The Holocaust as civilizational rupture?

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The polemic intention of the ‘German catechism’ argument – that Holocaust memory serves a quasi-theological function and is therefore policed – has distracted from the empirical claims on which it rests. So how strong is the evidence of continuity between the colonial and the Nazi genocides? And does a direct connection need to be established in order to justify reconsideration of the ‘singularity theory’?

On 23 May, the Australian historian A. Dirk Moses published a provocative text entitled ‘The German Catechism’ on the Swiss web journal Geschichte der Gegenwart. According to Moses, the catechism consists of five articles of faith:

1. The Holocaust is singular because it was the unlimited Vernichtung der Juden um der Vernichtung willen (exterminating the Jews for the sake of extermination itself) distinguished from the limited and pragmatic aims of other genocides. It is the first time in history that a state had set out to destroy a people solely on ideological grounds.

2. It was thus a Zivilisationsbruch (civilizational rupture) and the moral foundation of the nation.

3. Germany has a special responsibility to Jews in Germany, and a special loyalty to Israel: Die Sicherheit Israels ist Teil der Staatsräson unseres Landes (Israel’s security is part of Germany’s reason of state).

4. Antisemitism is a distinct prejudice – and was a distinctly German one. It should not be confused with racism.

5. Antizionism is antisemitism.

Moses interprets these beliefs as follows:
The catechism implies a redemptive story in which the sacrifice of Jews in the Holocaust is the premise for the Federal Republic’s legitimacy. That is why the Holocaust is more than an important historical event. It is a sacred trauma that cannot be contaminated by profane ones – meaning non-Jewish victims and other genocides – that would vitiate its sacrificial function.

He even characterized the German culture of remembrance and commemoration as ‘redemptive philosemitism’, in a rather tasteless inversion of Saul Friedländer’s notion of ‘redemptive antisemitism’. [1] Moses, an acclaimed and prolific historian of colonialism and genocide, asserts that the ‘supposed’ singularity of the Shoah rests on a false understanding of history. Advocates of the singularity thesis ‘ignore the fact that the Nazi empire was a compensatory undertaking to ensure the German people were forever invulnerable to the starvation they suffered in the Allied blockade during the First World War.’ The Jews, as the affiliates of international liberalism and communism, were seen as an ‘enemy people’ that threatened the goal of ‘autarchic territorial control over resources’.

This assumption is founded on Moses’s premise that the Nazi regime was shaped by a victim mentality. The Nazis’ belief that Germany’s mission was to protect European civilization from ‘Asiatic barbarism’ translated into the attempt to colonize other, eastern European nations. Moses supports his argument by invoking Franz Neumann, who in Behemoth (1944) described Nazism as a form of ‘racial imperialism’ that aimed to reduce ‘the vanquished states and their satellites to the level of colonial peoples’. [2]

Of course, Moses’ trenchant thesis is not new. As he points out himself, historiographical debate around the relationship between the Holocaust and German colonial crimes has been underway in Germany and internationally since the 1990s. [3] So what explains the intensity of the current controversy? According to Moses, it is generational development. Today, he writes, ‘we are witnessing … nothing less than a public exorcism performed by the self-appointed high priests of the Katechismus der Deutschen’.

Photo by Michael Coghlan, CC BY-SA 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

A new Historikerstreit?

Some have suggested that the controversy around Moses’ thesis is a new Historikerstreit, this time provoked by the left. As is well known, the first Historikerstreit took place in 1986/87. It was initially a dispute between the historian Ernst Nolte and Jürgen Habermas, before expanding considerably. Nolte had asserted that the National Socialist murder of the Jews was ultimately a defensive strategy against the ‘Asiatic crime’ of the ‘Bolsheviks’. See Rudolf Augstein (ed.), ‘Historikerstreit.’ Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung, Munich and Zurich 1987.

