

Public History and National Identity:

Holocaust Remembrance in Germany

By Sophia Cohen

After Auschwitz, there was silence. Despite receiving praise for its approach to the politics of memory, Germany's *vergangenheitsbewältigung* (translated to “mastery of the past”) is a relatively recent development. In the years that succeeded the Second World War, the crimes of Nazism were a societal taboo.¹ The extermination of European Jewry was pushed to the deepest corners of German minds, a collectively repressed memory. It was only in the late 1960s, inspired by the wide-spread climate of counter-cultural upheaval, that West German youth forced the Holocaust into the public sphere.² They wanted to question their forefathers, as they had witnessed both the rise and the fall of Nazism. They sought to understand, too, why they would have allowed atrocities such as the Holocaust to happen. In doing so, the youth of Germany opened a Pandora's Box — where memory would encounter, shape and be shaped by a nascent post-war national identity.

The Holocaust became a matter of dispute, hotly debated and evaluated. As a master narrative in its own right, it has overflowed the boundaries of Germany³ — becoming a trans-national feature of an increasingly cosmopolitan global community, as symbolized by post-war institutions such as the United Nations.⁴ As A. Dirk Moses

¹ Bernhard Giesen, “The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity,” in *The Trauma of Perpetrators*, ed. Jeffrey Alexander (University of California Press, 2004), 115-116.

² Giesen, “The Trauma of Perpetrators,” 117-118.

³ Liane Schäfer, “Memory in Discourse: Approaching Conflicting Constellations of Holocaust and Postcolonial Memory in Germany,” *AUC STUDIA TERRITORIALIA* 20, no. 2 (April 15, 2021), 61.

⁴ Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, “The Institutionalization of Cosmopolitan Morality: The Holocaust and Human Rights,” *Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 2 (June 2004), 149-151.

would argue, the Holocaust is more than a historical event: it is a symbol.⁵ The meaning of this symbol, however, is uncertain; it is in the eye of the beholder, interpreted through the lenses of collective memory. As a practice that is inherently social, collective memory is embedded in the structures one lives under, or so postulated theorist Maurice Halbwachs.⁶ It is embedded in the societal structures one lives under, contained in a given cultural context. More significantly, as Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich usefully notes, the catharsis of collective memory (“feelings and sensations”) are “constructed and shaped through state practices.”⁷ Museums, memorials, monuments, days of remembrance. Sponsored and mediated by a state, under the umbrella of public history, these *lieux de mémoires* are meant to tell a story. A story of the Nation.

With all these matters considered, this essay focuses on the creation of a German national identity slightly before and after reunification. It argues that Holocaust remembrance, through the civil religion of *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, is central to contemporary narratives of German nationality and citizenship. Furthermore, this piece is also concerned with the limitations that this dynamic may impose on the field of Holocaust studies — especially pertaining to the dissemination of scholarship to the wider public. For the sake of a swift progression in the pursuit of these arguments, the paper is divided into three sections. The first section is dedicated to the field of public history, with the intention of putting valuable concepts into perspective. The section that follows delves into the debates that surrounded Holocaust memory in the late 20th century, grounding them on the disputes over a unified Germany’s national identity.

⁵ A. Dirk Moses, “Holocaust Memory, Exemplary Victims, and Permanent Security Today,” in *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, Human Rights in History (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 482.

⁶ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, eds., “Public History,” in *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in History and Theory*, Second edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 345.

⁷ Jennifer Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenges of Representation* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 196.

Lastly, the third section touches on Holocaust studies, evaluating the challenges of the present and looking for the possibilities of the future.

Before delving into the specifics of Holocaust remembrance and German national identity, it is necessary to ground this essay on the “house” of public history and its associated concepts. As defined by Green and Troup in *Houses of History*, public history is “popular history, seen or read by a large number of people.”⁸ The nomenclature of this field can vary depending on location; for instance, while public history goes by this name in the United States and Canada, it is called “Heritage Studies” in the United Kingdom. Regardless of terminological specificities, their mission is the same. Green and Troup explain that: “the remit for both public history and heritage ranges from protecting sites of national historical importance, to creating and disseminating versions of the past for wider public audiences.”⁹ Although public history is implicated in academia, it need not be necessarily dealt with in academic terms. Because it engages with history and spreads it to the wider public, it can be considered a cultural discourse in its own right. It is a versatile practice enacted by varied agents, not only professionally trained historians performing academic research.

