

RfM-Debatte 2024: „Für eine stärkere Verbindung von Rassismus- und Antisemitismusforschung: Ein Vorschlag zur Übertragung des Konzepts des „institutionellen Rassismus“ auf Antisemitismus“

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Antisemitism, racism and empire: past and present

Comment on the debate by Tereza Hendl, Anna Zielinska, Yudit Namer

In our view, Sina Arnold and Juliane Karakayali make a compelling argument that research on antisemitism and racism need to be interconnected. We agree with them that this is crucial both for the sake of research that will be able to trace the intersections of the phenomena, and for the sake of material reality, in which antisemitism has been perpetuated in the broader context of racism that has affected many various populations alongside the Jews. For us, this is a crucial observation as we will argue that the racialization and dehumanization of other Others have enabled the Shoah, which needs to be both accounted for in research about the past but also as a warning for the present and future.

Where we, however, go beyond Arnold and Karakayali's analysis, as well as the commentaries by Messerschmidt (2024) and Müller (2024), is that we not only focus on the understanding of racism as an institutional issue (or an issue of institutional and social attitudes as it is predominantly discussed by Müller), but predominantly as a structure of hierarchization of human life, organizing of society and distribution of resources, including in Germany (Mills 1999; Lewicki 2022ab).

In our view, the disconnecting of antisemitism from racism is troubling as it obscures the analysis of the continuity of German imperial history and the ongoing legacy of perpetuating racist dehumanization and its intergenerational impact on affected populations. As some have already pointed out (Sillah and Zafar 2024), the disconnecting enables to conceal the

continuity of German imperial and racially motivated violence from the genocide in Namibia to the Holocaust, and enables these histories to be framed as 'exceptions' disconnected from ongoing patterns of racialization and oppression in today's Germany. In a recent text, "The Absent Presence of German Colonialism", Sillah and Zafar (2024) critiqued the ongoing lack of accountability for the German genocide against the Ovaherero and Nama, including the recognition that in Namibia Germany built its first concentration camps. The authors, however, oppose the common framing of this epoch of German colonialism as a 'mere' testing ground for the Holocaust, as they argue that the Namibian genocide was an end in itself and should be treated as such. Alarming, calls for dignifying reparations on the terms of the affected communities have still not been answered by Germany.

Furthermore, the connection of antisemitism, racism and empire is crucial for the understanding and accounting for the steps that have enabled the perpetration of the Holocaust. Namely, that it was the racial dehumanization of the Slavs and fellow Eastern Europeans that has made it possible for the Nazis to 'justify' the occupation of Europe's East - including to the wider West - and subjugate millions of racially inferiorized people to German imperial violence, while setting up extermination camps on occupied land (Kamenetsky 1956). The understanding of antisemitism in the broader context of racialisation and racial eugenics against systematically dehumanized groups of people will also enable us to more often account for the Shoah together with the simultaneously perpetrated Romani Holocaust, and their devastating impact. The harmful legacy of the Romani Holocaust is currently under-accounted for in Holocaust research, while the concerns of anti-Roma racism remain pressing, given that the Roma remain one of Europe's most racially oppressed and stigmatised populations (Berkyová 2017; Kóczé and Rövid 2017; MIA 2024).

Indeed, the Shoah has been perpetrated in a wider socio-historical context, which is crucial for the accounting for the scale of the harm as well as for the doing of justice to all of the affected populations harmed by German Nazism, Aryan racism, necropolitical racial eugenics, imperial domination, Lebensraum colonialism and extractivism. Beside the Jews and Roma against whom genocide was perpetrated, Aryan racial ideology has also systematically dehumanized the Slavs as subhuman Untermenschen for containment through eugenical means, imperial subjugation and forced labour (Kamenetsky 1956). By German Aryan racist ideology and policy, Slavs were designated as an inferior race and thus had to be dominated to not contaminate the racially superior Herrenvolk master race with inferior traits and avoid weakening its imaginary destined predisposition towards world domination. In this context, millions of Slavs and fellow Eastern Europeans had been militarily occupied by Nazi Germany and used for forced labour to enrich the German Reich. It was the Nazi subjugation of largely Slavic societies in Europe's East that enabled the systematic extraction of resources, which in turn provided the means for mass killing and genocide. In occupied Ukraine, around four million people were killed, 1,5 million of whom were Jewish, and many more were killed in combat in the Red Army (Hrytsak 2024). Around 2,4 million Ukrainians were transported to Germany for forced labour (Grinchenko 2015). In Poland, six million people were killed by Nazi Germans, three million of them were Jewish, three million were not (Grabowski 2018, Leociak 2008). To this day, both Jewish and non-Jewish victims of Nazism have not received dignifying reparations. Meanwhile, the maintenance of German-instated Nazi extermination

camps as sites of remembrance has cost Poland more than any reparations paid to the victims of Nazism who remained in Poland after 1945 (Kononczuk 2024).

