriel Rosenfeld and Dirk have also noted that several other debates since 1986 have already been dubbed the "second historians' debate," among them the Friedländer-Broszat exchange in 1987, the Schneider/Schwerte scandal and reactions to the Wehrmacht exhibition in 1995, the Goldhagen debate in 1996, the Walser-Bubis affair in 1998, and debates about the Berlin Holocaust memorial throughout the 1990s. Yet again, most figures involved have been white and male.

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one. Dirk, you opened a new chapter in these debates by arguing that that German Holocaust memory has calcified into a quasi-theological "catechism" that has been wielded against minorities and progressives. Your essay activated longstanding currents of what Theodor Adorno, already in the 1950s, called German "guilt and defensiveness" about the Holocaust, which has now turned into its opposite: what Anson Rabinbach calls Germany's "negative exceptionalism" about its crimes and pride in its memory culture in recent decades. Already in your first book, *German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past* (2007), you refer to such memory debates as exemplifying "manifest enactments of an underlying structure of German political emotions" (5). Susan Neiman began a recent symposium (and forthcoming publication) at which you spoke by suggesting that emotions have run so high because of the context of a "hysterical" liberal reaction to the rise of the far-right AfD: the Bundestag's 2019 anti-BDS resolution overcompensated for a pro-Israel proposal from the AfD itself.

Let's begin by situating the latest debates amidst these histories. What are the most salient continuities, repetitions, or ruptures? Did anything in the latest debates surprise you?

Michael Rothberg: I don't know whether the term "Historikerstreit 2.0" is the right one for the current debates, but I do find the reference back to the 1986 debate illuminating for understanding how much has changed in the last thirty-five years. There have, of

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one turn on a similar problem, even if they naturally cannot be reduced to a single factor: how to conceptualize historical comparison in the context of the Nazi genocide of European Jews. In each case, the point of comparison is different: in 1986 it involved the relation of the Holocaust to the crimes of Stalinism; today the most relevant referent is colonialism, especially German colonialism.

Once we situate the question of comparison at the heart of the two debates we can begin to see how different they are and how different their contexts are. As you note, my argument has been that comparison was deployed in the Historikerstreit, especially by Nolte—but implicitly also by someone like Hillgruber—to minimize German responsibility for the Holocaust. I don't know anyone on "our side" of the debate today who argues that granting colonialism the attention it is due would minimize German responsibility for the Holocaust. To the contrary, for many of us, it involves multiplying the forms of historical and political responsibility to include colonialism as well as more recent and current forms of racial violence (at a minimum).

That difference is fundamental—and frequently ignored by those who criticize people like Dirk, Jürgen Zimmerer, and me. But recognizing it also encourages us to highlight other differences that separate us from the moment of the Historikerstreit. A generational shift has taken place since the 1980s, from a moment in which the most significant participants had living

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Syllabus, as well as less traditionally prestigious newspapers like the *Berliner Zeitung* have also driven the debate.

The biggest difference of all, however, concerns the status of the Holocaust as such. The Historikerstreit illustrates just how contested the meaning of the Shoah remained in Germany even forty years after the defeat of National Socialism. But it was precisely the triumph of the Habermasian position—which highlighted the exceptionality of the Holocaust and of German responsibility for it—that became the clear cross-party consensus just a few years later with the end of the Cold War and the need to provide a unifying historical narrative for both a new Germany and a new Europe. With the Stockholm Declaration of 2000 and the completion of the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin in 2005, among other developments, a new threshold was reached in Holocaust consciousness and commemoration.