Green and Troup elaborate on this versatility of public history, arguing that it can take a variety of forms, such as “the interpretation of material culture or landscape, as well as narrative storytelling.”¹⁰ Due to the remarkable diversity in form, the larger domains of public history are often outside the trained historian’s sphere of influence. Although public history can and often is practiced or influenced by historians, it is also open to the contributions of journalists, documentarians, and even fiction writers.¹¹

⁸ Green and Troup, “Public History,” 342-343.

⁹ Green and Troup, 342.

¹⁰ Green and Troup, 343.

¹¹ Green and Troup.

Many pieces that inspired a re-appraisal of Holocaust memory in Germany (whether divided or unified) were not made by historians. Perhaps the foremost example would be the *Holocaust* mini-series, which was released in 1978 and broadcasted to West Germans a year later. The reception of this miniseries in West Germany was compatible in timing with the unrest of the post-war generation that sought accountability from their parents and grandparents for their actions during the Nazi period. Valentina Pisanty terms the process inspired by *Holocaust* a “collective soul-searching” that was opposed by “only a minority of Germans.”¹²

A significant group that remains unmentioned by the authors of *Houses*, however, are the architects. They play no small role in the creation of public history, being — in fact — active participants of the field. Such significance is owed to their role in, for instance, idealizing and projecting museums and other cultural sites. As was demonstrated in Hansen-Glucklich’s *Disciplining the Holocaust*, the physical structure of these *lieux de mémoire* are instrumental in embodying the mandate of a museum and its mission.¹³ Architecture is an avenue to the facilitation of a visitor’s understanding of the site: it sends a message.¹⁴ The architect’s place in public history is exemplified by the author’s analysis of the Jewish Museum Berlin, projected by Daniel Libeskind.

On the other hand, Berlin’s Jewish Museum is not detached from the urban landscape. The visitor, through the architecture of the *lieux de mémoire*, is invited to cross the threshold that separates the bustling metropolis of modern Berlin from the silent somberness of the Jewish Museum. The museum takes the visitor through a “disrupted” environment, with “sudden twists and turns, slanted halls, and... voided

¹² Valentina Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right*, trans. Alistair McEwan, Memoirs (New York: Centro Primo Levi, 2021), “Chapter III, Collective Memories.”

¹³ Hansen-Glucklich, *Holocaust Memory Reframed*, 10.

¹⁴ Hansen-Glucklich, 17.

spaces.”¹⁵ The qualities embodied in the architecture of the Jewish Museum channel its principal statement, which points at the “gaps” that plague German Jewish history, riddled with “*caesurae*, false turns, setbacks, and broken beginnings.”¹⁶ Moreover, the Jewish Museum Berlin also grapples with national challenges, since its narrative is underlined by a “multicultural society that embraces religious and ethnic tolerance.”¹⁷ In this context, the present self-image and identity of unified Germany encounters its turbulent, brutal past. It presents, therefore, an intentionally disturbing dialectic between past and present: the interaction between what Germany is, what it was, and the mourning for what it could have been.

Public history is, with all these matters considered, a complex matrix of historical practice. It is diverse, being practiced by a wide swath of occupations and possessing different forms. Historians, filmmakers, fiction writers, architects, and many others partake in the construction of public history. Having emphasized such versatility, it is worth noting that practitioners of public history do not create out of their own risk. They are backed by the government. States possess a key role in the production of public history, its centrality being owed in no small part to the significance of public funding to these pursuits. Because states fund the pursuit of public history through a myriad of different practices, it is reasonable to assume that they reap its benefits. As was demonstrated in the brief discussion of Germany's Jewish Museum Berlin, public history often presents a reflection on (or creation of) national identity.

In approaching what David Lowenthal would call the “foreign country”¹⁸ of the past, different states look for a justification of their own existence. They look for a sort

¹⁵ Hansen-Glücklich, 202.