As we have pointed out, the disconnecting of antisemitism from racism undermines the tracing of the continuities of German imperial conduct, and as such, conceals the imperial nature of Nazism and its methods of extermination and extractivism. The disconnect further obstructs a much warranted robust discussion about the Generalplan Ost, which envisioned the colonial conquest of Europe's East for Lebensraum, the territorial expansion for the nourishment of the Aryan master race of white German settlers on stolen land (Kamenetsky 1956; Smith 1980; 1986; O'Sullivan 2024). This would enable us to grasp why Ukraine was a major target of German colonialism, its exceptionally fertile lands extracted for Aryan agriculture, while large parts of the populations of Europe's East began to be exterminated through a genocidal famine (Herbert, 2003[2001]: p. 136; for "Generalplan Ost", see Snyder 2010). These dimensions of Nazism need to be discussed alongside the legacy of antisemitism and the Shoah, not only because they are interconnected but in order to redress historical revisionism. Recent empirical research shows that Slavic populations are stereotypically perceived as Nazi collaborators in Germany, while in reality they were among the main targets and victims of Nazi imperialism (Radziejowska and Falkowski 2024) and consequently also major anti-Nazi resistance fighters, as fiercely demonstrated e.g. in the Warsaw uprising or the assassination of the occupying imperial official Reinhard Heydrich, one of the major 'architects' of the Holocaust, by the Czechoslovak anti-Nazi resistance. At the same time, those who have collaborated with the Nazis, either under pressure or willingly, did so under the material conditions of a military German occupation, which is a crucial socio-historical context that must be accounted for. Otherwise, any analysis will fail to grasp the broader political and structural dimensions of Nazi imperialism, including the racialised abuse of power that Nazism stood on, was financed through and reinforced.

Why is this history important? Because of its urgent relevance to the present. For years the German society at large has been avoiding the confronting of its continuous racism, in all its forms and scale, and this avoidance allowed the Far Right turn in society. Concerns of racism have been largely outsourced to matters of 'right wing extremism', while the structural and institutional dimensions of racism shaping all aspects of life in Germany have been mostly disregarded and unaddressed. As one of us has previously critiqued (Hendl and James 2022), Germany does not formally collect statistical data on the impact of racialization on affected populations, and yet, smaller studies continuously show the severe impact of structural racism in the country. For example, a recent study confirmed (yet again) that population groups racialized in Germany, such as Black, Muslim and Asian people are most affected by poverty, no matter their education levels (Fürstenau, 2023). The subjects of Nazi genocide, the Roma, continue to face discrimination and violence, with almost 63% participants in a recent RomnoKher study (Strauß 2021) reporting being insulted in school or training and 53,8% complained about violence, while the Jews continue to face antisemitic hate crime, around 80% perpetrated by the German Far Right (Unabhängige Bundesbeauftragte für Antidiskriminierung 2024). Simultaneously, the dominant German conduct towards 'Eastern Europeans' remains highly racialized and alarmingly shaped by the inter-imperiality between Germany and Russia, viewing Europe's East through a Russo-centric lens and inferior

to Germany, only decades after the Nazi-Soviet pact that had divided Europe into German and Soviet/Russian 'spheres of interests.' This inter-imperiality has most recently been manifested by an ongoing governmental politics undermining Ukrainian self-defence and debates on the pressuring of Ukraine to surrender to invading Russia, that would sacrifice the Ukrainian population to a genocidal Russian occupation while benefiting German political and business interest (Ash 2023; Ioffe 2023; Hendl et al. 2024; Finkel 2022; 2024). These debates and German politics of appeasement are adding insult to injury, given the legacy and scale of Nazi crimes in German-occupied Ukraine, while enabling Russia to keep killing Ukrainians, including Jewish survivors of the Shoah (Ash 2023; Belam 2022; Hrytsak 2024). Meanwhile, Ukrainian refugees and fellow 'Eastern Europeans' are continuously racialised and exploited by German industries, marking their move from the source of forced labour to 'cheap' labour and, simultaneously, maintaining Europe's East as a space for the systematic extraction of exploitable labour and resources (Lewicki 2022ab; Bogoeski 2022; Djukanović 2024; Samnick, 2024; Uhlová 2024; Górska, Hendl and Majewska, forthcoming).

