

The German Campaign against Cultural Freedom: Documenta 15 in Context

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The controversy about Documenta 15 consumed the German public sphere throughout 2022 and continued into 2023. Hardly a day passed without a salacious newspaper article, television report, or social media storm about the art exhibition. Beginning six months before Documenta opened in June 2022, the fevered coverage proclaimed the discovery of the German media's favorite topic: an antisemitism scandal. Although Documenta 15 was not shut down, as critics had demanded, to a great extent the campaign against it succeeded in crystallizing new tropes in German public discourse: "post-colonial antisemitism" and "antisemitism of all types," meaning "Israel-related antisemitism" and "hatred of Israel." The mention of "hatred" was designed to link antisemitism (hatred of Jews) to anti-Zionism (alleged hatred of the State of Israel).¹ The purpose of this semantic stretching is twofold. The first is to insinuate that antisemitism is inherent in the Palestine solidarity widespread in the Global South. In this way, protest against the Israeli occupation is rendered as "hatred" rather than as legitimate political expression. The second is to decry and crush the supposed infiltration of Global South perspectives into Germany via the art and museum scenes and post-colonial academics.²

Such anti-antisemitism campaigns, which are not limited to Germany, are part of the Israeli state's project to define anti-Zionism as antisemitism. The debate about British universities adopting a particular definition of *antisemitism* is a case in point.³ In Britain, the issue is linked to a broader debate about the British Empire and the status of coloniality, because Israel is a child of British imperialism and itself a colonizing entity. The functional equivalent of "Western Civilization" fetishized by North American conservatives, the British Empire's reputation, whether as a force for historical good or evil, is the apple of discord. In the United States, the bone of contention is critical race theory (CRT) and the increasingly successful efforts of Republican-governed states to expunge the racial history of the country from educational curricula at all levels. What CRT is in the United States, "postcolonialism"—the shorthand for postcolonial and decolonial theory—is to German liberals and conservatives: a mortal danger to Eurocentric narratives and perspectives. Documenta 15 became a casualty of this culture war in Germany, where the State of Israel is viewed as an outpost of German-Jewish culture in the "orient."

The German Context

The cloud of antisemitism deliberately hung over Documenta 15 was the culmination of serial campaigns that reflect a long-term tendency. The same debate about alleged antisemitism in Germany's intellectual and cultural sectors has been going on for over a decade. In 2012, for example, the philosopher Judith Butler was accused of supporting Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement when the city of Frankfurt awarded her the prestigious Adorno Prize.⁴ The constellation of actors arrayed against Butler repeated the pattern discernible three years before when a Federal Cross of Merit was bestowed on the Israeli-German lawyer Felicia Langer. For her criticism of the Israeli occupation and security politics, American-Jewish, German-Jewish, and Israeli organizations, prominent German-Jewish figures, along with non-Jewish German politicians and journalists, accused her of antisemitism and supporting terrorism.⁵

Although the context differed, this constellation and denunciatory rhetoric echoed the largely forgotten outcry in West Germany against Hannah Arendt for writing *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in 1963.⁶ For their part, Jewish organizations and some Jewish commentators maintain that German politicians and organizations invite or bestow honors on “fringe” anti-Israel Jewish people who express the antisemitism that Germans want to hear.⁷ That assertion is impossible to prove. Certain, though, is that accomplished Jewish women are often such “fringe” targets, as the cases of the philosopher Susan Neiman (director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam), the writer Eva Menasse, and the publicist Emily Dische-Becker in 2021 and 2022 indicate. The first two were attacked in major German newspapers for defending the right to criticize Israeli policies as legitimate (i.e., non-antisemitic) political speech, while Dische-Becker was denounced for her role in advising Documenta 15 about antisemitism accusations. With good reason and some irony, Neiman pointed out that, while Arendt and Albert Einstein now enjoy saintlike status in Germany, they would be canceled if their critical views about Israel were known.⁸