It is striking that Moses’ recent argument also contains an undertone of apologia for Nazi antisemitism: ‘The Germans’ were scared of being colonized by the Jews and hence – the point emphasized by Moses - the need for security that ultimately lies behind all genocides.
Moses’ essay was a gift to the self-consciously intellectual New Right. Writing in *Sezession*, the Austrian identitarian Martin Sellner argued that, *pace* the ‘German catechism’, Moses had shown that ‘eliminating entire groups in paranoid and vengeful security campaigns against “hereditary enemies” is a common pattern in world history’. For Sellner, however, the problem with this guilt-cult is not that it neglects both the ‘perspective of migrants’ and German responsibility towards colonial victims, as Moses argued, but ‘its psychological or political effect on the German people’.

As the foundation for a new ‘civilizing mission’, Moses argued that the Holocaust exerts a moral pressure on migrants to assimilate and is thus a modern expression of a ‘style of rule that Europeans had employed in governing their empires’. However, argued Sellner, were the Catechism to be taken seriously by its liberal-conservative advocates, ‘Islamic mass migration’ would have to be rejected, since it ‘fragments the ethno-cultural homogeneity of the perpetrators’. Because this the conclusion is unpalatable, the result is ‘population exchange through migratory replacement’. A theorist of the ‘New Right’ thus uses the ‘second Historikerstreit’ to repudiate the German culture of commemoration and remembrance in its entirety.

**German colonialism and the theory of multi-directional memory**

Years before this debate, Michael Rothberg’s book *Multidirectional Memory* offered a way to think sensibly about the unique crime against humanity that was the Shoah, without subordinating the suffering of one group to that of another. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford: 2010.


Rothberg – who teaches comparative literature and Holocaust studies at the University of California – wrote that:

> my theory of multidirectional memory suggests that ... memory does not obey the logic of the zero-sum game. Rather, all memory cultures develop dialogically – through borrowing, appropriation, juxtaposition, and echoing of other histories and other traditions of memory ... Part of what we see in the Mbembe affair is the well-known fact that, as Holocaust memory became globalized, it came to serve as a platform for the articulation of other memories of violence – especially those touching on slavery and colonialism. [4]

This is absolutely correct. As has been shown by the discussions around the project to rename streets in Berlin – discussions which did not begin with the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement – the role of German colonialism and its early genocides against the Herero and Nama in German South-West Africa has moved to the center of public attention.

In 1904 Lothar von Trotha waged a declared war of racial annihilation in German South-West Africa and drove around thirty thousand Herero on death marches into the wilderness, as the Young Turks did later against the Armenians. [5] From 1905 the
German colonial regime established concentration camps for captured Herero. Unique in the colonial world, these camps were specifically designed to annihilate prisoners through labour, in particular the construction of railways.

Prisoners in German South-West Africa, possibly after the Nama rebellion, ca. 1904. Bundesarchiv, via Wikimedia Commons

Nowadays, the theory that the German colonial wars served as a model for National Socialism, which Moses calls ‘German fascism’, is becoming ever more plausible. In any case, the eugenicists Theodor Mollison and Eugen Fischer, who taught Nazi concentration camp doctors such as Josef Mengele, carried out their first experiments on the indigenous people of what was then German South-West Africa. The question of the relationship between colonialism, slavery and racism is also on the agenda, as is the question first asked by Hannah Arendt about the significance of Europe’s colonial expansion into Africa for racist and totalitarian politics in Europe. [6]

There can be no doubt that modern antisemitism is a biological conspiracy theory. In the antisemitism of the nineteenth century, the Jews were no longer seen as a religious community but as a biological race. Accordingly, their actions no longer had anything to do with beliefs but were simply behaviours determined by natural laws. A slogan to that effect, coined by the Austrian antisemite Georg von Schönerer (1842–1921), an idol of the young Adolf Hitler, was disseminated at the end of the nineteenth century in the self-named ‘Antisemitenvereinen’ (Antisemitic Communities): ‘Die Religion ist einerlei – im Blute liegt die Schwienerei’ (Religion makes no difference; filthiness is in the blood).