¹⁶ Hansen-Glücklich.

¹⁷ Hansen-Glücklich.

¹⁸ Green and Troup, “Public History,” 343.

of essence, something that can build national identity. For this reason, as pointed out Green and Troup, “public funding can be attached to a ‘particular vision of social harmony,’ or an idealized image of the past.”¹⁹ In this context, heritage is often treated with rose-tinted lenses, prioritizing a celebration of a people’s *grandeur* rather than offering necessary criticism.²⁰ As it is contained in the *nexus* of hegemonic culture, public history — in many cases — becomes an informal arm of the state, on an ideological level. For this reason, it is necessary that historians facilitate reflection on the nature of public history and the narratives it promotes. Academics, in general, should not stray from it. They, in fact, have a responsibility to deconstruct the most hegemonic forms of public history. Public history is not static, nor are they inherent — and neither are national identities.

These dynamics imply, therefore, that public history has a history of its own. Historicizing Holocaust memory, especially institutionalized forms of Holocaust remembrance, is instrumental in unsettling post-unification German national identity. It is worth emphasizing that this identity was not conceived suddenly, upon the fall of the Berlin Wall. Rather, it was gradually constructed through political practices and, of course, among other things, negotiated in public discourse. The memory politics that Germany is so famous for also emerged in this period of re-negotiation of identity, of finding a place for unified Germany in Europe and the world. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that there might be an intersection between a new German identity and institutionalized Holocaust memory, since they are embedded in the same structures and developments.

¹⁹ Green and Troup.

²⁰ Green and Troup.

In fact, these intersections between identity and memory entered the realm of public discourse a few years before unification. The year of 1986 marks the onset of the so-called *Historikerstreit*, or Historian's Debate, a controversy staged on the pages of significant West German newspapers. It was a diatribe of public intellectuals: historians, political scientists, sociologists, journalists, and writers.²¹ This year-long diatribe was adjacent, as notes Barnard, to the German tradition of *Publizistik*, an intellectual journalism of sorts.²² Moreover, in what concerns its historian participants, the *Historikerstreit* encapsulates the significance they had long held in producing German identity.²³ Barnard points out that historicism, the empirical and most traditional approach to the discipline, had a strong foothold in Germany. In the nineteenth century, the unification of Germany as the *Kaiserreich* coincided with the first steps of History as an institutionalized discipline. For this reason, historians had been active in the process of state-building — some even argue that, in Germany and other Central European states, this process was stronger than in their previously unified counterparts.²⁴ Due to their role in the invention of German traditions, in the crafting of a distinct *Volk* (people), historians became the “main speakers of the nation.”²⁵

For this reason, the *Historikerstreit* is a significant event in the history of Holocaust memory in Germany. Although it was not integrated exclusively by historians, as is common in the very versatile and open field of public history, historians were the engine of the controversy. The new questions being asked in Holocaust scholarship stimulated impassioned responses from wide swaths of the West German *intelligentsia*, whether favoring or opposing those views. At the centre of this struggle

²¹ Mark James Barnard, “The Past Becomes the Present. German National Identity and Memory since Reunification” (PhD Dissertation, University of Salford, 2008), 160-161.

²² Barnard, “The Past Becomes the Present,” 165.

²³ Barnard, 159-160.

²⁴ Barnard, 160.

²⁵ Barnard, 159.

was a fundamental question: *how* should the Holocaust be remembered? Even more significant to the argument of this paper is its conjoined inquiry: what place should Holocaust remembrance have in the present and future of (West) Germany?

