

Two German Perspectives on a German Discussion

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Keywords: Shoah; genocide; collective memory; Eurocentrism; survivor testimonies

This contribution results from a place of serious discomfort regarding recent public and academic discussions in Germany, where Holocaust memory and its political instrumentalization have seemed to produce a growing dogmatism, harming academic freedom. Because we both direct university research centers in Berlin and Los Angeles dedicated to the study of the Holocaust, we have decided to join forces and share our particular German perspectives on this debate. Our views are in part generational, in part personal.

Born at the beginning of the 1960s, we pursued our studies in East Berlin (Gruner) and Göttingen (Schüler-Springorum) and were among the first in our cohort who, as students in the mid-1980s, became interested in German-Jewish history and the Holocaust. In both our cases, this interest was fostered by our academic teachers, Kurt Pätzold und Helga Grebing who, albeit from very different backgrounds and political positions, had written important contributions on the history of National Socialism, the German “Sonderweg,” and the persecution of the Jews.

We are emphasizing this fact because there is a tendency to neglect the fact that, in both postwar German states, individual historians existed who were writing and teaching about the history of German fascism and the Holocaust in the 1970s and 1980s (in the case of Helga Grebing even as early as 1959) because of their personal upbringing or relationships to exiled and persecuted friends or relatives. Notably, at the time, they were lonely exceptions at universities in both Germanys.

Under their guidance, we embarked on topics for our dissertations that dealt with Jewish history, antisemitism, Nazi persecution, and the Holocaust. As young German scholars, we either based our work predominantly on Jewish sources or included testimonies and interviews to show the impact of the persecution on individual Jewish experiences. At the same time, we both share a strong attachment to Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula. Although coming from different biographical places, our life experiences in different parts of the world created an acute awareness of the history of colonialism, racism, imperialism, and violent oppression (and last but not least capitalism).

We were fortunate to meet soon after German unification in the first of the historical doctoral seminars on German-Jewish history led by Reinhard Rürup for the Leo Baeck Institute. He became an important academic mentor for both of us. An eminent scholar of modern German history and antisemitism, Rürup was a central protagonist of the incipient public history initiatives that called and worked for a greater awareness of German crimes and their victims since the 1980s. Moreover, Rürup was one of the few West German historians who engaged in debates with his East German colleagues on that matter. As a result of his relationship with Kurt Pätzold, both were able to bring the new Topography of Terror exhibition to East Berlin, using the celebration of the 750-year anniversary of the city in 1987 for that purpose.

Under Rürup's guidance, important exhibitions in museums and concentration camp memorial sites were curated. For the 1995 show on Berlin's Jewish History at the Neue Synagoge on Oranienburger Strasse, we both contributed several chapters. If there is one thing that we learned during the early 1990s, with the unification of the two Germanys and the subsequent debates about their pasts, driven and dominated by ideologies, it was the importance of academic and research-based engagement in public debates and educational endeavors—in short, in memory politics.

The development of the specific German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* has lately been recounted in different variations and with different emphases: from the vantage point of the early 2020s, it becomes obvious that it was especially in the 1990s, in the reestablished German nation-state, that (not at least under international pressure) intense debates on the character of German (and other) crimes took place. Those discussions always included the question of how to situate the mass murder of European Jewry within an array of twentieth-century atrocities. At the same time, however, the slogan of the “two dictatorships” on German soil emerged in German public discourse, portraying Nazi Germany, the GDR, and their respective crimes as not only similar but equal. The fact that this indeed questioned the “results” of the historians' debate of 1986–1987, which had established the Holocaust as unique, unprecedented, and not connected to the politics and crimes in the Soviet Union after 1917, went surprisingly unnoticed. Instead, the debates focused on the extent and uniqueness of German perpetratorship and the acknowledgment of collective German guilt or need for German “shame” about the Holocaust and its meaning for German identity and national memory. Contesting and supporting a national hubris of unification, these debates stood at the center of how the new Berlin Republic would view, understand, and present itself.

Interestingly enough, neither the exhibition on the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union in 1991 (at the Topography of Terror in Berlin) nor the more famous *Wehrmachtsausstellung* four years later influenced discussions of the character of the German colonial project in the East and its millions of victims beyond the Jews. We should not forget the bitter protests against the *Wehrmachtsausstellung*, which by documenting war crimes of the German army, hit the core of German family memories, namely that the army had not been part of the Nazi genocidal enterprise and that thus many Germans could claim that “Grandpa was no Nazi.”