Heart of darkness

In the context of the postcolonial debate, the question remains as to whether this form of antisemitism is not rooted at least as deeply in colonial rule. Consider the following passage from Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899), which describes neither the experiences of survivors of a German extermination camp liberated in 1945, nor starving people from the Sahel region at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees, leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair ... These moribund shapes were free as air – and nearly as thin. I began to distinguish the gleam of eyes under the trees. Then, glancing down, I saw a face near my hand. The black bones reclined at full length with one shoulder against the tree, and slowly the eyelids rose and the sunken eyes looked up at me, enormous and vacant, a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly ... and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or a pestilence. [7]

Over a century ago Conrad confronted the colonial plundering of the Congo by the Belgian royal house. What happened in the Congo at that time is now characterized as a genocide. The population of the region was halved, with the loss of ten million people to
murder, starvation and disease, as well as the resulting reduction in the birthrate. Is it a coincidence that this crime against humanity was committed in Africa – a continent on which the German Reich also perpetrated its first genocide a few years later?

A thorough critique of this interpretation has been available for more than two years – well before all the current controversy – in the form of Steffen Klävers’s 2019 study Decolonizing Auschwitz. Klävers offers not just a credible representation of the postcolonial attempt to relativize the Shoah, but also formulates a series of reasoned objections: there is no actual proof that the Nuremberg Laws were derived from the prohibition of mixed marriages in the German colonies; the difference between colonial racism and anti-Semitism is not taken properly into account; and – above all – there is no adequate consideration of the redemptive promise inherent in National Socialist antisemitism. [8]

Nevertheless, as Klävers himself concedes, colonial experiences did play a part in shaping Nazi antisemitism and its extermination policy in the broadest sense. For example, the central delusion common to many antisemitic ideologies that the German nation was being colonized by the Jews – a point emphasized by Moses – or that the Jews were as alien and repellant as many of the indigenous peoples seen in the colonies. Klävers closes his work with a critical view of postcolonial criticisms of the state of Israel – including that of Achille Mbembe – and comes to the following conclusion:

Because the Holocaust is one of the justifications for the foundation of a state as a sanctuary where Jews around the world can be safe from extermination, the normalization of the specificities of the Holocaust may also lead to a normalization of the special function of the state of Israel and so a delegitimization of its foundation. [9]

Nevertheless, it remains true that the ‘racialization’ of the Jews in the late nineteenth century was one of the necessary conditions for National Socialist exterminatory antisemitism. As a result of the Long Depression at the end of the nineteenth century, known in Germany as the Gründerkrise (Founder’s Crisis), a wide variety of groups and parties emerged in the German Reich with the principal goal of agitating against the Jews. The ‘most modern’ among them abandoned traditional ecclesiastical anti-Judaism and – ostensibly guided by science – invoked the concept of race. The open question here is the possible genealogical relationship between racial theory and colonialism. In fact, the historian Claudia Bruns has shown how the founder of biological anti-Jewish hatred, Wilhelm Marr, incorporated colonial and so anti-Black racism into his (no longer religious) antisemitism. [10]

Although Moses expressed himself in more moderate terms in his conversation in Die Zeit with Volkhard Knigge, the former director of the Buchenwald memorial foundation, a theoretical and practical political problem clearly remains. As Klävers has established, use of the generic term ‘genocide’ in the context of colonial atrocities ignores the historical specificities of the Holocaust. Klävers, Decolonizing Auschwitz?, 131. Moses also fails to acknowledge the ways in which other persecuted groups, like the Sinti and Roma or homosexuals, are commemorated in Germany by centrally located memorials. Klävers quotes Jean Améry, who had already expressed concerns about the

Finally, we must consider whether and to what extent Dan Diner’s widely accepted theory of ‘Auschwitz’ as a ‘civilizational rupture’ is historically and objectively accurate. [12] Were the genocides and horrors perpetrated by the colonial powers – Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands – in their colonies really an expression of ‘civilization’? If so 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.

Footnotes


9. Ibid. 226.

10. See Claudia Bruns, ‘Wilhelm Marr: Reise nach Central-Amerika (1863) Oder:


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