

Germany Should Stop Outsourcing Its Shame Over Historic Antisemitism to Migrants

AN INTERVIEW WITH ESRA ÖZYÜREK

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German politicians often boast of having atoned for their ancestors' crimes – but then claim that antisemitism is an ill imported by migrants. Far from a model, German memory culture has created an exceptionalist myth that Germans understand racism best.

Germany's effort to confront its dark history has [often been called](#) a model for other countries in atoning for their past atrocities. Memorial sites across the country recognize the Nazis' crimes, all schoolchildren are taught about the Holocaust, and glorification of the Third Reich is prohibited.

Yet, in recent years critics have pointed to a worrying turn. For Germany's historical responsibility toward Jews is today manifested as unflinching support for the state of Israel, enforced across public life. Anti-Zionism, or even strong criticism of Israel, is routinely [labeled antisemitic](#), and voices supportive of Palestinian rights are [increasingly silenced](#). Often, this takes the troubling form of the claim that while Germans have dealt with antisemitism, immigrants are reintroducing it.

This trend has accelerated sharply in the wake of Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7 and Israel's ensuing bombardment of Gaza, which led to a reported rise in antisemitic and Islamophobic incidents in Germany. Police have banned or repressed many pro-Palestine protests, even when organized by Jewish groups; state-funded cultural institutions have disinvited artists and intellectuals from events, or stripped them of awards, for showing solidarity with Palestinians; and the interior ministry has proscribed [the phrase](#) "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" under legislation used to criminalize the Nazi swastika.

Germany's Palestinian population — Europe's largest — and the more than five million Muslims who live in Germany have been placed under general suspicion of undermining the fight against antisemitism. President Frank-Walter Steinmeier called on all Arabs in Germany to distance themselves clearly from Hamas. Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck, coleader of the Greens, warned Muslims that tolerance of their presence in Germany was conditional on them rejecting antisemitism, and that they could face deportation in the case of antisemitic crimes. Parliament [debated a law proposed](#) by the opposition Christian Democrats that would require applicants for German citizenship to pledge support for Israel's right to exist. This was proposed in the name of "better protection against the further entrenchment and spread of antisemitism that has 'immigrated' from abroad."

Esra Özyürek is a professor at the University of Cambridge who has studied antisemitism prevention and Holocaust education programs for Muslims in Germany. Her book [Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory and Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany](#) was published in April. She spoke with Ruairí Casey about the climate of suspicion that surrounds Muslims in Germany today, and how a German memory culture that foregrounds citizens' direct lineage to the perpetrators of the

Holocaust excludes those whose families arrived after 1945.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

Citing reports of a rise in antisemitic incidents, German politicians have said Muslims must distance themselves from Hamas, antisemitism, and anti-Israel sentiment. Some have raised the threat of deportation. Why this suspicion of Muslims?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

According to German police reports, we know that more than 80 percent of the crimes committed against Jews are by far-right activists, who are overwhelmingly white. So constantly pointing fingers at Muslims as the main antisemites is a major problem.

During the 2000s, the concept of Muslim antisemitism, and the idea that Muslims do not care about the Holocaust, began to gain popularity.

This accusation goes back to the idea that you are allowed into the social contract as long as you prove that you have learned lessons from the Nazi regime. How do you prove it? By showing you are philosemitic, which in the German context means claiming allegiance to Israel. By definition, those who don't do that don't deserve to be part of Germany. The idea that Muslims have different cultural ideas, which makes them not fit into German culture, has been around for a long time. Now the focus is on antisemitism. There is this feeling among the Right and also the Left, settled around the idea that Muslims do not deserve to be here because they are antisemitic.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

How did German memory culture develop into what it is today?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

German memory culture, as we know it today, [did not develop overnight](#). It [took a long process](#). East Germany saw fascism more as a political and economic failure. West Germany saw it more like a personality, family, and culture problem, leading to authoritarianism and also antisemitism. With the social movements of 1968, young people whose parents were part of the Nazi regime questioned the role their parents played during the Third Reich. In the 1970s and '80s, civil society organizations and private individuals researched and revealed what had happened in their families and in their neighborhoods. Eventually, the more established Holocaust memory culture as we know it today became prominent in the 1990s.

After Germany reunited, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin and the Remembrance, Responsibility and Future Foundation, which gave reparations to people enslaved by the Nazi regime, were established. Soon after that, research shows us that increasingly more Germans started asking themselves, "Haven't we done enough? Now can we put an end to it?" These kinds of voices started to be heard as memory culture became more official and established.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

How did this lead to Muslims taking a central place in discussions about antisemitism and Holocaust memory?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

During the 2000s, the concept of Muslim antisemitism, and the idea that Muslims do not care about the Holocaust, began to gain popularity. Some other factors played a role: the 9/11 attacks, the enlargement of the European Union, the Second Intifada that led to protests against Israel in Europe, and changes to citizenship laws in Germany.