The campaigns against Langer and Butler failed, in part because prominent German-Jewish intellectuals defended, in the name of Jewish pluralism, their right to speak.⁹ But virtually identical campaigns have ruined many careers since then. Throughout 2021 and 2022, Germans of Arab and African descent were dismissed from public employment or disinvited from conferences and cultural meetings because of their Palestine solidarity and “BDS proximity” (*Nähe*), a new term reminiscent of the “fellow traveler” designation used in the infamous anticommunist crusades of the 1950s.¹⁰

Foreigners, if invited to Germany, were not immune either. Prominent writers had their German literary prizes revoked when it was discovered that they had signed a BDS declaration.¹¹ No less than a former International Criminal Court justice was also not immune: in September 2022, the Berlin mayor

publicly distanced herself from the award of a local peace prize to South African jurist Navanethem Pillay because of Pillay's participation in a United Nations human rights report critical of Israeli settlement policies, scuttling the event after a campaign in the tabloid press.¹² Even Jewish and Israeli artists living in Germany are subject to this treatment if they express criticism of Israel and/or support of BDS.¹³ If anything, the sustained and concerted efforts to further control the limited autonomy of artistic and cultural institutions have intensified and become more effective.

Two mechanisms are employed to this end. The first is the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) "working definition of antisemitism." The German cabinet duly approved it for use by the federal government in September 2017, after which the notion of "Israel-related antisemitism" proliferated in public discourse. The second instrument is the anti-BDS motion passed by the German Parliament in 2019, which declares the Palestinian civil society movement to be anti-semitic and interdicts government support of "BDS-proximate" artists and writers.¹⁴ That the promotion of the IHRA definition and combatting BDS are priorities of Israeli foreign policy is noted by the Israeli historian Omer Bartov:

Israel does use the Holocaust as international cover against all foreign criticism of Israeli policies, and presents the rest of the world as having been complicit in the genocide of Jews by commission or omission. Indeed, this became a major thrust of Israeli foreign policy under the Netanyahu administration, with dire effect, not least in Germany.¹⁵

Although printed in a major German newspaper, Bartov's warning has been studiously ignored, like others before it.

The reason may be that these two mechanisms are invoked by the Commissioners for Jewish Life in Germany and the Fight against Antisemitism (henceforth: antisemitism commissioners), established at the federal level in 2018 and now active in all layers of government across the country. Comprising members who are not Jewish (except for one recent convert), commissioners have called for individuals, including progressive Jewish voices, to be censured and censored if they fall foul of the commissioners' expansive definition of antisemitism, which the American Bar Association and American Civil Liberties Union, among other organizations, have rejected for its infringement of free speech and expression.¹⁶ In their work, the commissioners are supported by the Federal Association of Departments for Research and Information on Antisemitism (Recherche- und Informationsstelle Antisemitismus; RIAS), which gathers statistics about antisemitism on the basis of the IHRA definition.¹⁷

The commissioners and RIAS are not intrinsically problematic, because antisemitism exists in Germany, as in other countries.¹⁸ The issue is that they deploy a partisan definition of antisemitism and thus identify the main source of antisemitism as "imported" by nonwhite migrants and refugees, and expressed

in the form of Palestine solidarity (“BDS proximity”). Consequently, the commissioners tend to police migrants’ and refugees’ speech rather than interdict the violent plots of white Germans, who are responsible for the vast majority of antisemitic incidents. The far-right penetration of the German police and military is also a lesser priority for authorities than, say, an art exhibition like Documenta.¹⁹

This issue is particularly fraught and freighted in Germany for three reasons. First, the country’s political class has made Holocaust memory and support of the Jewish community in Germany central to its international public reputation.²⁰ That understandable position has been extended to unwavering support for the State of Israel as Germany’s “reason of state” (*Staatsräson*). Taken together, these positions have led to acute sensitivity to antisemitism and anti-Israel accusations. The pressure on politicians and on museum, art festival, and conference directors to respond to the antisemitism commissioners by canceling events and withdrawing invitations is accordingly intense. Few have what Germans call *Zivilcourage* (standing on principle at personal risk) to resist. Academics in Germany are also state officials (unlike in the Anglosphere), meaning that the pressure to adhere to the state’s definition of antisemitism is experienced as mandatory.