The issues raised in this discourse, therefore, are embedded in the concept of historical consciousness, which Green and Troup elaborated upon in *Houses*. Historical consciousness, as defined by the authors, “encompasses the inter-connection between an interpretation of the past, an understanding of the present and a prospect for the future.”²⁶ It is worth noting, too, that the idea of historical consciousness came to be in the 1970s, acquiring great significance for European educationalists.²⁷ It marked a departure from the classical, historicist position of historians, who “emphasized the differences between past and present.”²⁸ Historical consciousness tears down these temporal barriers, encouraging one to draw lessons from history rather than simply observing it. The acquisition of historical consciousness has been a primary paradigm in institutionalized Holocaust memory, a dynamic embodied in the ever-evoked motto of “Never Again.” Learning the atrocities of the Holocaust, therefore, is framed as essential to avoiding this history from “repeating itself.”²⁹ Despite the fragility of this logic, which Valentina Pisanty emphasizes, it has come to underline both the German politics of *vergangenheitsbewältigung* and other mainstream forms of Holocaust remembrance.³⁰

Moreover, one may argue, the mainstream paradigm of Holocaust memory goes back to the *Historikerstreit*. The *Historikerstreit* was largely motivated by the re-appraisal, in historical discourse, of the Holocaust. Ernst Nolte, a West German

²⁶ Green and Troup, “Public History,” 344.

²⁷ Green and Troup.

²⁸ Green and Troup.

²⁹ Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory*, “Chapter VI, Denial and Punishment.”

³⁰ Pisanty, “Chapter I, The Duty of Memory.”

historian, is one of the many characters of the controversy; he had, in fact, unleashed the *Historikerstreit* with a polemic essay entitled “The Past Which Will Not Disappear.”³¹

The above text was published on June 6th of 1986, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper.³² He argued, primarily, for the lessening of the burden of German guilt — drawing a line between past and present, insisting that Germany’s Nazi past should be allowed to “pass away.”³³ One of Nolte’s most inflammatory arguments was that perhaps the Holocaust had been committed in reaction to the “terror” imposed by the Bolsheviks, during and after their revolution. He asked: “Did the National Socialists or Hitler commit an ‘Asiatic’ deed merely because they and their ilk considered themselves to be potential victims of an ‘Asiatic’ deed?”³⁴ He tries to place, very rudimentarily, the Holocaust in its historical context, ambitiously inquiring whether the “Gulag Archipelago” was “primary to Auschwitz” or not.³⁵ In trying to historicize the Holocaust in such a way, however, he absolves the Germans of guilt.

Although some historians, such as Klaus Hilderbrand and Andreas Hillgruber, resonated with these statements, Nolte encountered fierce opposition. On the camp of the opponents, most notably, was Jürgen Habermas. Habermas, who was not a historian but a social scientist, took issue with the on-going relativization of the past. He implied that Nolte, Hilderbrand, and Hillgruber were concerned that the Nazi period overshadowed the “thousand-year history prior to 1933.”³⁶ Without this history, there would be a weakening of German national identity — which, he explains, would lead

³¹ Ernst Nolte, “The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered,” GHDI - Document, June 6, 1986, https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1064.

³² Nolte, “The Past That Will Not Pass”; Barnard, “The Past Becomes the Present,” 161.

³³ Nolte, “The Past That Will Not Pass.”

³⁴ Nolte.

³⁵ Nolte.

³⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians’ Debate*, ed. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 235.

up to a decline in the “forces of social integration.”³⁷ While these are problems that neoconservative historians, such as Nolte and others, meant to solve through the means of relativizing the Holocaust and diminishing it in comparison with other phenomena, Habermas suggested that German identity should take an unconventional path. He envisioned Germany as a post-national community, rather than traditionally national.³⁸ In his initial response to Nolte’s inflammatory thesis, an article titled “Apologetic Tendencies,” he writes that, “universalist value orientations,” have become the filter through which, “national pride and collective self-esteem,” pass.³⁹ In this context, “indications of the development of a post-conventional identity are increasing.”⁴⁰

This “post-conventional” identity of the German people should be anchored on “constitutional patriotism.”⁴¹ A sort of civic culture, open to more than simply those who integrate the *Volk*. Habermas emphasizes that such patriotism would not alienate West Germany from Western nations and their political culture, a political culture which it had only recently opened itself to.⁴² Furthermore, Habermas laments that these developments took place after the Second World War. “Unfortunately,” he writes, “in the cultural nation of Germany, a connection to universalist constitutional principles that was anchored in convictions could be formed only after — and through — Auschwitz.”⁴³ Absolving the Germans of their guilt, therefore, would dissolve the ties that held together Germany and the so-called West.⁴⁴ Here, he is both concerned with

³⁷ Habermas, *The New Conservatism*, 235.