Since then, fingers are increasingly pointed toward Muslims as the ones who bring antisemitism to Germany. Large amounts of funding have been delegated to deal with Muslim antisemitism and educating Muslims about the Holocaust through extracurricular activities. Muslim children also go through the same curriculum, but there is this sense that they do not learn it as well as their white German classmates.

Rather than as individuals who are already part of German society, Muslims are taken as a collective that needs to prove they are loyal to German values.

This incredible amount of work had been done, from the late 1960s to the 1990s. But it was based on the model that people are coming to terms with what their parents and grandparents had done. That is what made Germany a model around the world. It was admirable in the sense that it was personalized, that it led people to question their families. But the drawback was that because it was so personalized, it left the newcomers to the country after the war outside of it. Non-white or immigrant background children who went to school in the 1980s and '90s told me that when the topic was the Nazi period, teachers told them, this is not your thing, you don't need to deal with it. It became a problem, because the German narrative is that they learned from that grave mistake committed by their parents and grandparents. And as they came to terms with it, they became better people. This is also a very Christian narrative: committing a sin, then learning and becoming good again. People who are left outside of this redemptive narrative do not have another way into this national story of becoming democratic, civilized people.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

How are Muslims incorporated into a memory culture developed by white Germans?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

There is a big Palestinian community in Berlin. Education programs organized for Muslims talk to them about the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem (Amin al-Husseini, appointed by Britain in 1921). He was a collaborator of the Nazis. By depicting this man as if he was a Hitler, these programs locate a Hitler-like figure in the genealogy of the Palestinian, and then by extension Arab, and then by extension Muslim youth in Germany. So, they can find their own Hitler and also do the work of coming to terms with the Holocaust. Then, the path to be included in the German social contract theoretically opens up to them. But the Mufti of Jerusalem was not a Hitler and the Palestinians are not Nazis. Even if he sympathized with the Nazis, he was not responsible for killings. And even if some Arabs sided with the Nazis, many more sided with the Allies.

The bigger problem is that even while trying to integrate Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim youth into the German memory culture, it also pushes them aside. It says, well, you learn about this past and deal with it among yourselves and in your own genealogies. The projects that aim to integrate immigrants are at the same time separating them and putting an emphasis on their difference. It also shows how conditional this integration is, how quickly they can be branded as antisemites. Rather than as individuals who are already part of German society, they are taken as a collective

that needs to prove they are loyal to German values.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

The term “imported antisemitism” is often used in German politics and media, especially in relation to anti-Israel sentiment. What does it mean?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

If you look at the official documents about antisemitism or statements of officials, you will hear this term “imported antisemitism.” The idea is that antisemitism either doesn’t exist in Germany, or that a different kind of antisemitism that is completely foreign to German society is arriving. There is also the sense that this brings shame to Germany, and it’s unfair.

But there is ongoing longitudinal research in Germany that has measured levels of antisemitism for decades, and consistently 25 percent of the population holds onto antisemitic ideas. So, you don’t need to import antisemitism into Germany. There is plenty of it there. There have been people from Muslim-majority countries or the Middle East in Germany since the end of World War II — so, why were they not promoting antisemitism for all those years? What is called imported antisemitism is anger toward Israeli policies that do not allow a free and equal living space for Palestinians. The argument turns a political reality into a cultural and religious issue.

Many antisemitic actors are now accepted as legitimate in German politics, like the far-right Alternative für Deutschland.

The root of the conflict between Israel and Hamas is not religious. It is purely political. That’s why we see what Germans call Israel-influenced antisemitic incidents increase when the conflict escalates, and decrease when the conflict calms down. I am not saying that there is no other antisemitism among these groups. Antisemitism has been around for a long time. It is a powerful ideology and has given vocabulary and flavor to anti-Israeli sentiments. However, if there could be a good political solution then it would be easier to tackle antisemitism among groups linked to the Middle East.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

How does the Right benefit from the “subcontracting” of Holocaust guilt?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

Many antisemitic actors are now accepted as legitimate in politics, like the far-right Alternative für Deutschland with its connections to Nazi ideology, or Hubert Aiwanger (the deputy leader of Bavaria, who in September was accused of being a Nazi in his youth. He denied this and kept his post). They become whitewashed. They can take a central position in society as long as there are new, scary antisemites who are criticizing Israel. As antisemitism is offloaded to Muslims, it makes right-wing antisemites acceptable.

