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“Zionism Über Alles”

The German political establishment has abandoned the belief that the Holocaust gave it a responsibility to humanity and replaced it with a responsibility to Israel alone.

Hans Kundnani March 15, 2024

Former German foreign minister Joschka Fischer puts on a kippah as he enters Yad Vashem's Hall of Remembrance in 2001. (Isaac Harari/Getty Images)

In the five months since October 7, people around the world have looked on in horror as Germany has wielded the memory of the Holocaust to silence criticism of Israel's war on Gaza. The German government's response to the conflict itself has not been all that different from that of the United States: both have increased their supply of weapons to Israel and supported Israel against South Africa in the International Court of Justice. But Germany has gone much further than the United States in persecuting protesters, artists, and intellectuals expressing sympathy for and solidarity with the Palestinian people. It wields its responsibility for a barely distant genocide as a kind of moral authority.

This invocation of the Holocaust to police criticism of Israel is a far cry from the *Erinnerungskultur*, or memory culture, that many international observers once celebrated as an exemplary form of reckoning with the past. Even philosopher Susan Neiman, who five years ago wrote a book celebrating Germany's memory culture as a model for the United States, now thinks it has gone "haywire." Neiman speaks of a particularly German "philosemitic McCarthyism"—though since it has often also been directed against Jews who are critical of Israel, like the *New Yorker* writer Masha Gessen and the artist Candice Breitz, it may be more accurate to call it "Zionist McCarthyism."

Although much attention has rightly focused on these individual cases of persecution, the genesis and evolution of Germany's memory culture is less often discussed. Especially in the United States, many who imagined Germany to be a comparatively progressive country now assume that its Holocaust memory culture has always stipulated unconditional support for Israel. But the reality is more complex—and much stranger. Holocaust memory became entrenched within the Federal Republic's political establishment only in the 1980s. During the last two decades, this memory culture has regressed, as Germany has abandoned the belief that the Holocaust bestowed on it a responsibility to humanity and replaced it with a responsibility to Israel alone.

Much of the blame for this regression belongs to Angela Merkel, who dominated German politics for much of the last twenty years. In the last few decades, however, converging political forces have produced a bizarre alignment between the German center–left and the American and Israeli right. Germany today is led by a coalition government of Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Democrats that, on Israel, seems to be "somewhere to the right of AIPAC," as Neiman writes.

In order to understand this peculiar alignment, it is necessary to revisit the 1960s, when German memory culture emerged out of a New Left that sought to confront the Nazi past, a story I told in my first book, *Utopia or Auschwitz*. These activists were the first Germans to yoke their national identity to the country's responsibility for the Holocaust. Their approach, unlike the myopic hyper–Zionism that prevails in Germany today, was grounded in a universalist understanding of the lessons of the Holocaust, rather than a particularist focus on Israel—even when they were preoccupied with assuaging Germany's own conscience.

The 1968 Generation and Israel

While American baby boomers were the children of the generation that fought the Nazis—the so–called Greatest Generation—their West German counterparts were the children of what they called the "Auschwitz generation." For the 1968 generation, or the *Achtundsechziger*, reckoning with Nazism, and drawing moral lessons from the Holocaust, was both existentially important and extremely personal. As they came of age, they began to challenge the silence about Germany's not–too–distant Nazi past.

West Germany's first chancellor, the Christian Democrat Konrad Adenauer, had effectively suppressed any real engagement with Nazism. Many of those involved in the Nazi regime were rehabilitated and reinstated to their former positions; by the mid-1950s, the elite in the civil service, judiciary, and academia had largely reverted to that of the Third Reich. Many young people growing up in West Germany felt they were "surrounded by Nazis," as one person I interviewed put it. By the mid-1960s, they had begun to see not just personal continuities but structural ones: the Federal Republic was a fascist, or at least "pre-fascist," state. The student movement emerged as a protest against these real and imagined continuities.

On June 2, 1967, the West Berlin police killed a student, Benno Ohnesorg, at a demonstration against the Shah of Iran's visit to the city. Three days later, Israel commenced the Six Day War. Until then, the West German New Left had tended to support Israel, which it saw as a socialist project. But as the student movement radicalized in the days after Ohnesorg's killing, it also turned against Israel, which it now understood to be a bridgehead of American imperialism in the Middle East—a position that was in part a reaction to the hated right-wing media mogul Axel Springer's vehement support for Israel. (During the war, Springer quipped that he had published Israeli newspapers in German for six days.)