It took three more decades and the continuous emphasis on the unprecedented nature and dimension of the Holocaust to gain a wide public and social acceptance for its equally unprecedented positioning at the core of German democratic and national identity. The current reluctance among parts of the German political and cultural elite to even discuss, much less accept, comparable aspects of the Holocaust or its relation to other crimes because they are perceived as challenging its singularity, might have its roots precisely in the long and painful process of accepting it in the first place. Hence, if the moral fundament of united Germany is based on the collective acknowledgment of a supposedly unique mass crime, then any attempt to advance our understanding of the historical event itself through comparison with other Germans crimes or other genocides can be perceived as an attack on the very foundation of the new nation-state and, thus, receives fierce blowback by politicians and media representatives who dedicated their professional life to establish this new identitarian dogma.

Let us not forget that the leadership generation of the 1990s and 2000s grew up in different post-fascist societies: in the East, where the state emphasized a firm anti-fascist stand, yet by focusing on the remembrance of communist resistance against the Nazis prevented general knowledge and acceptance of a particular Jewish experience of the Holocaust; and in the West, where the (former) Nazis were so ubiquitous that the real German miracle seems to be the development of a functioning democracy. In both states, this produced a collective amnesia concerning the participation in and responsibility of individual Germans for

the atrocities committed and the cold and often dismissive treatment of the survivors of German crimes after the end of the war.

As pointed out previously, the establishment of what we call the unique German *Erinnerungskultur* today did not start until the 1990s and did not go uncontested. On the contrary, it found grandiloquent and loud opponents among elites and on the streets alike—well into the new millennium. The contemporary impression that this *Erinnerungskultur* and its basic moral paradigms are firmly rooted in German society probably has to do with its ascent to “raison d’état” during the last fifteen to twenty years, when the German state generously funded memorial sites, museums, and educational programs, which became a foreign policy export success, especially in eastern Europe.

But two decades is not a long time, and less so given the rise of a right-wing political party in Germany that—while maintaining an alibi discourse about the dangers of antisemitism—viciously fights projects and programs dealing with the Nazi past and its lessons on the local and regional levels. Such attacks on the discussion and dissemination of historical knowledge are just one of the dangers that extremist nationalism increasingly poses for democracies, not just in Germany and Europe but also on a global scale.

We both have been and still are part of this ongoing battle for collective memory, as actors and commentators in Germany and in the United States, as historians of Jewish and Holocaust studies, as promoters of one of the most important survivor testimony archives, the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation, as curators of exhibitions, and as advisers at memorial sites, educational institutions, and museums in Germany and the United States.

Therefore, in the recent German debate, we both find some arguments hard to understand. One refers, again, to the core question of Holocaust singularity. While we don’t question the uniqueness of any historical event, it is hard for us as historians to fathom why even the attempt to compare the German crime to other instances of mass violence is met by some politicians, journalists, and scholars with such a fierce resistance. In order to challenge such an attitude, we want to advance two main arguments, one within German history and one on the larger stage of world history.

Looking at German history, there are manifold connections of the Holocaust with other aspects of the terrorist social engineering of the regime and its war of annihilation: for example, Nazi biopolitics in the 1930s, the genocide against the Sinti and Roma, the “Generalplan Ost,” and the killing of psychiatric patients together with their Jewish doctors and nurses in the Soviet Union in the summer of 1942. Many of these various forms of entanglement have recently been pointedly summarized by Michael Wildt. One could argue that this is exactly where the uniqueness of the German mass murder lies: in the entanglement of particular radical ideologies with the general political will to eradicate all groups who were perceived by the Nazis as dangerous to their expanding authoritarian project and power.

