



## BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE FOR WESTERN AFFAIRS

### ■ Not only Namibia. Germany facing politics of memory challenges

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The centerpiece of Germany's historical memory is the Holocaust. The country's admission of responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich has been among the key points of moral, political and social convergence in today's Germany. However, rows about the colonial past increasingly put that very tenet into question. The paradigm of German politics of memory is transforming into, as Michael Rothberg put it, a "multidirectional memory" whose social canon is becoming increasingly democratic, supplemented with, inter alia, references to the colonial past.

In this article, I attempt to characterize this socio-political process and the intellectual challenges faced by the German elite by using three examples: that of the German-Namibian reconciliation agreement, the controversy surrounding the establishment of the Humboldt Forum and the intellectual debate on equating the Holocaust with colonialism, known as *Historikerstreit 2.0* (Historians' Dispute 2.0).

#### Namibia

In late May 2021, the media reported that, after six years of efforts by the German-Namibian governmental commission, a joint agreement was reached on the treatment of crimes committed in the early twentieth century in German South-West Africa (today's Namibia), a German Empire colony from 1884 to 1915. This Reconciliation Agreement (*Versöhnungsabkommen*) was premised on three points: 1) Germany recognizing the crimes committed in the former colony against the Herero and Nama peoples as genocide; 2) Namibia, and especially the descendants of the most affected groups, receiving €1.1 billion in development aid; 3) the German president making an official apology in the Namibian parliament for the criminal policy of the colonial authorities.

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The most controversial issue was that of the payment of voluntary redress by the German government. From the very onset of the negotiations, Berlin refused to either compensate individuals or pay reparations under international agreements. As reported in the official position statement, the events in question took place before the entry into force of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948), which means that in legal terms, Germany committed no genocide in German South-West Africa, and that the German state is under no obligation to pay damages. The German authorities emphasize that the recognition of genocide is a purely political and moral gesture with no legal implications. Due to the reluctance of the German side, a different compensation scheme was agreed in the form of special funds to be allocated to support vocational education and agriculture and infrastructure development.

The Herero and the Nama refused to recognize the agreement between the governments of both countries and threatened to stage mass protests during the imminent visit of President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. The most vociferous opposition came from Vekuii Rukoro, Paramount Chief of the Herero since 2015. Rukoro sharply opposed the work of the German-Namibian commission and questioned the legitimacy of the Windhoek government's involvement in the negotiations. He demanded that Germany pay the descendants of the victims direct compensation. In 2017, he filed a lawsuit against Germany in a New York court which ended up being dismissed. Rukoro died unexpectedly of Covid-19 on June 18 of this year.

It is difficult today to predict whether and, if so, when the Berlin and Windhoek governments may sign the agreement. Efforts to ratify it are hampered mainly by the spread of the coronavirus in Namibia. However, the commission's prior accomplishments that have been disclosed to the media are a major diplomatic achievement of Germany, especially when it comes to the form of such compensation. Equally important is the official recognition of the murders of the Herero and Nama as genocide. Germany is the first former colonial power to have made such a declaration.

## The Humboldt Forum

On July 20 of this year, after more than seven years of sustained efforts, the Humboldt Forum, named after the brothers Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt, opened to visitors. The Forum's offices are placed in the Berlin Castle, whose baroque façade has been reconstructed, its interior remodeled to accommodate the exhibition. The display features the works of non-European artists. The bulk of the items on display come from the holdings of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art. The origin of the exhibits on view as well as the enormous amount spent on building the Forum (close to €700 million) have sparked considerable controversy.