Over the next decade, as they became increasingly focused on and critical of Israel, some on the West German left crossed the line from anti-Zionism into antisemitism. This left-wing antisemitism reached its apex in 1976, when two Palestinians and two West Germans who had come out of the Frankfurt student movement hijacked an Air France jet, flew it to Entebbe, Uganda, and separated out the Israeli and Jewish passengers from the others, who were released. (Benjamin Netanyahu's brother Yonatan was killed in the subsequent Israeli raid to free the hostages—an event he cites as the beginning of his political life.)

Entebbe shocked many on the West German New Left, including Joschka Fischer, a leading figure in a Frankfurt group called Revolutionary Struggle. Fischer knew one of the hijackers, Winfried Böse, from Frankfurt's left-wing scene. Fischer later told his biographer that the hijacking, and especially the separation of Jewish and non-Jewish passengers, illustrated to him "how those who emphatically set themselves apart from National Socialism and its crimes had almost compulsively repeated the crimes of the Nazis." In the following years, the failure of the New Left's political project, and in particular its entanglement with terrorism, decisively shattered Fischer's worldview,

forcing him to rethink many of his political positions. The Nazi past and German responsibility for it remained central for him, but the lessons he drew from it changed.

In particular, Fischer gradually moved away from his earlier anti-Zionism. When Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, for example, he defended it against critics within the political party he had just joined, the Greens. Along with many of his former comrades, he also reconciled himself with the Federal Republic, which now appeared to disillusioned activists as a fragile democratic bulwark against fascism. German historian Heinrich August Winkler called this the "posthumous Adenauerian left"—that is, a left that had now embraced many of the positions of Konrad Adenauer, the embodiment of what the student movement had seen as a fascist state.

Auschwitz and German *Staatsräson*

Fischer now became increasingly preoccupied with the question of the implications of the Nazi past for German foreign policy. In 1985, on the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe, Fischer wrote an article for the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* that concluded: "Only German responsibility for Auschwitz can be the essence of West German *Staatsräson*. Everything else comes afterwards." (The somewhat archaic term *Staatsräson* is sometimes wrongly translated as *raison d'être* but is better rendered as *raison d'état*, or something like the national interest.) Fischer sought to deduce a vision for German foreign policy from the principle of responsibility for the Holocaust.

At the time, he believed that this principle meant rejecting the use of military force. But he abandoned that position after the Srebrenica massacre in 1995. Following his friend Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the star of the *evenements* in Paris in May 1968 who had then moved to Frankfurt and set up Revolutionary Struggle, Fischer came to support the idea of military intervention to prevent genocide. Until then only the center-right had advocated this position; the Greens saw it as a pretext for German remilitarization. But if his generation did not use all means to prevent genocide, Fischer asked in an open letter to his party, would they not have failed in the same way their parents had during the Nazi era?

Three years later, when Fischer became foreign minister in the red-green government led by the Social Democrat Gerhard Schröder—another *Achtundsechziger*, though one

who did not share Fischer's preoccupation with the Holocaust—he had the chance to put his ideas into practice. The issue of the implications of Auschwitz for German foreign policy came to a head almost immediately with the question of military intervention to prevent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. The debate was especially intense among Greens, who were committed both to the idea of peace and to responsibility for the Holocaust. They seemed to face a choice between two principles: "Never again war," which led some to oppose the NATO military intervention in Serbia, or at least German participation in it, or "Never again Auschwitz," which led others (like Fischer) to support the intervention and German participation.

This obsession with Auschwitz led to a narcissistic foreign policy debate that often seemed to be less about the region in question—in this case, the Balkans—than about Germany itself. Nevertheless, although Fischer was now more defensive of Israel than he had been before Entebbe, his idea of "Never again Auschwitz" remained a universalist aspiration to prevent any genocide anywhere in the world.

From Universalism to Particularism

Although Fischer won the argument over Kosovo in 1999—four German Tornados joined the NATO bombing of Serbia, with the support of the Greens—a consensus emerged afterward that he had "instrumentalized Auschwitz" for political purposes. When I later interviewed Wolfgang Ischinger, then the state secretary in the Germany foreign ministry and later the director of the Munich Security Conference, he told me that his former boss had "overplayed the argument in order to win domestic support." From then on, Auschwitz was no longer invoked in German foreign policy debates as it had been in the 1990s.

There was exception, however, for Israel. German support for Israel dated back to Adenauer, who had agreed to pay reparations in 1952 and began to supply the country with weapons. And when invoking Auschwitz in foreign policy debates fell out of favor, some on the right began using the term *Staatsräson,* which Fischer had revived in his 1985 article, to give a harder edge to Germany's responsibility to Israel. As journalist Patrick Bahners wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 2002, "it is German *Staatsräson* that Hitler cannot be allowed to win posthumously." The Jewish people were still surrounded by enemies—and it was as much in the German national

interest that these enemies did not triumph as it was to prevent a Nazi takeover of Germany itself.

