BOOK REVIEW

Özyürek, E. Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory & Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany

Reviewed by Adam Sutcliffe, Professor of European History, King’s College London

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, earnest grappling with how to learn from the horrors of twentieth-century history has grown into a vigorous German export industry. Esra Özyürek’s excellent book, which explores the positioning of Germans from Muslim cultural backgrounds in the nation’s discourses and practices of Holocaust memory, casts a salutary critical light on some of the underlying assumptions of this regime of civic pedagogy. Rooted both in subtle and sophisticated anthropological fieldwork and in sharp historical and theoretical analysis, Özyürek’s study offers a deeply illuminating window into the worldview and lived experience of the young male Turkish and Arab Germans who are drawn into this memory work. It also provides an incisive dissection of the elisions, confusions and evasions of these culturally targeted programmes. Subcontractors of Guilt should be required reading for anybody seeking to understand the fundamental role of historical memory in the deep-seated problematic of ethnic and religious inclusion in contemporary Germany.

The focus in Germany on Muslim antisemitism is not, Özyürek reminds us, justified by the evidence. The definition both of antisemitism and of the category of Muslim or Muslim-background Germans are far from straightforward, but the latest federal government report on antisemitism in the country noted that there was no clear demonstration that this prejudice was more prevalent in that broad group than in the population as a whole. Hate crimes, meanwhile – whether against Jews or against Muslims or other immigrant-background communities – are overwhelmingly committed by right-wing white Germans (72-3). These facts have not, though, dislodged the dominance in German thinking of what Özyürek calls the “export-import theory” of Muslim antisemitism. On this account, Germany remains the originary source of antisemitism, and guilty of having exported it far and wide during the Nazi period, including to the Middle East. Through their intensive engagement with their past, though, postwar Germans have essentially overcome their antisemitism. This hard and virtuous work now risks being unravelled through the “re-import” of antisemitism by Muslims: both recent immigrants from the Middle East and more long-standing German residents, most numerously from Turkey, supposedly influenced by the culture of their homeland.

The battle against Muslim antisemitism in Germany, according to this theory, readily appears as the new frontline against antisemitism in toto. Several Muslim

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intellectuals in Germany, Özyürek shows, have attained prominence by embracing the narrative that Muslim German men, in particular, stand in a similar place to ethnic German men in 1945. They are facing their own Stunde Null, and need to profoundly remake themselves, proceeding from a disavowal of the authority that they had previously believed in and wielded. Patriarchal Islam is here positioned analogously to Nazism, and through its overcoming – manifested in a rejection of the sexual policing of sisters and daughters, as well as of antisemitism – Muslim-background men pass through their own version of the ritual of psychic refashioning that denazifying ethnic Germans supposedly underwent in the early years of the postwar Federal Republic.

As part of this process, Muslim-background Germans are required to place themselves imaginatively in a perpetrator position in relation to the Holocaust. In one striking episode observed by Özyürek in the majority-immigrant neighbourhood of Duisburg when she conducted most of her fieldwork, a group of young men from Turkish and Arab backgrounds perform to their peers a play set in Palestine during World War II. One of the performers plays a German Nazi who is also a convert to Islam, and who draws the local Palestinians into complicity with the extermination of Jews. The play is part of an educational programme called “Muslims in Auschwitz”, which aims explicitly to jolt its participants out of their self-understanding as victims and into the perpetrator position in which they are assumed to problematically place Jews. The programme achieves this through tendentious representations of history, as in this play, and by associating figures such as the Mufti of Jerusalem and Atatürk with Nazism. The aim, though, is not to provide accurate historical understanding, but to enable programme participants, having come to associate themselves with perpetrators, to repent, “and by repenting become legible within the grammar of the German political narrative” (135).

For some young men eager to attain this legibility, programmes such as Muslims in Auschwitz hold out an alluring promise. Özyürek describes how participants told her that they felt “lightened”, and more able to enjoy their lives in Germany, after disconnecting themselves from their previous identification with Palestinian victimhood (138-9). She connects this dynamic of refashioning to what has been described in relation to Black American and other marginalized subcultures as “flipping the script”. By “cracking” the German script of public Holocaust memory, these young men are able to win attention and approval from the mainstream culture and feel that they have finally earned their place as fully-fledged members of the nation’s civic community (152).