Critics of the institution argue that it holds "looted art" (they deliberately use the term previously employed to describe the works of art stolen by the Third Reich), which found its way into German museums in circumstances that have not always

been clear and that most likely resulted from colonial conquests by the German Empire and other European states. Some of the most prominent works include the Benin bronzes stolen by the British in the late 19th century, over a thousand of which ended up in German museums, and a boat from Luf (today's Papua New Guinea), brought back by the Germans from a punitive expedition against the island's population. The story behind the boat's acquisition was described by Götz Aly, a historian whose book on the subject, *Das Prachtboot. Wie Deutsche die Kunstschätze der Südsee raubten*, attracted considerable media attention. Besides Aly, sharp criticism of the Humboldt Forum came from the Hamburg-based German historian of colonialism and researcher Jürgen Zimmerer, who has repeatedly argued that the reconstruction into the present form of the Castle of the Hohenzollerns, who, being the German ruling family, were responsible (or perhaps, more accurately, carried out) the colonial conquests of the German Empire, is a "disgrace" and an example of "a colonialism amnesia" of the Germans (Deutschlandfunk 2020).

These and other critical voices have placed the Humboldt Forum front and center of a debate on Germany's colonial past. Its General Director Hartmut Dorgerloh expressed willingness to participate in a debate on the history and provenance of artefacts and their possible restitution. Federal Government Commissioner for Culture Monika Grütters, who started out with a relatively conservative mindset, noted that the Forum could contribute substantially to discussions about "blank spots" in German history, and even expressed willingness to return the Benin bronzes.

### "Historians' Dispute 2.0"

Colonial issues were some of the main triggers that initiated the debate on the shape and future of Germany's remembrance culture in German-speaking media. The argument focused on whether the Holocaust was a singular one-of-a-kind crime or one in any way comparable to other atrocities, in particular those committed in the colonial period. The controversy is largely reminiscent of the "Historians' Dispute" from more than three decades earlier, in which Ernst Nolte posited that Nazism was a response to the threat posed by Bolshevism.

The present debate, which has been simmering for quite some time, came to a head in the wake of the publication of the essay *German Catechism (Der Katechismus der Deutschen)* by the Australian historian (currently a university professor in the US) Dirk A. Moses. The article appeared in the Swiss online historical magazine *Geschichte der Gegenwart* on May 23, 2021, after it had been rejected by the editors of a German journal, which Moses later admitted without revealing its title. The key precepts of the essay, which is rendered in a fairly journalistic style and deliberately imbued with biblical rhetoric, boils down to the following three major points.

First, the memory of the Holocaust, which constitutes a moral and political foundation of the German state, has become its *raison d'être* and an inviolable "sacred trauma". Second, this "civil religion" legitimizes Germany's actions in the international arena, while its "redeeming philosemitism" is the central tenet of German-

Israeli relations. Germany owes Israel loyalty because, as goes the mantra: “Israel’s security is part of the German *raison d’etat*.” Anyone criticizing Israel knowingly harms Holocaust memory. And vice versa. Moses invokes two events to support his thesis, which illustrates the direct impact of the “fetishized memory” of the Holocaust on Israel relations. One of them is the Bundestag’s recognition of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement that calls for a global boycott of Israeli products, as being anti-Semitic (2019). The other is the exclusion of the Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe from participation in the 2020 Ruhr Triennial after he was accused of relativizing the Holocaust and promoting anti-Semitism for having equated contemporary Israel’s policy on the Palestinians to South African apartheid. Third, the current “regime of remembrance” renders Germany incapable of providing an accurate account of its own colonial crimes or noticing parallels between colonialism and the Holocaust. “The German elites instrumentalize the Holocaust as a way to remain silent on other historical crimes,” observes Moses. In his view, Germany’s politics of memory, which is becoming increasingly entrenched in its dogmatism, is in dire need of a profound revision. Researchers in their turn, he continues, should overcome “the fear of reducing the iconic status of the Holocaust to that of just one of many genocides.” In other words, only by “desecrating” the current consensus can one start a new chapter in politics of memory (Moses 2021).

A similar appeal was made by the aforementioned Jürgen Zimmerer and Michael Rothenberg in the weekly *Die Zeit* (Zimmerer, Rothenberg 2021). The two authors argue that the current historical policy has reached its limits and is becoming increasingly “provincial”. A possible remedy they propose is “multidirectional memory”, which brings together multiple cultures of memory allowing them to coexist and interact with one another in various configurations. In their view, a juxtaposition of the Holocaust and colonialism may provide researchers with new insights into Nazi genocide.