The red–green government came to an end in 2005, when Merkel took over as German chancellor—a position in which she would remain for the next sixteen years. In a speech to the Knesset three years after taking office—the first by a German chancellor—she claimed that all of her predecessors had been aware of Germany's particular historic responsibility for Israel's security. "This historic responsibility is part of the *Staatsräson* of my country," she declared.

Merkel's speech seems to have been influenced by Rudolf Dreßler, Germany's ambassador to Israel from 2000 to 2005, who in a 2005 essay wrote that "a secure existence for Israel is in the German national interest and thus part of our *Staatsräson*." Although the term had originally come from Fischer, according to recent reporting by the *Spiegel*, Merkel's staff thought it sounded like hard-headed "Christian Democrat language." It was also typical of Merkel in another sense: known for a "there is no alternative" approach to politics, she sought to take German policy toward Israel out of the space of democratic contestation and make a commitment to Israeli security "an unquestionable, no-alternative principle," as historian Jürgen Zimmerer has put it.

Merkel succeeded: commitment to Israel as a principle of German *Staatsräson* has become consensus across the political spectrum. In 2021, the new coalition government of Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Democrats reached a carefully negotiated agreement that included a familiar line: "For us the security of Israel is *Staatsräson*." Visiting Israel ten days after the October 7 attacks—by which time Israel had already dropped thousands of bombs on Gaza—Chancellor Olaf Scholz repeated the declaration. (His national security adviser, Jens Plötner, worked in the German embassy in Israel while Dreßler was ambassador.)

Since Merkel left office, there has been a growing criticism of her foreign policy legacy—especially with respect to China and Russia, where she prioritized economic interests over security. Since October 7, it has become abundantly clear that Merkel also left behind a disastrous legacy for German policy toward Israel. In 2009, the year after she delivered the Knesset speech, Netanyahu returned to power for the second time—and since then Israel has moved further and further to the right. Germany now

finds itself completely unable, or unwilling, to criticize Israel even as it expels and exterminates the population of Gaza.

A Hyper-Zionist Germany

In the 2010s, I wondered whether declining domestic public support might lead to a weakening of Germany's commitment to Israel. A generational shift was taking place as the *Achtundsechziger*, for whom the Nazi past was existential and personal, were succeeded by Germans with a more distant and indifferent attitude to it. (An influential book, *Opa war kein Nazi*—"Grandpa wasn't a Nazi"—illustrated how members of this generation could not imagine that their grandparents could have participated in atrocities.) Moreover, German society was also becoming more diverse, and immigrants have their own sense of the lessons of the Nazi past.

To my surprise, what has emerged in the last decade is not so much a post-Zionist Germany as a hyper-Zionist Germany. Even as the collective memory of the Holocaust is complicated by generational and demographic change, German elites have doubled down on their commitment to Israel. In fact, part of the reason they seem to have done so is that they fear their understanding of the lessons of the Nazi past is no longer widely shared, and they want to make it nonnegotiable before it is too late.

Joschka Fischer's successors in the Green Party have not only acceded to the shift from a universalist understanding of the lessons of the Nazi past to a particularist one, but have become its most aggressive defenders. Leading Green politicians, such as foreign minister Annalena Baerbock and economics minister Robert Habeck, are among the staunchest supporters of Israel and the harshest critics of anti-Zionist and pro-Palestine voices. Unlike American conservatives, however, they see their unconditional support for Israel as an expression of anti-Nazism—in other words, as a progressive position. Fischer is remembered for his clash with American neoconservatives in the run-up to the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which he opposed. But today, some Greens are closer to neoconservatives than to the left.

The Springer media corporation's stance on Israel has effectively become the position of the entire German political establishment—including the successors of the New Leftists who were radicalized by Springer's support for Israel in 1967. More

recently, Springer has led a number of the witch hunts against critics of Israel, such as Nemi El-Hassan, a Palestinian-German journalist who was ultimately dropped by the German public broadcaster ZDF. The company's employees are required to sign a declaration of support for Israel. In one German state, the Christian Democrats have made a similar commitment to Israel a requirement for citizenship, and other states are proposing to do the same—as if all German citizens were now Springer employees.

Last year, *Die Zeit* published a shocking investigative report based on leaked emails from Springer CEO Mathias Döpfner. In one of the emails, Döpfner gives a summary of his political beliefs, which ends with an extraordinary and chilling phrase that also aptly describes the political consensus that has emerged in Germany in the last few decades: "Zionism über alles."

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