Second, the preponderant role of state authorities at all levels—municipal, provincial, and national—in funding museums, galleries, exhibitions, political foundations, and cultural institutions like the Goethe Institute means the potential for political interference in culture is an ever-present threat—and reality, as we saw in the cancelations of 2021 and 2022. Third, Germany’s handful of blue-chip newspapers, with their substantial culture sections (the *feuilletons*), enables a relatively small number of journalists and social media-savvy politicians to mobilize and apply public pressure. The campaign against Documenta 15 also reveals how social media, the press, and politics can interact to generate a campaign and shape public opinion based on speculation and insinuation.

To sound the alarm about such creeping censorship, leaders of German and cultural institutions, like Neiman, founded the Initiative GG 5.3 Weltoffenheit in December 2020. Their declaration explains the title: “The name is a reference to Article 5, Paragraph 3 of Germany’s Basic Law, which guarantees freedom of the arts and sciences.”²¹ Although opponents of BDS, they criticized the parliamentary resolution as a counterboycott that tied their hands in inviting local and foreign artists, intellectuals, and academics. The trigger was the unseemly public excoriation earlier that year of the Cameroonian social theorist Achille Mbembe upon his invitation to a German cultural festival. Israel-Palestine is not a focus of his work, but anti-antisemitism sleuths dug up the few critical lines he had written on the subject to condemn him as a foremost postcolonial antisemite. The “Mbembe debate” also cemented the impression that the cultural sector offered figures like him a local platform—which

needed to be stopped.²² As the journalist Stephan Detjen notes of the agitation against Mbembe, its aim was nothing less than the “intellectual isolation of Germany as political program.”²³

The stage was thus set for the campaign against Documenta 15, Germany’s premier and most lavishly funded international art exhibition. Curated by ruangrupa, a collective from Indonesia, a Muslim-majority nation without diplomatic relations with Israel, and promising to display art largely from the Global South in the spirit of anti-imperial solidarity, Documenta 15 represented a potential threat to the cultural and intellectual settings desired by German authorities and Israel advocates in the media and civil society. The unfolding of the scandal has been well documented and analyzed. This article does not reconstruct the scandal in full detail, instead highlighting the campaign’s lowlights and implications for artistic freedom.²⁴

The Anti-Documenta Campaign Begins

In January 2022, a self-proclaimed and seemingly one-person “Alliance against Anti-Semitism Kassel” warned on Facebook that anti-Israel art might be displayed at Documenta when it opened in June. It was then picked up by blogs run by so-called *antideutscher* (anti-German) leftists, who are fervent supporters of Israel, opponents of the Left’s anti-imperialism, and believers in Holocaust uniqueness.²⁵ Although not of the Left, the journalists who had pursued Mbembe shared the *antideutscher* antipathy to Global South politics and the scholarship embodied by the South Africa–based theorist. Themselves often graduates of art and literature departments, they found their Eurocentric training was increasingly outmoded in the art and academic worlds and so secured work in journalism, where they could police public speech.²⁶ The fact that Documenta 15 would showcase Global South experiences and possibly the crimes of colonialism and the West needed to be opposed.²⁷ They soon made a mainstream story of fringe speculations about Documenta 15; namely, that it was boycotting Israeli-Jewish artists, that the Palestinian collective The Question of Funding stemmed from a cultural center named after a pro-Nazi Palestinian nationalist of the 1930s, and that the Documentas had been founded by a Nazi to whitewash German culture after the war, implying that Indonesian Muslims were continuing an antisemitic tradition.²⁸

Needless to say, the situation was more complicated. Indigenous artists and collectives were invited as a general rule, meaning, for example, that the only Australian at Documenta was the Indigenous artist Richard Bell. No consternation about the absence of white Australian artists was expressed in Germany.²⁹ Accordingly, Palestinian artists were also invited, representing the Global South perspective but thereby breaking the German taboo about framing Israel as a colonial state, which is common in most of the world. Even so, no ban had been issued against Jewish artists or Israelis as such. Ruangrupa disavowed a boycott of Israeli and Jewish artists, noting that Israeli-Jewish artists were exhibiting at Documenta 15 but did not wish to

be identified.³⁰ Similarly, the misinformation about the Palestinian art center was soon cleared up after basic research.³¹