To be clear, I'm not calling for a "forgetting" of the Holocaust in Germany or globally. But what we are seeing in current hostile responses to what I call multidirectional approaches to the Holocaust is a loss of the progressive, critical dimension of Holocaust memory that both Habermas and grassroots memory activists of the 1980s championed. The tasks of the present are different from those of the 1980s; you cannot simply assert the same slogans about the Holocaust's uniqueness in a moment when the agents and contexts of comparison have changed. In contrast to 1986, today it is anti-comparative approaches that

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"Dialectic of Vergangenheitsbewältigung," in which the state's appropriation of the critical approach Habermas articulated in the 1980s, which has been contested by conservatives ever since, has transformed its emancipatory effect into its opposite: a censorious culture of political correctness reminiscent of the establishment's reaction to the Fischer Controversy in the 1960s and New Left in the 1970s. In a presentation at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam in October 2021, I argued that the two decades from 1985 to 2005 witnessed the moral refoundation of the republic. One could even term it a revolution in moral coordinates in which many—though not all—Germans began to identify with the victims of their Nazi grandparents rather than with those grandparents. In doing so, they began to relinquish the national self-pity that characterized national sentiment, namely empathizing with the suffering of one's "own people." Now their victims' suffering moved to the center of identification and emotional connection. I welcomed this development at the time because the denationalization of politics could encourage multiculturalism. However, the opposite has occurred. As I put it in Potsdam: "When black and progressive Jewish voices are disciplined, indeed cast out by non-Jewish German politicians, journalists and even scholars with pompous displays of self-righteousness, I sensed that things had gone awry here. That moral revolution was eating its children." Now Germany's vaunted "coming to the terms with the past" seems inimical to multiculturalism as it becomes the vehicle for a new form of postnational nationalism, and as

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seems to me very polarized: "more or less Holocaust memory," "comparing or not comparing genocides," "Europe vs. the rest." There is very little nuance in the debate itself, which is not reflective of actual scholarly debates, at least judging from the viewpoint of the American academy. Michael's statement on the Habermasian position as the winner of the 1986 debate shows how this is more than a debate among historians and about history. Rather, it is about the normative relation one should have with the Holocaust within a range of modern genocides.

Certainly, the debate of 1986 cemented the public meaning of the Holocaust after the Cold War. The memorial debates in the 1990s, spearheaded by Reinhart Koselleck, were concerned with how to represent victimhood and death, specifically that of Jews vis-a-vis other groups who were victims of the Nazi regime, in memorial practice. What is interesting about that debate is the emergence of certain questions *after* the Historikerstreit. If the Holocaust is unique, how do you represent death—Jewish death, that of Roma and Sinti, but also death of "homosexuals"? Are they all equal victims of war united by death? Or do you have to represent how they were killed in order to explain how they were governed during and before the Holocaust? These questions underlie past debates about building a Holocaust memorial with the aim of giving space to the victims, and it becomes a problem of how to represent hierarchies of religious, racial, and sexual differences and intersections without reifying Nazi categories. In a way, Koselleck

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and how they have to speak. So, instead of arguing for more or less Holocaust memory, I would urge us to pay attention to its quality. More Holocaust memory can also mean blurred memory and less specificity, as we are currently experiencing. In fact, I think that we are mistaking performed national memory for Holocaust history. Beyond representation and meaning, I focus on what these debates *do*, what memorials *do*. What does exceptionalizing the Holocaust *do*? What do these discourses bring into motion? How do they inform policies?

My research on citizenship, religious difference, and migration grows out of the debates and developments of the early 2000s that Michael laid out, but there is an additional layer to my work: "the war on terror." Securitization discourse has shifted former immigrant groups, specifically Middle Easterners, from the category of the *Auslander* to Muslim. This shift came at a time of civic and legal equality for Middle Eastern migrants, who had just been greeted into Germany as a nation of immigrants. Within ten years of liberalizing citizenship for non-Europeans, I observed how a new integration policy targeted these former labor migrants and refugees as Muslims, and with that as potential Islamic extremists and antisemites. And I actually regard these integration policies and the hyper-vigilance that came with it as part of liberalism.

Holocaust memory became a moral compass in this time. Many of my interlocutors, mostly civic educators and social workers, did not have any issue with learning or teaching Holocaust memory.

