

## “Migration Background” versus “Nazi Background”: (German) Debates on Post-Nazism, Post-Migration, and Postcolonialism

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The politics of history and memory culture have recently been the topic of increased discussion again—and this discussion has by no means been cool-headed, but hot, with a high potential for conflict. An argument is ongoing in the public sphere over which (hi)stories are present and visible and which are not, who is being recognized and who is not, as well as what is being forgotten, repressed, or tacitly accepted in this context. Corresponding to this general development, a debate is currently ongoing in the German press that has been dubbed “*Historikerstreit 2.0*,” or “the historians’ debate reloaded.” The controversy was initially sparked by a discussion about the Cameroonian intellectual Achille Mbembe, his position toward the State of Israel, and his involvement with the BDS movement, before continuing on to a discussion about Michael Rothberg’s book *Multidirectional Memory* when it was published in a German translation. Finally, the debates deepened with the controversy surrounding Dirk Moses’s polemics concerning an ostensible “German catechism” with regard to Holocaust commemoration.

The *Historikerstreit 1.0* in the mid-1980s—which constituted an exclusively West German domestic debate relating to Germany’s self-conception—revolved around the question of whether Nazi mass crimes had been a reaction to Soviet mass crimes and should thus be subordinated to these. This resulted in the singularity of the Holocaust being inscribed—at least superficially and purely rhetorically—in (hegemonic) German discourse, going on to lay the foundation for a future German culture of memory following unification after 1990. By contrast, the present debate addresses the question of whether there is place alongside Holocaust commemoration, not least of all in Germany, for commemorating the crimes of colonialism, as well as the history and ongoing presence of racism in the Federal Republic (and elsewhere). The *Historikerstreit 1.0*—which took place shortly before the end of communist rule in eastern Europe—preempted the competition between the memory of Nazi and Stalinist crimes that would shape and at the same time divide the European commemorative landscape over the next thirty years. While these inner-European conflicts continue to proliferate, and are in some respects even being exacerbated, they are increasingly overshadowed or substituted by a global competition between the memory of the Holocaust and colonial crimes.

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In the spring of 2021, artist Moshtari Hilal and political geographer Sinthujan Varatharajah sparked a debate about Nazi heritage in present-day Germany when they introduced the

concept of *Nazihintergrund* (Nazi background) in a live Instagram talk entitled “*Nazierbe, Kapital und Rassismus in Deutschland*” (“The Nazi Legacy, Capital, and Racism in Germany”).<sup>1</sup> They were here alluding to the term *Migrationshintergrund* (migration background), which is used to designate people living in Germany who were themselves born outside the country or whose parents were. The resulting debate in many ways constituted a link between the controversy over Achille Mbembe, his criticisms of Israel, and his allegedly antisemitic positions, which emerged in the spring and summer of 2020, and the discussions surrounding Rothberg’s book and Moses’s polemic later in 2021. Yet the *Nazihintergrund* debate has remained the less visible of these recent, surprisingly intense, public discussions of the history and memory of the Holocaust and the question of its relation to the history, memory, and the ongoing presence of colonialism (postcolonialism). Although, at the same time, that debate encapsulates all the constitutive aspects of the underlying general debate. This debate, however, is not concerned with comparisons or the relationship between colonialism and the Holocaust, but “only” with the question of what happens when people regarded by majority society as not belonging, or as Other, begin to engage with German history and ask critical questions about it. Indeed, one of the most common demands in the tiresome integration debate is that migrants should engage with the history of their new homeland. Thus, the *Nazihintergrund* debate highlights particularly astutely the current challenges to German “memory culture” in the framework of Germany’s diverse and ever-changing “migration society” (also described in recent scholarship with the term *postmigration*).

Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah’s approach is a downright refreshing departure from a commemorative culture that has become ossified in routines and rituals. The pair take the issue seriously—they evidently care about it. Yet they discuss it in an unusual manner, which many people obviously view as a provocation. The German press was consequently full of accusations and misunderstandings.<sup>2</sup> Why should we not debate how certain entrepreneurial families (Bahlsen, Quandt, Stoschek, etc.) acquired wealth in the Third Reich and preserved it in the postwar period, how their descendants are still profiting from it today, and how little critical or conscientious engagement has been dedicated to these issues even now? See for example the eruption regarding the Berlin queer feminist bookstore of Emilia von Senger whose great-grandfather was a high-ranking general in the Wehrmacht.

