

German Cultural Memory at Stake. On the Shift to the Right of the "Never Again" Discourse and the November 2024 Bundestag Resolution on Antisemitism

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This article focuses on how Germany's memory culture currently shifts from a paradigmatic model of coming to terms with the German past to a more dogmatic and repressive one, well before the post-October 7 context. The argument put forward here is that this development is linked to the exceptional symbolic significance of the Jewish presence in Post-Holocaust Germany and of the German-Israeli relations on one hand, and to the challenges facing a multicultural, post-migration society on the other. All this is clearly reflected in the 2024 Bundestag resolution "Nie wieder ist jetzt" (Never again is now). The (highly problematic) identification of certain social groups as being more susceptible than others to contemporary forms of 'new anti-Semitism' and the repressive measures aimed at combating it show how anti-antisemitism discourses can be misused in a restrictive manner.
Keywords: Germany; memory culture; minorities; migration; antisemitism.

A memória cultural alemã em jogo. Sobre a viragem à direita do discurso do "nunca mais" e a resolução do Bundestag de novembro de 2024 sobre o antissemitismo

Este artigo centra-se na forma como a cultura da memória na Alemanha tem passado de um modelo paradigmático de reconciliação com o passado alemão para um modelo mais dogmático e repressivo, muito antes do contexto pós-7 de outubro. O argumento aqui apresentado é que esta evolução está ligada, por um lado, ao significado simbólico excecional da presença judaica na Alemanha pós-Holocausto e das relações germano-israelitas e, por outro, aos desafios que uma sociedade multicultural e pós-migratória enfrenta. Tudo isto reflete-se claramente na resolução do Bundestag de 2024 intitulada "Nie wieder ist jetzt" (Nunca mais é agora). A identificação (altamente problemática) de certos grupos sociais como sendo mais suscetíveis do que outros às formas contemporâneas de "novo antissemitismo" e as medidas repressivas destinadas a comba-

tê-lo mostram como os discursos anti-antissemitismo podem ser utilizados de forma abusiva e restritiva.
Palavras-chave: Alemanha; cultura da memória; minorias; migração; antissemitismo.

German Cultural Memory at Stake. On the Shift to the Right of the "Never Again" Discourse and the November 2024 Bundestag Resolution on Antisemitism

Thomas Serrier*

Something is not working properly in German memory culture those days.[1] To write this in 2026 certainly remains a highly provocative statement, yet it is being made by a growing number of intellectuals and scholars who are closely following the German debates on memory. There is no question about the fact that Germany has long been internationally recognised as a role model when it comes to "coming to terms" with its Nazi past. One could indeed go back to the period – primarily the 1950s and 1960s – when the term *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* dominated the debates. This rather strange neologism apparently coined by the historian Hermann Heimpel and popularised by the President of West Germany Theo Heuss in notable speeches already gave rise to a huge body of comments.[2] One could also suggest

* Thomas Serrier (thomas.serrier@univ-lille.fr). https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2013-8707. University of Lille. Original article: 9-03-2026; revised version: 16-06-2026; accepted: 1-07-2026.

1 This article expands on an analysis that I have previously presented as "Malaise dans la culture mémorielle allemande", *AOC*, December 5, 2024, https://aoc.media/analyse/2024/12/04/malaise-dans-la-culture-memorielle-allemande/ [Last view 28 September 2025].

2 Peter Dudek, "Vergangenheitsbewältigung. Zur Problematik eines umstrittenen Begriffs," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 1-2 (1992): 44.