Moreover, the singularity thesis is also based on a second line of argument, one that does not refer to the killings itself but to its meaning: it is, in the words of Dan Diner, the cognitive horror of a deed that destroys anthropological certainties about human behavior, about how mankind is supposed to live and “share the world with others” that supposedly marks the distinct quality of the Holocaust over other mass atrocities and genocides. Even though this famous phrase by Hannah Arendt has been crucial for our understanding in its moment in time, from today’s stand point and knowledge, we see a grave problem: at least part of the horror stems for many from the fact that the killings were done by supposedly “civilized” people to “civilized” people—an abhorrent crime within a world that thought of itself as “civilized.” Entertaining a very similar thought in 1930, long before the Shoah, Heinrich Vierbücher called the 1915–1916 Ottoman Genocide against the Armenians an unprecedented mass murder of a *Kulturvolk* (people of culture). With his book, the German journalist wanted to raise attention and create empathy in Germany for the persecuted Armenians and fellow Christians.

However, such a Eurocentric view neglected and still neglects the many colonial genocides against indigenous people in the Americas and Australia, not to mention the German mass murder of the Herero and Nama in 1904 South West Africa. If in 1942 one had asked a Herero survivor if he or she could imagine Germans being capable of eliminating a whole people just because they existed, they would not have been as utterly shocked as, say, Thomas Mann or Leo Baeck. So maybe we have to rephrase the “cognitive horror” to one that destroys certainties about European “civilized” behavior not just in one particular case, but throughout modern history.

About the rest of the world, we simply know very little: although we collected tens of thousands of Holocaust survivor narratives, we do not have similar sources that could tell us about the perceptions of other victims of genocide and mass violence, illuminating what the survivors really thought about the deed itself and the “civilization” of the perpetrators.

In Germany, history as a field has suffered for a long time from Germanocentrism. This is also true when one looks at Holocaust studies. Not only the philosophical approaches, but also the commemorative culture in this country relies to a great extent on the emotional impact of the fact that the victims were “like us,” looked “like us,” read the same books and lived next door to us—and, last but not least, were able to transmit their experiences by means of a shared cultural language. However, the survivor testimonies of the USC Shoah Foundation Visual Archive can teach us an important lesson. Not only do many Holocaust survivors include in their interviews final statements with the plea of “never again,” they mention more often than not their hope of preventing any future genocide against any group of people. At the same time, survivors of the Rwandan, Guatemalan, and Armenian genocides, now available at the Visual History Archive, tell hauntingly similar stories of persecution, violence, and survival in their video testimonies as their Shoah counterparts.

Moreover, their testimonies tell stories that were absent from the traditional Holocaust account. Genocide studies as an academic field has begun to produce insights that help us challenge old assumptions in Holocaust studies, for example the presumed lack of sexual violence against Jewish women because of the Nazi taboo against sexual relations with Jews established in the Nuremberg Laws. Although this assumption was always based on an odd premise (German law also forbade murder), inspired by studies of sexual violence in genocide studies over the last decade, often based on survivor testimonies, Holocaust research has recently begun to unearth countless cases of Nazi sexual violence and enslavement of Jewish women and men.

In sum, we cannot deny the effects of the familiarities mentioned previously for our own work, for the limits of our approaches or our choice of topics. Nor can we change our own biographical imprint from one day to the next—this would be utterly dubious—but we should at least be aware of the pitfalls of it. This concerns our academic interests, judgments, and classifications, as well as our collective memory in general. In this respect, the demands of new generations of postmigration Germans, as well as German academics who were (at least partly) trained outside of German universities, can provide us with opportunities: to acknowledge and recognize other (including non-European) victims of persecution and mass murder and their histories; to integrate different perspectives and narratives; and above all to reflect on our own individual positions and particular histories.

Only on this multi-pillared basis can something like a multi-empathetic collective memory develop, one that recognizes different histories as history in its own right and acknowledges the suffering of others without seeing a danger that the German “Holocaust” will be minimized. Nobody should be afraid that its lessons will be lost or its foundational anti-fascist function for German democracy will become brittle. In fact, the contrary is the case, as last but not least, our personal German-German encounter thirty years ago has taught us, we need openness to other perspectives to develop a less simplistic historical understanding and more applicable lessons of this past, as well as strong, inclusive, and

multigenerational alliances based on mutual respect and recognition if we want to maintain this crucial heritage alive, relevant, and productive in the twenty-first century.

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Cite this article: Wolf Gruner and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum. “Two German Perspectives on a German Discussion,” *Central European History* (June 2023): 56, 278–282. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938923000067>.