A Brazilian-Jewish art collective also felt compelled to correct the record when a major German newspaper alleged that it had been disinvited because of its Jewish identity. Ironically, the anti-antisemitism campaign against Documenta reminded the collective of antisemitism:

The same strategies that sustained anti-Semitism for decades are being used in public debate to condemn ruangrupa. Instead of open conversations, public debate is fed by denunciations and rumors. Instead of looking at Documenta 15 as a complex body of works, dynamics, and responsibilities, the artistic team and the artists are living under threats, intimidation, and censorship (the creation of a committee being a complex issue).³²

Nonetheless, by the time Documenta 15 opened, a full-scale public controversy had been generated solely by these allegations. Documenta's relations with Jewish communities lay in tatters once a planned dialogue of Documenta 15 participants and supporters with Jewish academics and Jewish community representatives was called off after the leader of the Central Council of Jews, Josef Schuster, objected to the coupling of antisemitism and racism as themes in the dialogue program.³³ Following suit, the federal president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, declared that he would not visit the exhibition, repeating the critics' inaccurate claims about the boycott of Jewish and Israeli artists.³⁴

For their part, Documenta's supporters pointed out the contrived nature of the scandal and decried the ransacking of the Palestinian artists' art space by seemingly racially motivated vandals. The real problem was not antisemitism, they insisted, but German racism against "non"-Western artists whose work had not yet been displayed. Jewish liberals who were not necessarily supporters of Documenta were disturbed by the relentless campaign against an unopened exhibition. Keep an open mind and see for yourself when it commences, they said.³⁵

A collective holding of breath greeted the opening of Documenta 15 on June 18, 2022. What was to follow could have been predicted from events the night before, when an unknown activist projected scurrilous slogans in Gothic script onto buildings, claiming Documenta 15 would be akin to a fictional Nazi Documenta held in 1933. Certainly, that is what critics were expecting. Unfortunately, the large banner created by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi, *People's Justice*, provided them with a flagrant example. Painted in 2002 and erected in the prominent Friedrichsplatz in central Kassel, the banner depicts a popular tribunal that indicted the powers that had supported the murderous Suharto regime: "the banner attempts to expose the complex power relationships that are at play behind these injustices and the erasure of public memory surrounding the Indonesian genocide in 1965, where more than 500,000 people were murdered," Taring Padi explained.³⁶

The powers were drawn as cartoon-like characters and included a series of figures from foreign security services, among them the Israeli Mossad (as a pig), the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation, the British MI5, and, satirically, “007.” Depicting Mossad in this way provoked the charge of antisemitism, although an American soldier was likewise represented as a pig in a different part of the banner.³⁷ Unmistakably antisemitic was a figure of an ultraorthodox Jewish man with razor teeth whose hat was adorned by the Nazi SS symbol, implying that a fantasized international Jewish power was fascistic and had participated in the oppression of ordinary Indonesians via the Suharto dictatorship.³⁸

No one had expected such flagrantly antisemitic imagery to appear in the Indonesians’ art—the focus had been the Palestinian artists. Germans—and especially German Jews—were understandably shocked. Now the critics could say that their predictions had been fulfilled: “postcolonial antisemitism” appeared when cultural production was entrusted to people of color from the Global South. The banner was taken down within days with the consent of ruangrupa, which, along with Taring Padi, apologized for the image although disavowing any antisemitic intent; these images had different meanings in Indonesia, they insisted. Moreover, they continued, the inclusion of demonic attributes like fangs and red eyes was an Indonesian artistic practice with roots in wayang puppet traditions, and antisemitic imagery was imported to the Dutch East Indies by the Dutch and Germans over a century before.³⁹