³⁸ Norbert Kampe, “Normalizing the Holocaust? The Recent Historian’s Debate in the Federal Republic of Germany,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 2, no. 1 (1987), 63.

³⁹ Habermas, *The New Conservatism*, 227.

⁴⁰ Habermas.

⁴¹ Habermas.

⁴² Habermas.

⁴³ Habermas.

⁴⁴ Habermas.

the intra-community identity of Germany and how this identity should play out in the international stage, in interaction with the West and its institutions.

Habermas shuns, too, the suggestion that German guilt is a “burden.” Instead, Habermas claims that the Federal Republic, as a legal successor to the Third Reich, should take liability for the crimes of their forefathers.⁴⁵ Liability for the Holocaust and other Nazi crimes should be taken “through remembrance, practiced in solidarity, of what cannot be made good ... through a reflexive, scrutinizing attitude towards one’s own identity-forming traditions.”⁴⁶ With this approach, Habermas inverts the logic of Nolte, Hitlerbrand, and Hillgruber. He implies that remembrance, because it is performed in solidarity, solidifies a community. The Habermasian argument anticipates, in many ways, the position that the Holocaust and its institutional remembrance would have in German national identity.

Liana Schäfer writes that, instead of relying on “the long tradition of German history,”⁴⁷ German national identity relies on the Holocaust and the Nazi past. German citizenship has, according to Harjes, “usually been regarded as an exercise specifically of German citizenship.”⁴⁸ The Holocaust and Germany’s Nazi past serve, therefore, as the “negative pole of collective German identity.”⁴⁹ In consonance with what was envisioned by Habermas, “universal values and norms” came to constitute the “positive pole.”⁵⁰ It is from the dialectics between positive and negative poles that contemporary, unified Germany emerges: both as a nation in and of itself, and as a member of the international community.

⁴⁵ Habermas, 236.

⁴⁶ Habermas.

⁴⁷ Schäfer, “Memory in Discourse,” 62.

⁴⁸ Kirsten Harjes, “Stumbling Stones: Holocaust Memorials, National Identity, and Democratic Inclusion in Berlin,” *German Politics and Society* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2005), 139.

⁴⁹ Schäfer, “Memory in Discourse,” 62.

⁵⁰ Schäfer.

The centrality of the Holocaust to German identity, at least formally, was achieved gradually, developing gradually through the mid 1990s and early 2000s in different areas of German society. The solidification of this identity was owed, in no small part, to the promotion of public history — and the debates that it elicited, especially in the *Bundestag*. When parliamentarians deliberated on the construction of a Holocaust memorial in Berlin, *Bundestag* member Volker Beck declared: “We have to show that it is not only a question of collective responsibility, but also our national identity.”⁵¹ He was not the only one to make such a connection. Christian Simmert, a colleague of Beck in both the *Bundestag* and in party (the Green Party), emphasized the role of historical consciousness in preventing a tragedy of the Holocaust’s magnitude: “Preventing a repetition of the past is Germany’s mission. Auschwitz must, therefore, remain part of German identity.”⁵² This rhetoric crossed party lines, also finding resonance in representatives of the CDU, some of which based their support of the Holocaust memorial on their assumption that “German history between 1933 and 1945 is an indispensable part of German identity.”⁵³ These remarks seem to represent a consensus, at least among the *Bundestag* politicians, that Holocaust memory and its intersections with a new post-unification German identity was significant.⁵⁴

Most interestingly, there seems to exist a need to center a sense of “Germanhood” in the memorialization of the Holocaust, at least in what is spoken in the *Bundestag*. For example, former President of the *Bundestag* Wolfgang Thierse declared that the Holocaust memorial in Berlin was not being built “for Jews — whether German or otherwise — but our own self-understanding that accepts a perpetual reminder and

⁵¹ Barnard, “The Past Becomes the Present,” 170-171.

⁵² Barnard, 171.

⁵³ Barnard.