And, of course, one cannot expect Hilal and Varatharajah—who do not have a Nazi background—to automatically understand the objection that a general who led Hitler’s war was maybe not a Nazi himself. At the same time, it should hardly be surprising that people nowadays get their information via the internet, as Hilal and Varatharajah did, nor can they reasonably be expected to have engaged with the entire research literature on these issues. Yet it seems equally desirable that such topics always be discussed at such a high level as Hilal and Varatharajah do—and that people also ask themselves what these issues have to do with their present, their everyday lives, and their immediate environs, as Hilal

<sup>1</sup> See Instagram post ([https://www.instagram.com/tv/CLU2dZiqvMG/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/tv/CLU2dZiqvMG/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)). See also Nina Monecke, “Es geht uns nicht um Boykott, es geht um Transparenz,” in *Die Zeit*, March 19, 2021 ([https://www.zeit.de/zett/politik/2021-03/ns-familiengeschichte-instagram-diskussion-nazihintergrund-moshtari-hilal-sinthujan-varatharajah?utm\\_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F](https://www.zeit.de/zett/politik/2021-03/ns-familiengeschichte-instagram-diskussion-nazihintergrund-moshtari-hilal-sinthujan-varatharajah?utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F)); Saskia Trebing, “Kritik ist das Gegenteil von Gleichgültigkeit,” in *monopol*, May 7, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> See, characteristically, “Erinnerungskultur: Deutlich stolz,” in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, March 12, 2021 (<https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/erinnerungskultur-deutlich-stolz-90239939.html>); Jan Küveler, “Wo jeder Biodeutsche gleich zum ‘Menschen mit Nazihintergrund’ wird,” in *Die Welt*, March 5, 2021 (<https://www.welt.de/kultur/literarischewelt/plus227529223/Fall-Emilia-von-Senger-Deutsche-sind-Menschen-mit-Nazihintergrund.html>); “Strittige Perspektive,” in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, March 10, 2021 (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kolumne/vergangenheitsbewaeltigung-strittige-perspektive-1.5230934>). For a more nuanced view, see Caren Miesenberger, “Menschen mit Nazihintergrund,” in *taz*, February 18, 2021 (<https://taz.de/Social-Media-und-NS-Familiengeschichte/15747511/>); Leonard Kaminski, “Migrationshintergrund vs. Nazihintergrund,” in *Jüdische Allgemeine*, March 25, 2021 (<https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/meinung/migrationshintergrund-vs-nazihintergrund/>).

and Varatharajah do. It seems absurd to accuse the two commentators of having introduced identity politics and generalizing attributions into commemorative culture. These were already from the outset an integral component of this commemorative culture, even if they were not necessarily labeled as such.

Why is German society so surprised about the phrase *Nazi background* and why did this spark such a discussion? Why is that phrase considered an “injury to the people” and even “racist”—rather than the fact that one-quarter of the people who live in Germany are constantly and matter-of-factly classified as “people with a migration background,” notably across numerous generations? The use of this phrase is even considered a positive thing because it helps avoid using other labels for this group. Numbering more than 20 million people, this group is not just classified like this for the purpose of statistics, but made to feel constantly that they do not really belong, even if they were born in Germany and hold German citizenship.

At one point in the video, the term *Genozidhintergrund* (genocide background) was dropped, which also sparked mystification and indignation. Are there really still people who have not yet understood that the Holocaust was a genocide and that we who live in Germany and Austria and Europe are therefore living in a post-genocidal context? How is it possible that this term caused such a stir and was classified as inappropriate? Are there perhaps some who think this term should be reserved for the Global South? Were we not just told insistently in another debate that the Holocaust was absolutely singular and the worst crime in all human history that cannot be compared to anything else?

Together with the other aforementioned debates, the consternation over the phrase *Nazi background* reveals the weak points in German commemorative culture. Evidently, German society cannot tolerate:

- \* when people who are not accepted as Germans and who are also not Jewish express opinions about the history of the Holocaust and its commemoration;
- \* when migrants of this generation quite naturally engage with German history and perhaps ask some uncomfortable questions in the process;
- \* when the notion of German commemorative culture as a linear success story is critically questioned.