German critics—and the Israeli embassy, which talked of Nazi-like propaganda—were unconvinced and intensified their campaign. German politicians now also joined the chorus of condemnation of the banner and the organizers—both ruangrupa and the German authorities who had commissioned them to curate the event—calling for resignations and vowing to conduct a thorough investigation. The German federal parliamentary Committee for Culture and Media quickly held a session on the scandal in July 2022, and a Jewish community leader called for a “self-cleansing” process in the art scene.⁴⁰ A few months later, in September, the interior ministers of the German federal states jointly proclaimed their determination to institute further measures against “antisemitism and anti-Israel agitation” (*Hetze*).⁴¹ Even if not, strictly speaking, antisemitism, “anti-Israeli agitation” violated the German *Staatsräson* and could not be tolerated. That is why the Berlin police banned public meetings to commemorate the Palestinian Nakba in May 2022, violating freedom of speech and assembly.⁴²

Documenta organizers were now on the back foot. Their supporters felt betrayed by ruangrupa. Because of the collective’s negligence in failing to check Taring Padi’s banner when everyone understood the consequences of confirmed antisemitism accusations, they had inadvertently handed a powerful weapon to those seeking to crack down on the German art scene. Had attention been focused on the Palestinian artists,

the campaign against Documenta would have been conducted on the terrain of the contested IHRA definition. No longer. Now it was publicly more challenging to separate antisemitism and any criticisms of the Israeli occupation.

The rest of Documenta was subsequently consumed by rolling accusations against other Taring Padi pieces and the Palestinian artists. They were rebutted by careful contextualization, and police investigations about incitement were dropped for lack of evidence, indicating that Documenta could have more robustly defended itself but for *People's Justice*. For example, the large noses in a Taring Padi drawing were not of Jews but of traditional wayang figures; an alarmist newspaper article was duly corrected.⁴³ In a series of articles, the Israel-born historian and journalist Joseph Croitoru set the record straight on misinterpretations of The Question of Funding and images by Arab artists subject to antisemitism accusations.⁴⁴

His exacting work may have been a reason why a scientific advisory panel (Gremium zur fachwissenschaftlichen Begleitung) did not highlight the *Guernica Gaza* series of paintings by the Palestinian artist Mohammed al-Hawajri in its interim report in September 2022. The panel had been established by Documenta and local authorities in late July to investigate allegations of antisemitism at Documenta 15, to investigate how those allegations were handled, and to make recommendations on the subject for future Documentas. While it included no experts on Arab art, two of its members *were* explicit proponents of the IHRA definition of antisemitism with close ties to the federal antisemitism commissioner and to the Central Council of Jews in Germany.⁴⁵

Of the thousands of artworks and displays at Documenta, the interim report (actually a press release) singles out only one, recommending its removal: Tokyo Reels, a Japanese-Palestinian solidarity film project that, from the 1960s to the 1980s, had produced a series of films that the scientific advisory panel accused of inciting anti-Israel hatred. The Reels' defenders noted that, while undoubtedly militant, the films were accompanied by curatorial commentary that clearly identified them as historical artifacts. They were hardly a source of terrorist recruitment, as alleged.⁴⁶ Other commentators likewise challenged the panel's approach, regarding it as a misguided witch hunt while noting that three of its members had not signed the press release.⁴⁷ Two of these—Elsa Clavé and Facil Tesfaye, specialists on Southeast Asian art and African studies, respectively—then withdrew from the panel after complaining that it was ignoring postcolonial perspectives. They seem to have sensed that a predetermined conclusion had been reached and thus decided to distance themselves from a flawed, politically motivated process. The panel now possessed no expertise on the contexts in which the incriminated art was produced.

An intrepid journalist also ascertained that one of the panel members directed a museum that displayed historical German

antisemitic images. Why were German museums not subject to the same scrutiny, indeed public commotion, as Documenta, the journalist asked?⁴⁸ To top it off, on the eve of Documenta, the German Court of Justice ruled that a church in Wittenberg where Martin Luther had preached antisemitic sermons could retain a seven-hundred-year-old antisemitic sculpture of a “Jews’ sow” (*Judensau*). Although literally set in stone, unlike the transient and newly created images at Documenta, the sculpture did not, the judge ruled, incite hatred of Jewish people because a sign nearby mentioned the Holocaust.⁴⁹