⁵⁴ Barnard, 173.

admonition of the unspeakable atrocities against humanity engraved within our conscience.”⁵⁵ In this context, the unified German state serves as what scholar Valentina Pisanty terms a “guardian of memory.”⁵⁶ She defines the “guardian” as “people, associations or institutions... appointed to conduct appropriate commemorative practices,” and to rule over who “has more right to express their claims in the vocabulary of the Holocaust.”⁵⁷

The role that the Holocaust plays in the fashioning of German national identity tends to restrain the scope of Holocaust studies and public discourse at large. As Michael Rothberg writes: “As Holocaust memory became a linchpin of Germany’s official public culture in the post-unification period... [it] began to occupy a sacred space quasi-sacred space in the nation’s memorial landscape.”⁵⁸ Holocaust memory is a disputed field filled with discourse, and heavily policed by the institutions in which it has been formally entrenched. Attempts to “historicize” the Holocaust by placing it in a larger context and detracting from its assumed “singularity”, which is what Ernst Nolte did — inappropriately — are constantly met with resistance in German society. Nolte did, indeed, compare the Holocaust with the “Gulag Archipelago” to diminish the intensity and significance of Nazi crimes.⁵⁹ In this case, of course, charges of relativization and *apologia* were applied correctly. Regardless, these are charges that continue to be weaponized against scholars who dare to look at the Holocaust through lenses that are not sanctioned within hegemonic structures and forms of remembrance.

⁵⁵ Barnard.

⁵⁶ Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory*, “Introduction: What Went Wrong?”.

⁵⁷ Pisanty.

⁵⁸ Michael Rothberg, “The Specters of Comparison,” *Zeitgeist*, May 2020, <https://www.goethe.de/prj/zei/en/pos/21864662.html>.

⁵⁹ Jonathon Catlin, “A New German Historians’ Debate? A Conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg (Part I),” *JHI Blog*, February 2, 2022, <https://jhblog.org/2022/02/02/a-new-german-historians-debate-a-conversation-with-sultan-doughan-a-dirk-moses-and-michael-rothberg-part-i/>.

These dynamics are not good for historical scholarship, as they remove the Holocaust from “the field of ordinary historical understanding.”⁶⁰

Recently, there has been a notable postcolonial turn in Holocaust studies. The most notable scholars to partake in this flourishing field are Jürgen Zimmerer, a German historian known for *From Windhoek to Auschwitz* and *German Rule, African Subjects*, American literary critic Michael Rothberg (*Multidirectional Memory*), and Australian historian A. Dirk Moses (*The Problems of Genocide, German Intellectuals and the Nazi Past*). Of course, the above historians are not the only ones to utilize post-colonial lenses to analyze the Holocaust, but their scholarship has been subjected to no small scrutiny and polemic in mainstream German media. For his work in genocide studies and his response to a text entitled “The German Catechism,” Moses has been termed a *Gleichmacher*: an ‘equater’ or relativist for “violating the German taboo about challenging Holocaust uniqueness.”⁶¹ Some of the views channeled by Moses and others are already widely accepted in the Anglophone sphere of scholarship. Nonetheless, his ideas still meet resistance in Germany. Moses also points out the differences between the academic and public sphere, and the nature of the debates enacted within them: “[they] operate according to different rules... the scholarly sphere is driven by innovation, the public sphere by stability, because it constitutes a site of collective identity formation.”⁶² All of those layers hinder the dissemination and taint reception of more unconventional Holocaust scholarship to the wider public, especially in Germany.

Another significant controversy concerning post-colonialism and the Holocaust in Germany took place in 2020, when Cameroonian thinker Achille Mbembe was

⁶⁰ Catlin, “A New German Historians’ Debate?”.

⁶¹ Catlin.

⁶² Catlin.

accused of antisemitism for drawing a parallel between the apartheid states of South Africa and Israel. Because of a quote encountered in his article “The Society of Enmity,” Mbembe was charged with relativizing the Holocaust: “The apartheid system in South Africa and the destruction of Jews in Europe... constituted two emblematic manifestations of [a] phantasy [sic] of separation.”⁶³ It is uncertain how this claim could be taken as a relativization of sorts, but the German “guardians” are not strangers to interpretative acrobatics. The charge of antisemitism is, therefore, weaponized to silent dissent from the cultural, institutionalized norm — disciplining Holocaust studies and public discourse alike.

