



## **The Attacks on the Uniqueness of the Holocaust**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The last decade has seen an explosion of attacks on the memory of the Holocaust. This expresses itself in many ways, including the casting of doubt on the Holocaust's uniqueness. This version was aired in recent public debates in Germany and can also be found in historical manipulations by academic scholars.

The memory of the Holocaust has been under assault for decades from all sides: the extreme right, the extreme left, and parts of the Islamic world. A common tactic is to assert that the Holocaust was not unique, contrary to the Jewish claim.

Looking at the question on a purely empirical basis, the Holocaust was unambiguously a unique event. While some elements are comparable to other genocides, its combined characteristics are not. Several criteria collectively make the Holocaust an unprecedented event: the totality of the targeting (all Jews everywhere), its priority (all branches of the German state were involved in the effort), its industrial character, and its impracticality (instead of exploiting Jews for labor purposes, they were killed.)

Leading Holocaust philosopher Emil L. Fackenheim noted that the Armenian genocide was confined to the Turkish Empire. And even within that empire, not all Armenians there were targeted—for instance, those living in Jerusalem were spared. Geographical confinement also applies to the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Sudan.

As Fackenheim pointed out, the Nazis, by contrast, set out to exterminate every last Jew on the face of the earth. He said that while the Holocaust does belong to the species "genocide," the planned and largely executed borderless extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust is without precedent and, thus far at least, without sequel. It is thus entirely appropriate to call it "unique."

Another Jewish philosopher, David Patterson, extended Fackenheim's view. Patterson wrote that when comparing the Shoah to other genocides,

I would go even further and insist that the Holocaust is not reducible to a case of genocide, any more than it is reducible to any other historical or political phenomenon, in the strict sense, although it certainly includes those elements. The Nazis set out to annihilate more than a people. ...they set out to annihilate a fundamental principle; to obliterate millennia of Jewish teaching and testimony; to destroy the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to eradicate a way of understanding God, world, and humanity embodied by the Jews in particular.

In Germany, the debate on the uniqueness of the Holocaust became an adjunct to the recent Achille Mbembe affair. This public intellectual from Cameroon had been invited to give the keynote address at the German Triennale music festival this August. It then became known that he is an anti-Israel inciter and has been involved in antisemitic acts. A public debate followed that continued despite the cancelation of the festival because of the coronavirus pandemic.

One of a variety of claims against Mbembe was that he compared the Holocaust to apartheid, contending that the only difference between them is scale. Alan Posener, an editor of *Die Welt*, responded that that claim is fundamentally false: "The Holocaust was not a much bigger form of apartheid, and what is more important apartheid was not a smaller version of the Holocaust. It was not a quantitatively different process but one which was qualitatively dissimilar."

There is an important secondary element to the Mbembe affair relating to the national memory. Unfortunately, the issue of Germany's national memory was brought to the fore mainly by people who were doing everything they could to whitewash Mbembe's antisemitism.

The memory of colonialism was the centerpiece of an open letter signed in May by more than 700 African scholars and artists. The letter was addressed to German Chancellor Angela Merkel and President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. It said: "We, African intellectuals, thinkers, authors and artists condemn without reservation the lying antisemitic accusation of extreme right, hostile to foreigners and right-wing conservative groups in Germany against Professor Achille Mbembe."

The letter's first paragraph contained two lies. The first was that Mbembe has never made antisemitic statements, an easily disproven claim. The second was

that the accusations against Mbembe came from the extreme right. In fact, the exposure of Mbembe's antisemitism originated mostly in mainstream sources. The letter ended with the brazen demand that the German antisemitism commissioner, Felix Klein, be fired. Klein had told the truth about Mbembe's antisemitism even before additional facts about his hate-mongering had come to the fore.

A prominent German whitewasher of Mbembe, Professor Aleida Assman, said in an interview in *Die Welt*: "Critics see in Mbembe a preacher of hate. I see him on the side of empathy." This is eminently false. While Mbembe promotes "empathy" and "repairing the world," he makes no secret of despising Israel and extends it no empathy whatsoever.

In a *Deutschland Kultur* radio interview on the Mbembe case, Assman admitted that she had a hard time understanding Mbembe due to his abstract philosophical tone, which sometimes turns poetic. She added that she is most interested in Mbembe's reflections on repairing post-colonial relationships. Another scholar who came out in support of Mbembe, philosopher Susan Neiman, whose expertise is on memory culture in a global perspective, said, when asked what her takeaway was from Mbembe's work, that she didn't know.

Frankfurt ethnology professor Hans Peter Hahn argued that the two experts' offhand admission that they "haven't a clue about Mbembe's theories" reflects the fact that "German intellectuals allow themselves to speak about and for African authors without having read them."

Philosopher Ingo Elbe has observed that the battle against Israel is being fought vicariously through attacks on German memory culture and its supposed provincialism. As Elbe expresses it, the post-colonial concept of memory has given rise to the false assertion that the emphasis on the uniqueness of the Holocaust creates an indifference to others' suffering. He adds that victim rivalry must be combatted, and that the claim that Holocaust remembrance unfairly diminishes other memories downplays Black and Muslim antisemitism. It also overlooks specifically Jewish experiences that are sacrificed to a strategy of anti-racist counter-hegemony.

Another attack on the uniqueness of the Holocaust is taking place in international academia. Leading Israeli genocide scholar Israel W. Charney observes: "In the academic world an alternative has developed to the classic 'sloppy' denials of the Holocaust. Several scholars now propagate the explicitly false thesis that the Jews were not targeted as victims because they were Jews. What is claimed instead is that they were a minority who were persecuted by the Nazis along with other minorities."

Charny added,

This kind of specious intellectual juggling has led to outright false statements in several articles in the “respectable” *Journal of Genocide Research* (JGR). The German case of Holocaust dilution or minimization is not only a German phenomenon. In one article it is claimed that the specifically anti-Jewish Wannsee Conference was not at all motivated by hatred of the Jews, but represented a policy toward European minorities as a whole, despite the fact that it was this conference that cemented the plans for the “Final Solution.”

Charny concludes, “The distorted attitude that the Holocaust is one of many genocides the German Nazi regime committed is a minimization of the basic significance of the Holocaust that a shocking number of bona fide genocide scholars have been promoting.”

There has been an explosion of Holocaust minimization in the past decade. It manifests itself in many ways, including Holocaust inversion (i.e., claiming that Israel acts like the Nazis), denial, deflection, whitewashing, de-judaization, equivalence, and trivialization, as well as other distortions that have emerged in recent years. As long as there are no broad post-Holocaust studies programs anywhere, these abuses of the memory of the Holocaust will have to be tackled one after the other.

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