The Official Reports

By this point it was clear that highlighting these blind spots would not change the direction of discussions. In this context, Federal Minister of State for Culture and the Media Claudia Roth played a clever game by criticizing Documenta’s management while insisting on artistic freedom and assuring Germans that “people from the Global South are not necessarily antisemitic.”⁵⁰ That she had not voted for the anti-BDS motion was noted by her critics, who called for her resignation, but she stood firm while making tactical concessions. To assuage critics, she signaled greater government control of future Documentas, even foreshadowing the involvement of the German-Jewish community in screening the next iteration.⁵¹ She also commissioned a legal opinion (*Gutachten*) by the jurist Christoph Möllers on artistic freedom, the law, and state responsibility to clarify the question of artistic censorship. Completed in October 2022 but released only in late January 2023, Möllers’s report was greeted by Roth as providing transparent guidelines on the subject.⁵² In exacting detail, Möllers elaborates the conflicting duties of the state in interdicting antisemitism and racism while guaranteeing artistic freedom, as set out in the Basic Law. His main point, which reflects previous court rulings, is that the state’s ability to censor artistic production should be limited even if that production is publicly funded. The right of freedom of expression, even antisemitic speech, is guaranteed: scandals are the price of a free society. Accordingly, the parliamentary anti-BDS motion has no legal standing, and suspicions of “BDS proximity” cannot be a reason to withhold access to public facilities.⁵³ Overall, the report can be regarded as a tool against the use of the IHRA definition and anti-BDS motion to “cleanse” the artistic sector.

However, Möllers was also a member of the scientific advisory panel, which issued its 133-page report in early February 2023. If his legal opinion is the theory, the report is the practice, and it does not augur well for artistic freedom. While space limitations preclude an exhaustive analysis of its contents, a few remarks can be made. The report confirms suspicions that it would indict art that depicts violence against Palestinian civilians as “anti-Israeli” and thus fall foul of the IHRA working definition of antisemitism—precisely as its critics had feared.

Even then, only three cases (in addition to Taring Padi) were

identified: Tokyo Reels, *Guernica Gaza*, and images and maps in the project Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie.⁵⁴ Lacking a member who could have written as an expert about the contexts of their production and having lost its only two specialists on Asian and African art, the panel might reasonably have been expected to draw on the publications of Croitoru and Indonesian scholars who had written on the criticized artworks.⁵⁵ It did not. Instead, the report mechanically applies a checklist about antisemitic visual codes based on partisan definitions of antisemitism.⁵⁶ For example, the report's discussion of the *Guernica Gaza* series of pictures routinely conflates Jews and Israelis and ultimately condemns the series for a "one-sided" version of the conflict because Israelis are depicted as aggressors against innocent Palestinians. The conflict is not one-sided, the report explains, because the terrorist group Hamas governs Gaza and fires missiles at Israel. So much for context. Missing is the fact that over 60 percent of Gazans are refugees from what is now the State of Israel and the fact that massive and disproportionate violence is used against Gaza, where many thousands of civilians have been killed by Israeli ordnance. Similarly, in indicting the drawings and maps in the Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie collection for delegitimizing Israel by depicting the ethnic cleansing of the Nakba and imagining Palestine according to the borders of the British Mandate, the report also ignores the now widely known massacres, rapes, and looting committed by Israeli forces.⁵⁷ Throughout, the report evinces a striking lack of interest in Palestinian sensibilities because the German *Staatsräson* is Israel's security, which, according to Israeli authorities, means the permanent subjugation of Palestinians. Accordingly, the German *Staatsräson* is effectively the same.⁵⁸

The report implies as much by setting much store on what it refers to as the sensibilities of German Jews. That is understandable, but the report goes further, giving the impression of writing for "many Jews" in Germany and for the Central Council of Jews in Germany. Indeed, the report claims to speak for a single "Jewish perspective."⁵⁹ It concludes critically that the Documenta management disregarded these Jewish sensibilities and this perspective. In view of increasing antisemitic violence, the management's conduct is said to be a "slap in the face" to German Jews, although the report does not mention that virtually all of the cited attacks were committed by white Christian Germans.⁶⁰ However, because a scandal like the Taring Padi banner cannot recur, the report recommends measures to ensure that complaints about artworks, even if they are not illegal, can be heard—and indeed none of the Documenta artworks broke laws about disturbing the peace and racial incitement, ruled the district attorney in a report in April 2023.⁶¹ Such a mechanism was missing in Documenta 15.