Being publicly pro-Israel becomes a way to show that one is not a far-right ideologue. If they put an Israeli flag around their shoulders, then it becomes okay to appear at anti-Muslim protests.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

In Germany, antisemitism and Islamophobia are often discussed as entirely unrelated phenomena. Why?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

If you look at research, people who show antisemitic sentiments also express Islamophobic sentiments, as well as anti-black, sexist, homophobic ones. Separating different kinds of discrimination as if they are different things by nature is very harmful. A common argument in Germany is that antisemitism is different because it sees Jews as superior and racism sees racialized groups as inferior, so they are two different forms discrimination. This is not true at all. Every racism works a little differently. The common thing is that the groups are seen as fundamentally different, and that there is both hatred and fear of them.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

In the Holocaust education and antisemitism prevention programs you describe in your book, Muslim participants are told they should not see themselves as victims. Why is that?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

In Germany, after the war, victimhood is seen as a politically unviable position to argue for. That position is reserved for Jews. All the political education that came afterward had been to teach Germans they were not victims, they were perpetrators. Jews were indeed absolute victims during the Holocaust. But Israel is a strong state with a powerful army and allies. A comparison between the October 7 Hamas attacks and the Holocaust is not appropriate.

For Germans, the situation of Israeli Jews in this story may be complicating the Holocaust memory narrative. In the Israel-Palestine conflict there are multiple levels of victimhood. They all need to be understood. Thinking that Jews are victims by definition is a self-centered narrative that focuses on Germans' guilt toward Jews. It makes it difficult to understand the current reality in its full complexity. It erases the ability to see things from the perspective of Palestinians.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

Why were some participants told they had responded to the Holocaust in the wrong way?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

In those programs, I observed that when Muslims are taken to concentration camps or other memorial sites, they get afraid. Especially people who are not familiar with these stories, who are more recent immigrants or refugees who came from Syria. They find these sites really scary. When Muslims, or other minority groups go there, they have the sense that "Oh my god, if this was happening now, I would be in this position. I would be in the position of the Jews."

It's important that Germans took responsibility personally. But now, in a country where one in four people have a migration background, Holocaust memory culture as it is taught cannot form the basis of a well-integrated nation.

I have seen, again and again, teachers get angry at them: "How dare you say that," or "How dare you think you're like the Jews." Like they are competing. Of course, what Muslims are facing in Germany right now has nothing to do with the Holocaust. However, it doesn't mean that they are not

racialized and seen as not belonging. So, it triggers white German teachers, educators, and public figures. I believe it reminds them that racialization is not finished in Germany.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

So, they aren't allowed to make comparisons with discrimination they face in Germany today?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

When minority groups are not allowed to think about their experiences in light of the Holocaust, these programs miss that part of the lesson is to learn that there are other groups who are also put in minoritized positions and excluded. Especially when politicians start threatening to deport immigrants, or they always have to show they support Israel. All nationalisms share common elements even at different degrees. That is also what Jews were accused of during the Third Reich, of not being loyal to Germany. Muslims are told, "You are not loyal to our values," and people are sensitive toward such judgements. I have observed that many Muslims closely identify with Jews during Holocaust education. When it comes to Israel, they do have a different understanding of what a peaceful and just coexistence means. That doesn't mean they don't understand and feel for Jewish victims of the Holocaust.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

In your book, you describe seeing a "radical empathy" among Muslims who learn about the victims of the Holocaust. What does this mean?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

In Auschwitz, there's an exhibit that shows the life of Jews before the Holocaust. They have their family photos on display. When I went with a group of Muslim youngsters, they spent a lot of time looking at these photographs, and they were really touched. They said things like "Oh, these people look like us," and "I can totally imagine, these photos feel very relatable to me." They have photos of bar mitzvahs, or other religious traditions. Youngsters said they look modern and European, but they're darker. They felt, as Muslims living in Germany, as if these could be their own family pictures. That is the radical empathy there is. Some of them said, "I wish they hadn't been killed, I could be friends with them in a way that I cannot be with white Germans."

There is a basis for Jews and Muslims who share common experiences in Germany to feel connected.

The optimistic side of me says that these are the kinds of feelings that can be built upon. Instead, politicians are promoting the idea that they are enemies to each other. Obviously, the situation is different in Israel and Palestine, but in Germany they are both minorities, and there are lots of Jewish-Muslim groups or Israeli-Palestinian groups who find comfort in each other. They do activism together, or prayers, or art. They know that they are both targets of right-wing militants. There is a basis for these two groups who share common experiences in Germany to feel connected.

RUAIRÍ CASEY

What would a more inclusive memory culture look like?

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

It's important that Germans took responsibility personally. But now, in a country where one in four people have a migration background, Holocaust memory culture as it is taught cannot form the basis of a well-integrated nation. Now we are talking about the fourth generation after the Holocaust. The perpetrators have passed away. It's easier to find a common Holocaust memory culture where no one is a perpetrator and everyone who lives there carries the burden of this criminal past. Germany still has the effects, and everyone needs to learn from it. And everyone gets to learn from it, and appreciate how important democracy is, and how important minority rights are.

The memory of the Holocaust belongs to all of us, but it especially belongs to Germany, and obviously Jews. It needs to be taught in a way that incorporates everyone who lives in the site of the crime. There can be a good balance between universalism and specificity, but this strong and successful struggle against one form of racism should not be used to further socialize and marginalize other groups. One cannot fight antisemitism effectively by resorting to Islamophobia.

Ruairí Casey

Esra Özyürek

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