There is in fact little that currently speaks for German commemorative culture as a success story: antisemitism is on the rise, racism is omnipresent, skepticism regarding democracy is growing, right-wing populists are on the upsurge, human rights are not held in high regard—and every survey in recent times has demonstrated a lack of basic knowledge regarding the facts and circumstances surrounding the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust. So what are the successes of this commemorative culture—apart from the fact that it serves to evince Germany’s normality and to make the country appear morally superior to the rest of the world, while the rest of the world should not interfere in German commemorative culture, thank you very much?

One would have thought that “we” would regard it as a good thing if migrants want to engage with “our” history—but then only in an uncritical and unreflective manner. Of course, migrants will speak differently about this history because they bring different perspectives and experiences with them. On the one hand, “we” cannot accept this, whereas on the other hand, we would like to see this history elevated to a gold standard for the world, regarding both the magnitude of the crime and the grandiosity of the manner in which it was dealt with.

Regarding the everyday diversity of German society, we will have to accept the fact that an increasing number of people will quite naturally have something to say about these issues, even if they do not have an immediate familial relationship to the events in question. Or maybe they do have a connection that we are simply not yet aware of? In any case, the Holocaust is already established as a global point of reference: consequently, anyone can

have an opinion about it. The earlier German logic that “anyone who was not there cannot speak about it” no longer applies.

German commemorative culture—despite the globalization of Holocaust memory—has regrettably become a closed affair: self-sufficient and self-congratulatory and in no way capable of self-reflection. And no, Hilal and Varatharajah—who deliberately wore brown sweaters for their discussion—do not consider *German* and *Nazi* to be synonymous; that’s why they introduced the phrase *Nazi background*. They intended by doing so to liberate the collective ascription of Germanness from its equation with the collective ascription of Nazidom, an equation that incidentally also serves once again to ostracize the victims because they thereby seem to be automatically excluded from being German. Instead, the two commentators were clarifying: there are Germans with a Nazi background and Germans without a Nazi background. And this can apply to both old and new Germans.

As a German with a Nazi background, I have now been living and working in Austria for twenty-five years. Naturally, I ask myself all the time when we will initiate this discussion here, too: about Austrians with and without a Nazi background.

The reactions to Moshtari Hilal and Sinthujan Varatharajah’s engagement with the Nazi past reflect a German variant of what Gavriel Rosenfeld identified as the “illiberal memory” that has taken hold across the world over the past ten to fifteen years.

Meanwhile, the engagement with migration and migrants as well as with pluralism and diversity in our societies is obviously connected more closely to the memory of the Holocaust than hitherto guessed—although this actually should not come as a surprise. In the past years and decades, at the latest since the beginning of the new millennium, Holocaust commemoration has moved from a marginalized and rather subversive position to a government-sponsored, hegemonic, and legitimizing state memory. The current discussions could be read as a consistent evolution of this process in light of growing right-wing populism alongside increasing racist, anti-Muslim, and antimigrant sentiments. These debates have also revealed the extent to which the unique transnational institutionalization of Holocaust commemoration over the past years has led above all to a consolidation in collective memory of this historical event as an exceptional occurrence, thus sidelining the more nuanced question of what possible lessons it holds for the present. Following its globalization and universalization, Holocaust commemoration is now being re-ethnicized. It is consequently taking on a decisively exclusionary character.

References to the singularity of the Holocaust were important in the Federal German debates of the 1980s—*Historikerstreit 1.0*—in order to clarify that German guilt and responsibility could not simply be relativized or repressed. Today, however, it serves rather to deny the actual lessons of this history and to render impossible any form of solidarity. What meaning does singularity hold in the face of phrases like “Never Again!” and the imperative to learn from history?

It should be clear by now that these events may have ended in Auschwitz, but they did not begin there. Keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive can only mean solidarity on a global scale, including standing up for human rights and liberal democracy as well as fighting antisemitism, racism, radicalism, and violence. The Holocaust should never be used as an argument to diminish or question the suffering of others, whether in the past or the present.

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