Seemingly realizing the implications of this stance, the report insists that the German *Staatsräson* regarding Israel is not "authoritarian" but the legitimate expression of democratic

decision-making processes, thus allowing the state to express its reservations about art that questions Israel's right of existence.⁶² "It was not a matter of repressing a politically legitimate position but of how the state realizes its commitment to protect Jews against antisemitism."⁶³ Again, that is a legitimate, indeed important imperative, but its partisan realization in the report envisages ensuring Jewish safety at the expense of Palestinians and their supporters.

The context matters: the conclusion to be drawn from the serial cancellations and employment terminations in Germany, and in view of the banning of Nakba demonstrations, is that the IHRA definition and anti-BDS motion are de facto, if not de jure, instruments to clamp down on culture in Germany. According to the report's logic, no Palestinian—or Muslim or leftist Israeli or Jewish—artist can be invited to future Documentas because their presence could provoke an official Jewish objection.⁶⁴ Although affecting a balanced tone, the report is blind to its own presuppositions and naive about the potential for political instrumentalization of its recommendations. This is not surprising given the panel's explicit IHRA commitments and general loyalty to the *Staatsräson*. Detjen's observation that the "intellectual isolation of Germany" was a "political program" was prophetic. The scientific advisory panel's report is further equipping the German state to isolate the country from the rest of the world—and from many of its own citizens. The 131-page RIAS report on Documenta issued in February 2023 makes this political agenda abundantly clear.⁶⁵

Conclusion

As might be expected, the same journalists who attacked Documenta 15 hailed the report, reinforcing the feedback loop in the increasingly authoritarian German public culture.⁶⁶ What I call the "Dialectic of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [mastering the past]" was intensifying: in trying to master the Nazi past, Germans ended up reproducing the exclusionary structures and illiberalism they were trying to overcome.⁶⁷ The effects are readily apparent. In November 2022, in the wake of the Documenta scandal, Wajdi Mouawad's play *Birds of a Kind* was closed in Munich after allegations that it was antisemitic, although it had been performed in Israel. Statements by Mirjam Zadoff, director of the Documentation Center for the History of National Socialism, and Bernhard Purin, director of the Jewish Museum of Munich, signaling disquiet about the political pressure on the culture sector fell on deaf ears.⁶⁸ In Hamburg, the appointment of two members of *ruangrupa* to guest professorships at the University for Fine Arts after Documenta 15 closed its doors in September 2022 prompted protest from local politicians and even the Israeli ambassador to Germany. Public institutions could not appoint antisemites, they complained. Led by the Hamburg antisemitism commissioner, the press has applied continual pressure to have them dismissed.⁶⁹ The cleansing is underway.

True, it could be much worse. Had conservatives been in power at the national level, Documenta 15 might well have been shut down—or been preemptively canceled. Even so, the campaign against Documenta was a battle won in the German culture wars. While the Documenta artists displayed resilience and defiance in the face of the media storm, its legacy for the German art scene is state supervision of the art sector in the name of combatting alleged antisemitism.⁷⁰ Politicians, including the circumspect Roth, now declare that artistic freedom must be limited by the German state’s commitment to combatting antisemitism, which includes loyalty to an ever-rightward-trending Israel.⁷¹ The scientific advisory panel’s report provides them with a roadmap to cleanse culture; Möllers’s legal opinion is a thin reed with which to stem the tide. The current campaign demonizing the new director of the influential Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) in Berlin, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, for his supposed “BDS proximity” indicates that cultural freedom is in mortal danger in Germany.⁷²

Notes

Thanks to Joseph Croitoru, Andreas Huyssen, Fazil Moradi, Ana Teixeira Pinto, Daniel Weissmann, Charlotte Wiedemann, and Jürgen Zimmerer for comments on drafts. The usual disclaimers apply.

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