Moreover, as pointed out by Darja Klingenberg in her commentary on Arnold and Karakayali's article, much of the Jewish population who has migrated to Germany after the collapse of the USSR might also be affected by complex patterns of institutional racism as a migrant, racialized and/or religious minoritized population group. We appreciate Klingenberg's points that the experiences of this population are largely invisible and need further disentangling. What we also wonder about is the heterogeneity of the 'post-Soviet' Jewish population and further layers through which the lived experiences have been shaped by different legacies of imperialism and genocide. For example, while belonging to a systematically othered and oppressed population both in the Soviet and German context, the experiences of Russian Jews can still simultaneously be shaped by Russian imperial powers and privileges over Russian-Soviet occupied populations. In contrast, the experiences of post-Soviet Jews from Ukraine can intergenerationally be affected both by German military occupation and Holocaust as well as the Russian-Soviet perpetrated Holodomor (i.e. a genocidal famine against Ukrainians, see Zasiakina et al 2021; Markevich et al 2024). Closer attention to these layers of inter-imperiality between Soviet and German empires can further assist in better accounting for various legacies of imperialism, genocides and ongoing patterns of racialisation across persistent European East-West hierarchies (Tlostanova 2003; 2010; 2012; Hendl et al 2024).

Alarming, the racialised hierarchies of human lives and the urgent need for their dismantling are pressing issues, given that we are writing at a time of an increasing revival of fascism. In recent state elections, the state of Thuringia elected as its leader AfD's Björn Höcke, who in 2017 said that Germans should be more proud of their Nazi past (Pfeifer 2024). The AfD (euphemistically and ahistorically called the "Alternative for Germany") has previously campaigned with an election poster featuring a white pregnant woman and the slogan: "New Germans? We will make them ourselves. Dare yourself Germany!", echoing racial eugenics, mixed with the explicit exclusion of post-migrant communities which allied under the collectively-empowering identifier of "new German organizations" (www.neue-deutsche-organisationen.de), and alongside a sexist claim to and instrumentalization of "our" women. Other posters included explicitly anti-Muslim content, stigmatising women in burkas or pairing the statement "'The Islam' is not fitting our kitchen" with an image of a young pig. Increasingly,

anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian and anti-Muslim racism has been escalating in Germany alongside the onslaught on Gaza and by the German-allied Israeli state, while Jews, commonly those who are critics of the Israeli state's conduct, comprise 25% of people targeted under German politics of tackling antisemitism (ECCHR 2024; Grenier 2024; Jaser 2024; Younes and Al-Taher 2024). Jewish intellectuals have repeatedly raised alarm that anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish racisms are interconnected and that German politics and the Far Right are making these populations less safe. Towards Germany, "the birthplace of Nazism", they say (Adler et al. 2024: n.p.):

We demand that a variety of Jewish perspectives, and not only those that flatter German feelings, be invited to participate in any resolution passed in our name. We insist that the German state cannot safeguard Jewish life solely through repressive measures. We write in the belief that the only way of "protecting, preserving, and strengthening" Jewish life in Germany is to protect, preserve, and strengthen the rights of all minorities. If there is a lesson from the catastrophe of the Holocaust, it is this: "Never again" means "never again for everyone."

We have observed that the persistent disconnecting of antisemitism and racism in research enables their disconnecting in material reality, and in turn, obstructs tracing their legacies, continuities and intersections in German past and present. In our view, this not only obscures the accountability of German society but also, as one of us previously argued (Hendl and James 2022), perpetuates white ignorance about structural racism while undermining effective actions and policy aimed towards its elimination. In other words, the disconnecting and lack of addressing of antisemitism and racism as intertwined and urgent problems undermines effective strategies for pushing back against racism in all its forms as well as defeating the Far Right. Yet, history shows us how crucial pro-active struggles against racism and fascism are.

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