Public history is a versatile field of historical practice. Its domains are open to historians, filmmakers, architects, writers, journalists, and even politicians. Because of its government-sponsored nature, public history is heavily entrenched in hegemonic structures — being utilized, as an informal arm of the state, to construct national identity. This is the case in Germany, where official Holocaust memorialization has been centered on a sense of “Germanhood.” Holocaust memorialization is heavily utilized in the identification of the German nation inside itself, but is also significant to the manner in which the Berlin Republic portrays itself to the world. Furthermore, Holocaust memorialization is considered a “negative pole” of German identity — in contrast with liberal Western values, that work as a “positive pole.” The centrality of Holocaust memory to the Berlin Republic produces a discourse of its own, with an institutionally-sanctioned perspective. For this reason, Scholars are met, with controversy when they try to breach the boundaries imposed by Holocaust exceptionalism. The post-colonial turn of Holocaust studies has not been particularly well received by the German public and institutions. The public’s resistance to post-

⁶³ Rothberg, “The Specters.”

colonial perspectives are owed to the centrality of the Holocaust and its memorialization to national identity in Germany. The post-colonial turn of Holocaust studies has not been particularly well received by the German public and institutions, and this may be owed to the centrality of its memorialization to German identity.

Bibliography

- Barnard, Mark James. "The Past Becomes the Present. German National Identity and Memory since Reunification." PhD Dissertation, University of Salford, 2008.
- Catlin, Jonathon. "A New German Historians' Debate? A Conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg (Part I)." JHI Blog, February 2, 2022. <https://jhiblog.org/2022/02/02/a-new-german-historians-debate-a-conversation-with-sultan-doughan-a-dirk-moses-and-michael-rothberg-part-i/>.
- Giesen, Bernhard. "The Trauma of Perpetrators: The Holocaust as the Traumatic Reference of German National Identity." In *The Trauma of Perpetrators*, edited by Jeffrey Alexander, 112–54. University of California Press, 2004. <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520235946.001.0001>.
- Green, Anna, and Kathleen Troup, eds. "Public History." In *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in History and Theory*, Second edition., 342–73. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The New Conservatism: Cultural Criticism and the Historians' Debate*. Edited by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- Hansen-Glucklich, Jennifer. *Holocaust Memory Reframed: Museums and the Challenges of Representation*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2014.
- Harjes, Kirsten. "Stumbling Stones: Holocaust Memorials, National Identity, and Democratic Inclusion in Berlin." *German Politics and Society* 23, no. 1 (March 1, 2005): 138–51. <https://doi.org/10.3167/104503005780889237>.
- Kampe, Norbert. "Normalizing the Holocaust? The Recent Historian's Debate in the Federal Republic of Germany." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 2, no. 1 (1987): 61–80.
- Levy, Daniel, and Natan Sznaider. "The Institutionalization of Cosmopolitan Morality: The Holocaust and Human Rights." *Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 2 (June 2004): 143–57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1475483042000210685>.
- Moses, A. Dirk. "Holocaust Memory, Exemplary Victims, and Permanent Security Today." In *The Problems of Genocide: Permanent Security and the Language of Transgression*, 477–511. Human Rights in History. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Nolte, Ernst. "The Past That Will Not Pass: A Speech That Could Be Written but Not Delivered." GHDI - Document, June 6, 1986. https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1064.
- Pisanty, Valentina. *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right*. Translated by Alistair McEwan. Memoirs. New York: Centro Primo Levi, 2021.
- Rothberg, Michael. "The Specters of Comparison." *Zeitgeist*, May 2020. <https://www.goethe.de/prj/zei/en/pos/21864662.html>.

Schäfer, Liane. "Memory in Discourse: Approaching Conflicting Constellations of Holocaust and Postcolonial Memory in Germany." *AUC STUDIA TERRITORIALIA* 20, no. 2 (April 15, 2021): 57–82. <https://doi.org/10.14712/23363231.2021.4>.