



ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjgr20>

Introduction

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To cite this article: Ulrike Capdepón & A. Dirk Moses (2021) Introduction, Journal of Genocide Research, 23:3, 371-373, DOI: [10.1080/14623528.2020.1847851](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2020.1847851)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2020.1847851>



Published online: 04 Dec 2020.



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FORUM: THE ACHILLE MBEMBE CONTROVERSY AND THE GERMAN DEBATE ABOUT ANTISEMITISM, ISRAEL, AND THE HOLOCAUST



Introduction

In the northern hemisphere spring and summer of 2020, Germany hosted its latest controversy about the Nazi past: the “Mbembe debate” regarding the accusation that the African philosopher, Achille Mbembe, is an antisemite because he allegedly supports the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement and describes Israel as an illegitimate colonial entity akin to Apartheid South Africa. He had been invited to address the Ruhrtriennale German international arts’ festival which was subject to intense political pressure to disinvite him. This case differs from previous controversies about the Nazi past by linking discourses that had otherwise only partially been connected: the Holocaust, Israel, Zionism, antisemitism, Apartheid, and Postcolonial Studies.

Some debates had raised many of the same issues in the past. Historians have been arguing for decades about the colonial origins of the Holocaust.¹

And then, as now, smearing those who drew such links as antisemitic was the order of the day. These attempts did not make the German mainstream, however, in part because respectable, white, male professors were the targets, in part because Israel was not at issue.² But when an African scholar added the taboo ingredient of Israel to this continuity debate all hell broke loose, exhibiting what one of us calls “anxieties in Holocaust and Genocide Studies.”³

The counter-attacks defending Mbembe were not long in coming. A group of Jewish intellectuals and artists supported him and called for the removal of his accuser, the Federal Commissioner for the Fight Against Antisemitism, Felix Klein.⁴ Another open letter warned against partisan accusations of antisemitism, and defended historical comparison as a necessary

¹ The current debate has proceeded as if this discussion never took place. More recent literature making these links are Jürgen Zimmerer, “Colonialism and the Holocaust: Towards an Archaeology of Genocide,” in *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, ed. A. Dirk Moses (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004); Zimmerer, *From Windhoek to Auschwitz? On the Relationship Between Colonialism and the Holocaust* (London: Routledge, 2015); Reinhart Kössler, “From Genocide to Holocaust? Structural Parallels and Discursive Continuities,” *Africa Spectrum* 40, no. 2 (2005): 309–17; and A. Dirk Moses, ed., *Empire, Colony, Genocide: Conquest, Occupation and Subaltern Resistance in World History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008). Questioning the links are, among others, Birthe Kundrus, “Kontinuitäten, Parallelen, Rezeptionen: Überlegungen zur ‘Kolonialisierung’ des Nationalsozialismus,” *Werkstattgeschichte*, no. 43 (2006); Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, “The Pre-History of the Holocaust? The Sonderweg and Historikerstreit Debates and the Abject Colonial Past,” *Central European History* 41, no. 3 (2008): 477–503; Robert Gerwarth and Stephan Malinowski, “Hannah Arendt’s Ghosts: Reflections on the Disputable Path from Windhoek to Auschwitz,” *Central European History* 42, no. 2 (2009): 279–300; and Thomas Kühne, “Colonialism and the Holocaust: Continuities, Causations, and Complexities,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 15, no. 3 (2013): 339–63.

² Clemens Heni, “Historian Jürgen Zimmerer Promotes Post-Colonial Antisemitism,” *Times of Israel*, 14 October 2018, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/historian-jurgen-zimmerer-promotes-post-colonial-antisemitism/>; Heni, “StandWithUs to Distort History?” *Times of Israel*, 26 April 2016, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/standwithus-to-distort-history/>

³ A. Dirk Moses, “Anxieties in Holocaust and Genocide Studies,” in *Probing the Ethics of Holocaust Culture*, ed. Claudio Fogu, Wulf Kansteiner, and Todd Presner (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 332–54, 474–83. On the anxiety among German intellectuals about “taking a stand about Israel,” see the observation of the Israeli philosopher, Omri Boehm, “The German Silence on Israel, and its Cost,” *New York Times*, 9 March 2015.