going back to the 1980s and to what has been called the "memory boom".[3] Since then, it sometimes seems that memory is everywhere in German social and political discourses, and that "all paths lead to memory, like all roads lead to Rome", as German famous memory expert Aleida Assmann wrote.[4] Regardless of this tentative chronology and these conceptual considerations, in fact, hardly any other country invests so many resources in dealing with the most painful times in its own history, reminding people of the crimes of National Socialism and commemorating the victims. However, critics have long warned that the established, institutionalised culture of remembrance has failed in its current form despite its apparent success. Some scholars, such as Y. Michal Bodemann, have highlighted the long political use of the Holocaust memory and the revival of German-Jewish life in post-war Germany. In his analysis there is an element of a real-political manoeuvre inherent in German memory, in particular in the moral support given to the re-establishment of a Jewish community in Germany after 1945 in order to signal to its Western partners the break with the Nazi past.[5] According to another author, Daniel Marwecki, German "raison d'état" – a concept that plays a central role in the current context – and Germany's special relationship with the State of Israel are intended to absolve Germany of its past and secure absolution for Nazi crimes.[6]

This article focuses on how Germany's position may have shifted from a paradigmatic model of memory culture to a more problematic one. The argument put forward here is that this development is linked, on the one hand, to the exceptional symbolic significance of the Jewish presence in Post-Holocaust Germany and, on the other, to the chal-

3 Jay Winter, "The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the 'Memory Boom' in Contemporary Historical Studies," *Canadian Military History* 10, n.º 3 (2001): 57-66. With a focus on Germany: Aleida Assmann and Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1999).

4 Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2003), 27.

5 Y. Michal Bodemann, *Gedächtnistheater. Die jüdische Gemeinschaft und ihre deutsche Erfindung* (Hamburg: Rotbuch, 1996).

6 Daniel Marwecki, *Absolution? Israel und die deutsche Staatsräson* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2024).

lenges facing a multicultural, post-migration society. These challenges are reflected most clearly in a Bundestag resolution, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. Indeed, this article spotlights a specific moment and a specific text, namely the resolution "*Nie wieder ist jetzt*" (Never again is now) passed by the Bundestag in November 2024. It aims to show how anti-antisemitism discourses that have emerged in public debates can be used in a restrictive manner and how they are in fact present in the Bundestag resolution. The content of the Bundestag resolution itself can be summarised in three points: the solemn reminder of the fundamental importance of the revival of Jewish 'life' (*Jüdisches Leben*) in Germany since 1945 and 1989; the (highly problematic) identification of certain social groups as being more susceptible than others to contemporary forms of 'new anti-Semitism'; and a list of repressive measures aimed at combating it.

One thing is certain: times are changing, and German society is changing. In parallel, its relationship to the past and traditional perspectives on history are also changing. On one side, due to migration and globalisation, Germany is much more diverse today than it was in the 1980s or 1990s. This has led some specialists in German history to believe that a purely institutionalised form of remembrance that placed the Holocaust at its centre is no longer self-evident, and that the German memory culture should indeed undergo a reorientation towards a pluralistic, more diverse form that includes all parts of its postmigration society, taking into account particular origins and memories.

At the same time, the rise of the far right, undeniable at the latest since 2017 and the electoral successes of the AfD [Alternative für Deutschland], has been accompanied by a massive offensive against the "official" memory. The AfD openly and directly attacked the fundamental values of the German *Erinnerungskultur* for diametrically opposed reasons. For a brief but crucial moment, the main target of the attacks by the far right was the "culture of repentance" – what one of the party's most radical figures, Björn Höcke, has once called the "culture of shame" ["*Kultur der Schande*"] allegedly cultivated by Germany, and

symbolized by the Holocaust Memorial inaugurated in the centre of Berlin in May 2005.[7]