In a subsequent edition of *Die Zeit*, Saul Friedländer, one of the most prominent Holocaust researchers, counters Moses’ article (and indirectly to those by Zimmerer and Rothenberg) (Friedländer 2021). While fully rejecting Moses’ arguments, Friedländer emphasizes that the Holocaust is a “fundamental crime” and that its uniqueness lies in its anti-Semitism. In his opinion, the postcolonial perspective detracts from the impact of anti-Semitism on the way in which the “final solution” was implemented.

Moses responded swiftly to Friedländer’s text, accusing the latter of “putting forth arguments that are driven mainly by the fear of having the Holocaust framed in colonial terms”. He emphasizes that, not unlike other crimes against humanity, the Holocaust forms “a part of history” rather than being “the only genocide in history”, and that Western civilization is guilty of committing “many fundamental crimes” (Moses 2021).

The assertion of the uniqueness of the Holocaust and the inviolability of the political and historical consensus is defended above all by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* daily. A case in point is the article by one of the newspaper’s editors-in-chief Jürgen Kaube eloquently titled “Die Gleichmacher”. Kaube argues that in writing his article, Moses was politically motivated to criticize Israel and German relations with it.

The editor does not deny that Third Reich policies in occupied Europe bore some of the characteristics of colonialism but insists that reducing the Holocaust to a colonial crime is a “delusional claim” (Kaube 2021). Historian Dan Diner refers to the equating of colonialism and the Holocaust as a “scandalous discourse”, recalling Nolte’s controversial assertion and pointing to the parallels between the two “historians’ disputes” (Diner 2021).

Thomas Thiel, in turn, points to the fact that Moses confirms the existence of “a well-coordinated postcolonial pattern.” Thiel writes that “in his pamphlet, Moses (...) chooses to perceive facts selectively for his own ideological purposes that are typical for the postcolonial movement.” This focus on postcolonial ideas blinds Moses to the complexity of the anti-Jewish policy of the Third Reich. While perfunctorily transferring historical issues to contemporary politics, the historian “swaps roles”: “The Muslim becomes the new Jew. Demonized Israel becomes the main aggressor. The only thing that stands in the way of recognizing new victims is the Holocaust’s unique status (Thiel 2021).

## Conclusions

An overall conclusion from the above considerations is that the German politics of memory has undoubtedly reached a turning point. Partly as a result of the Namibian issue, it became more focused on German colonialism, although it is only beginning to debate this chapter of history and its implications. Perhaps the most important effect of the remembrance culture debates is a globalization of sorts of German historical memory, driven directly by the global nature of colonialism. It is significant that the historian who sparked one of Germany’s most important historical debates in recent years is of an Anglo-Saxon background. M. Rothberg notes that the current “historians’ dispute” is being fought “by various international communities” seeking to determine the “relationship between the Holocaust and non-European and colonial history” (Rothenberg 2021). Further, other European countries have also been asking questions about looted artifacts and works of art. France has been particularly active in this field. As early as 2017, President Emanuel Macron called for reconciliation between the former colonial powers and their historic colonies. A year later, France handed some of the most valuable (previously stolen) exhibits over to the Republic of Benin while committing to research the provenance of further 50,000 or so items. Given the importance of this matter for European countries, one cannot rule out that the Humboldt Forum, of all organizations, will soon become Europe’s central platform for discussion on this issue. This demonstrates that the German state is taking the matter seriously and approaching it comprehensively.

The ferocity of the German historical debate can be explained in part by the succession of generations: a new generation is here to pose new questions. The big question is whether the new politics of memory will become truly multidirectional or, as debates grow more intense and polarized, dwell predominantly on colonialism. The danger is that the complexity of historical processes (such as the extermination of Jews) and the succumbing to certain intellectual and political fads may end up being trivialized. Based on how the debate has proceeded thus far, it appears that politics



of memory is becoming a field of cultural and ideological conflict, posing perhaps the biggest threat to the successful achievement of a new consensus.

The views expressed in this publication belong solely to the author.

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