Even the most accomplished script-flippers, though, are not truly extended the status of equality with ethnic Germans in the context of the nation’s culture of memory. Within the overarching “export-import” theory of antisemitism, migrants and migrant-background communities remain eternally under suspicion: the guilt-processing labour
that is subcontracted to them by the ethnic German majority is never-ending. Özyürek observes a revealing visit by a Muslims in Auschwitz contingent to an anti-fascist and passionately Zionist “antideutsche” group in Leipzig. The hosts, for whom combating antisemitism is central to their political identity, refuse to accept that their visitors have truly renounced their anti-Jewish prejudices. The antideutsche are a small group at the fringe of German politics – but the acceptance more generally bestowed on these “good Muslims” is, Özyürek argues, “partial and exclusionary”. After receiving polite applause at a worthy award ceremony, they still face everyday discrimination, and still face routine accusations of sexism and antisemitism (157–8).

A particularly fascinating and illuminating chapter of the book focuses on the issue of young Muslim-background German residents feeling the “wrong emotions” when visiting Auschwitz and other Holocaust-related sites. On such educational visits, when participants are expected and often themselves hope to experience the approved German feelings of nationally inherited responsibility and guilt, they more typically feel intense empathetic identification with the Holocaust’s Jewish victims. This is heightened by their own experiences of racism in Germany, and feelings of fear, prompted by the Holocaust, that this racism could once again be taken to such murderous extremes. The memory manoeuvres that underpin programmes such as Muslims in Auschwitz push the racism of contemporary German society out of sight: Muslim-background Germans, not ethnic Germans, are viewed as infected with prejudice and hate. The willed repression by members of this minority of their subjection to ethnic German racism cannot be fully sustained, though, in the face of the instinctive identification and fear they feel when vividly reminded of the Jewish experience of German racism in the not-so-distant past.

The brilliance of Özyürek’s study lies in its deft combination of tightly focused observation with shrewd reflection on the broad significance of her case study. Her many suggestive arguments prompt much further thinking. German anti-Americanism has been widely associated with antisemitism: for German leftists, according to this analysis, the United States and “the Jews” stand as almost interchangeable metonyms for the ills of modernity. The subcontracting, or passing on, of German Holocaust guilt to the country’s Muslim-background immigrants looks rather like an ethnic German script-flip of this dynamic. The international voice of Germany today is ardently philosemitic, and more firmly in lockstep than any other European country with the pro-Israeli politics of mainstream America. In replicating, towards minority communities seen as tainted with Islam, attitudes very similar to those directed towards Germans themselves by their American occupiers eight decades ago, ethnic Germans enact their graduation from immature, anti-modern antisemitism to mature, modern, American style philosemitism.

The centrality of repentance to the German way with Holocaust memory suggests that there may also be theological undercurrents that require closer examination.
Özyürek mentions Freud briefly in connection with the anti-patriarchalism of placing Muslims at Stunde Null (32). A related Freud reference came to my mind while reading this book: his comment, in Moses and Monotheism (1939), that the Jews, in rejecting the Christian atonement, through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, for the earlier parricidal murder of the primal horde, had taken a tragic load of guilt on themselves [and] have been made to pay heavy penance for it. The fragility of Christian belief in their atonement for past crimes, Freud suggests, fuelled resentment and hatred of Jews, whose non-atonement challenged this belief, and onto whom, as Christ-killers, this guilt was displaced. A structurally similar position now seems to be ascribed to Muslims in contemporary Germany. They are the new unrepentant non-atoners: for the killing not of the primal father, or of Jesus, but of Jews. Like Jewish converts to Christianity before the Holocaust, however much they insist that they have indeed joined the Germans in their repentance for past crimes, their transformation is at best only superficially accepted.

The war between Israel and Hamas, on-going at the time of writing (November 2023), has placed the emotional and political dynamics of German Holocaust memory under unprecedented levels of strain. The public expression of solidarity with Palestinians has been more stringently constrained in Germany than anywhere else in Europe and has been very widely associated with antisemitism. This linkage has fuelled anti-immigrant rhetoric, including calls from across the political spectrum for the accelerated deportation of non-citizens who have expressed anti-Israel sentiments in terms considered tantamount to antisemitism. The limits of acceptable self-expression for people of Muslim heritage in the Berlin Republic are more starkly apparent than ever before. Will programmes such as Muslims in Auschwitz survive this current crisis, or will the socially marginalized young men that they target become increasingly alienated by German racism and speech restrictions, and less willing to set these feelings aside in the hope that doing so will earn them approval and civic inclusion? Alternatively, might the German culture of memory possibly be jolted into a profound rethink? This is probably a naïve hope. After reading this book, though, it feels impossible not to hope for it nonetheless, and to hope also that such a rethink is urgently spurred by Özyürek’s research and arguments.