⁴ Call to Federal Minister Horst Seehofer on 30 April 2020: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/grroe59qdd92q2s/Aufruf%20an%20Bundesminister%20Seehofer.pdf?dl=0>

academic tool.⁵ In a dramatic public intervention, 700 African artists and intellectuals rejected the antisemitism accusations against Mbembe as not only patronizing but also as unfounded: it was “an unacceptable political instrumentalization of a horrible human catastrophe” that damaged the right to “criticism, freedom of thought and opinion, academic and artistic freedom, and freedom of conscience.”⁶

The back and forth between attackers and defenders continued through 2020 without resolution, but raised the very issues that we study in this journal: how to analyse mass violence and its legacy – whether regarding genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes – in comparative perspective while retaining the specificity of each case. Doing so when the Holocaust is in play adds a fraught element in view of its much-proclaimed uniqueness, about which this journal has published a number of articles over the years.⁷ The German debate contained all these ingredients, and added other dimensions on which we also publish: the relationship between racism and colonialism to genocide and the Holocaust. Holocaust memory, yet another topic about which authors in this journal write, is obviously central in Germany.

We decided to organise a forum on the Mbembe debate for two reasons. First, we believe the quality of the debate is worthy of academic reflection. German newspapers dedicate much more space for discussion of the public meaning of history than their Anglophone counterparts, and academic experts and intellectuals are happy to fill it with thoughtful essays. The sustained nature of the discussion also means that arguments advanced one month are engaged in the next one, and so on, meaning a genuine, if generally unresolved discussion unfolds. That was certainly the case in the Mbembe affair. Second, because it took place largely in German, we wanted to make it accessible to our international readership. For that reason, three of the forum contributions are by prominent authors who wrote much-discussed pieces in the German press, even though some of them are based abroad. A feature of the German public sphere is its openness to scholars and intellectuals in North America, Great Britain, and Israel in particular.

This vaunted cosmopolitanism has strict limits, however. Notwithstanding the above-mentioned open letter, voices from African and Arab intellectuals and scholars were scarcely heard in this debate.⁸ More generally, the glaring absence of perspectives from Postcolonial Studies and Palestinian experiences is impossible to ignore. Equally apparent is that the typical profile of authors invited to write for German newspapers and journals is the senior, white, mostly male academic and intellectual. So we invited two younger scholars to redress these structural imbalances in the German public sphere. It is a sad commentary on the current state of affairs there that one of them insisted their contribution appear anonymously for fear of career-threatening retribution. The treatment of Mbembe gives them good reason, some might think.

All this takes place while the German government continues to dispute whether genocide was committed by Imperial German forces in Namibia in 1904–1905, and quibbles about paying reparations the victims’ descendants. Combined with the growing colonial nostalgia in sections of the population, people of colour in the country wonder whether it has really

⁵ Aufruf Solidarität mit Achille Mbembe [Call to Solidarity with Achille Mbembe], 1 May 2020: <http://www.ipk-bonn.de/gesellschaft/news/2020050900.html>

⁶ Offener Brief afrikanischer Intellektueller, Schriftsteller-, und KünstlerInnen [Open Letter from African Intellectuals, Writers, and Artists] on 18 May 2020: https://www.afrieurotext.at/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Brief-von-Achille-Mbembe-an-die-dt-Bundeskanzlerin-Frau-Angela-Merkel_%c3%9cbersetzung_18.05.2020.pdf

⁷ A. Dirk Moses, “The Canadian Museum for Human Rights: the ‘Uniqueness of the Holocaust’ and the Question of Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 14, no. 2 (2012): 215–38; Daniel Blatman, “Holocaust Scholarship: Toward a Post-Uniqueness Era,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 17, no. 1 (2015): 21–43.

⁸ See the plea by Sonja Hegasy, “Antisemitismus-Debatte: (Post-)migrantische Stimmen zulassen,” *Dis:Orient*, 16 July 2020, <https://www.disorient.de/magazin/antisemitismus-debatte-post-migrantische-stimmen-zulassen>

confronted its colonial-racist past.⁹ In an irony that requires further reflection, the German culture of “coming to terms with the Nazi past” has led to a situation in which persons can jeopardize their employment and face permanent stigmatization for questioning the terms of the German “coming to terms with the Nazi past.” Rather than liberalize public discussion by promoting toleration and diversity, it has produced a generalized climate of suspicion that is devastating for public and intellectual opinion builders, especially people of colour.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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⁹ Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland Bund, <http://isdonline.de>; Decolonial Objections Against the Humboldt Forum, <http://www.africavenir.org/projects/projects-germany/decolonial-objections-against-the-humboldt-forum.html>; Alexander Wells, “Historian Jürgen Zimmerer on Germany’s Other Genocide,” *Exberliner*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.exberliner.com/features/history/j%C3%BCrgen-zimmerer-interview/>