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political structures, rather than the unique exception of modernity. This is perhaps already an element of multidirectionality—not on the epistemological level Michael describes, but rather as a lived reality for many immigrants. In a sense, what Michael is demanding publicly is already experienced but not verbalized openly. To say this publicly would cause social death, especially if you are a person of color and visibly Muslim. Certain accusations with regards to the Holocaust and antisemitism can force people out of their jobs, socially isolate them, or revoke their funding, etc. and have their colleagues dissociate from them as if they had never known one another. The consequences are real and painful, as I know from some of my interlocutors, because there is no space for reconciliation or clarification.

JC: Dirk, you have been called a "*Gleichmacher*"—an equater or relativizer with respect to the Holocaust. This accusation paints you as violating the German taboo about challenging the Holocaust's uniqueness, which you argued in "The German Catechism" is an essentially theological claim, not a social-scientific one. You argued in response that *Vergleichung*, comparison, is not *Gleichsetzung*, conflation, and that we historians "trade in complexity and not in binaries or simplicity." "Where journalists and politicians see historical facts," you said, "we see contingent interpretations." Indeed, many of the "intertwined" histories of colonialism and genocide, including the Holocaust, that you've worked on were already accepted by the

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Multidirectional Decolonization, from 2009, was only just translated into German; and it did not invent new comparisons, but gives a history of decades of comparisons undertaken by mostly Black and Jewish thinkers since the Second World War. How do you explain these divergences and temporal lags between historical understanding and public memory?

Michael Rothberg: To address the politics of comparison generally, beyond the German case—and also Sultan's earlier comment on "lived multidirectionality"—I would say that sometimes public memory and activist discourse run ahead of scholarship as well. One of the most remarkable discoveries I made when working on *Multidirectional Memory* was the prevalence of connections made between the Holocaust and the October 17, 1961 police massacre in Paris of peacefully demonstrating Algerians. Right from the moment of the event, observers on the left saw disturbing echoes of the Nazi period in the rounding up, detention, torture, and massacre of Algerians. It was only decades later that it was revealed that the man responsible for the events of 1961—Paris police chief Maurice Papon—was also responsible for the deportation of Jews to Nazi camps under the Vichy regime; activists were ahead of historical research in this case. And, in general, it was only activists, writers, and non-professional historians who kept the memory of the October 17 massacre alive when it was being largely ignored by both scholarship and the state. So, like Sultan, I believe that

multidirectional before they are guild.

Dirk Moses: I b scholars had b and were in effect reprising debates Michael and others honor from the 1950s. In my latest book, *The Problems of Genocide*, I show how they can be traced to the late 1930 and 1940s. Commentators have always understood Nazism as a form of violent expansionism that imported and radicalized modes of colonial rule and destruction into Europe. The current debate makes clear that the scholarly and public spheres operate according to different rules because they have contrasting purposes. The scholarly sphere is driven by innovation, the public sphere by stability, because it constitutes a site of collective identity formation. German president Steinmeier said words to this effect in his speech opening the Humboldt Forum. Unlike other commentators, he respected rather than disdained academic work, but insisted on the significance of the political domain. I don't dispute that, and I welcomed Jürgen Habermas's intervention, which Steinmeier effectively endorsed by suggesting that public memory was not "frozen" and needed to account for migrants' experiences.

JC: Let's address Habermas's evolving position directly. He was the central figure on the liberal side of the 1980s Historikerstreit, and in September 2021 he also weighed in on the latest debate. In the 1980s, he exemplified what Dirk has called "the non-German German," opposing revisionist, conservative positions such as that of Nolte, and advocated German acceptance of singular guilt for Nazi crimes. In his recent short essay, Habermas reiterated the

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catechism but must evolve and expand with the diversifying body politic to include other historical traumas such as colonialism, racial violence, and migration. Dirk has already noted how a similar position was recently articulated by President Steinmeier, such that one could even say the correct interpretation of official Holocaust memory is multidirectional memory! On the other hand, figures such as the U.S.-Israeli scholar Omri Boehm have argued that Habermas's resigned liberal politics of communicative rationality has betrayed itself on issues like his silence about human rights abuses and violations of international law in Israel. Were you surprised that Habermas revised his position? Does he still have insights to contribute on this issue?

MR: I really welcomed Habermas's intervention, and I was also impressed by Steinmeier's speech at the opening of the Humboldt Forum (though I liked Chimamanda Adichie's speech even more). Habermas seemed to "get it"—to realize that we are not still fighting the 1986 Historikerstreit; he understands that different things are at stake and that Germany today is a different country (not that it wasn't already "postmigrant" in the 1980s, however). A new memory culture is to be welcomed—and does not have to necessitate the erasure of the gains that were made through grassroots and public sphere struggles in the 1980s and 1990s. That said, it was then disappointing to find Habermas's same short essay appended to a new volume collecting journalistic pieces by Saul Friedländer, Norbert Frei, Sybille Steinbacher, and

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Germany in recent decades or the ways that the hard-won liberal discourse of Holocaust memory has begun to have illiberal effects in the public sphere, as a whole host of examples illustrate.

JC: At least one important part of the academic historical consensus *does* seem to have changed. As Michael notes, leading historians have advanced paradigms for understanding the Holocaust as a singularly "fundamental" crime (Saul Friedländer), as "incongruous" (Götz Aly), or as a "civilizational rupture" (Dan Diner)—now hegemonic approaches that are canonized in the new volume with a foreword by Habermas. Lately, however, these frameworks have been challenged as particular ways of narrating the Holocaust from a Germanocentric standpoint. As the German-Jewish intellectual Micha Brumlik put it, if the by now well-established historical understanding of colonialism as not a barbaric exception but an essential part of Europe's "civilizing mission" is true, then "'Auschwitz', in all its singularity, must be seen as the climax of a trend that began long before—at the latest with the expansion of Europe towards Africa and the Americas." To what extent do "multidirectional" and "entangled" approaches still allow for retaining the special place of the Holocaust in German history and memory?

DM: Brumlik made that concession in a regrettably querulous discussion of my essays, although without having read my book, which makes precisely that argument about the Holocaust being a

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the answer to the Nazi past is returning the country to the fold of western civilization. As a result, liberal elites such as the contributors to that new book berate younger and non-white scholars and attack postcolonial studies and Black Lives Matter because they undermine this "answer" to the Nazi past. They are finally prepared to acknowledge, say, the Imperial German genocide of the Herero and Nama people, but only if it's seen as categorically different—i.e., subordinate to—the Holocaust. I covered these debates already twenty years ago. To be clear, I think Holocaust commemoration should retain its central place in Germany, but not in its current partisan form that is implicated in an illiberal political culture characterized by taboos, inquisitions, and denunciations directed against migrants and progressive Jews.

MR: I agree with Dirk about the parochial or provincial nature of the German insistence on a "unique" civilizational rupture, but I do also think there's a real issue here—one that is related to Sultan's point about the "quality" of the memory at stake and about the risks of blurring different histories. One frustrating aspect of these debates is how often we seem to be speaking past each other, perhaps because we're operating at different levels of abstraction and addressing different phenomena (history vs. memory, for example). There is a place for large-scale arguments of the sort that Dirk makes in *The Problems of Genocide* that allow us to see long-term patterns and discourses; and then there's also a need to

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which we need to take into account in the evaluation of memory cultures. In a follow up to *Multidirectional Memory* called "From Gaza to Warsaw," I map out different versions of multidirectionality and make an ethical and political case for what I call "differentiated solidarity": the ability to create transcultural links without erasing distinctions, which I see in a text like Du Bois's "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto." That's the ultimate direction of the normative project of multidirectional memory.

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Featured Image: Cracking stelae of the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, which was completed in 2004 (courtesy of Pexels, creative commons).

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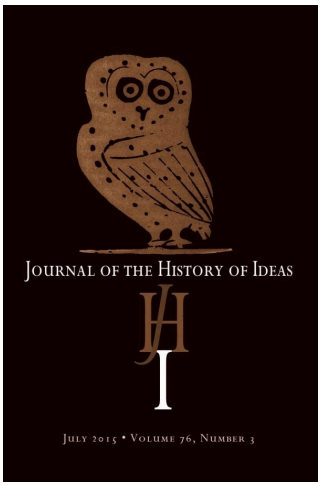

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