The following article is based on the worrying observation that a new political shift might already be underway. This seems clearly evident in the Bundestag resolution entitled "Never again is now. Protecting, preserving, and strengthening Jewish life in Germany", also known as the Bundestag resolution on antisemitism of November 2024. The thesis defended here is that this ongoing evolution is characterized by an anti-immigrant radicalization of that pillar of German political identity that is the fight against anti-Semitism and the discourse of "Never again." For several decades now, the culture of remembrance had increasingly become a means of political self-assurance. In a powerful paradox and one of those reversals of meaning that are so common at the moment, the rhetoric of "Never again," the traditional slogan of the anti-fascist struggle, anti-totalitarian vigilance, and post-war pacifism in Germany, seems now compatible with the security, anti-migration and islamophobic obsessions of the far right. It seems that the democratic tradition of the "Never again" discourse can now be suitable for the interests of the AfD, provided that the main target of German memory culture, once despised as a form of self-hatred, is now people from immigrant backgrounds. In the context of post-October 7, 2023, this shift, which is reminiscent of the European far right's recent and overwhelming support for Israel in its war of destruction against Gaza, takes place at the cost of a blatant distortion of the past and the forgetting of the historical anti-Semitism of the far right. All this did not prevent the strange political convergence ranging from the Greens to the AfD that took place on the occasion of the Bundestag resolution of November 2024. This was only possible thanks to the political use (or misuse) of the positive label of the *Erinnerungskultur* and the hazardous instrumentalization of the fight against anti-Semitism. In other

7 Volker Weiß, *Das Deutsche Demokratische Reich: Wie die extreme Rechte Geschichte und Demokratie zerstört* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2025); Sophie Schmalenberger, "Vom 'Vogelschiss', Bismarck und deutschen Opfern: Die Neue Rechte und der Kampf um die deutsche Erinnerungskultur," in *Erinnerungskämpfe. Neues deutsches Geschichtsbewusstsein*, ed. Jürgen Zimmerer (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2023), 276-293.

words, and this is the second thesis of the current article, radical history and dogmatic distortion of the past can not only be observed in radical parties but are also promoted more or less consciously by the traditional parties, and what Germans often refer to as the "centre of society", so-called "Mitte der Gesellschaft". The following article therefore makes three methodological choices: 1) to focus less on parties usually classified as "populist" or "radical" and more on an overall dynamic encompassing all political forces; 2) to examine the shift in German memory culture from an instrument for the formation of a democratic culture to a divisive, prescriptive, and dogmatic tool; 3) finally, to present a dense discourse analysis devoted to the text of the "Never Again is now" resolution itself.

"Never again": an increasingly distorted and disconnected discourse

The discomfort with the recent shifts in German memory culture is deep enough that a researcher as emblematic of the international openness of intellectual life in today's Germany as the American philosopher Susan Neiman, director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, recently stated: "Today, in Germany, Hannah Arendt would no longer be allowed to speak."[8] This is pure speculation, of course, as Arendt died in New York in 1975, but imagining this icon of 20th-century philosophy, who was persecuted by the Nazis, once again condemned to silence, is enough to make one's head spin.

An expert on the Enlightenment, a figure of the American liberal Left, and author of essays at the intersection of moral philosophy and political analysis, including the recent *Left Is Not Woke* (2024), Neiman, like many other essayists of Jewish origin before her, not long ago was one of those who graciously held up a flattering mirror to the Germans, which of course the German political sphere and civil society are fond of.

8 See: Massive Kritik an Antisemitismus-Resolution des Bundestages | Komplette PK 6 November 2024 - Jung & Naiv – Podcast, https://jung-naiv.podigee.io/1026-massive-kritik-an-antisemitismus-resolution-des-bundestages-komplette-pk-6-november-2024 [Last view 26 September 2025].

In her *Learning from the Germans* (2019), she examined the efforts made across the Rhine to atone for Nazism, giving top marks to the political, educational, and symbolic measures that for long contributed to the development of an open democratic culture based explicitly or implicitly on the "negative memory" (Reinhart Koselleck) of the Shoah.[9]

Neiman went so far as to present what is known as *Erinnerungskultur* as a model for Americans, given their own country's history of slavery.[10] The German memory culture, or culture of remembrance, exemplified an overall successful effort to critically confront the past, regardless of the terms, which are all unsatisfactory, that have been used since Theodor W. Adorno's pioneering essays on the subject: struggle of "overcoming the past", "coming to terms" with the past, "coping with the past", "working through the past", etc.[11]

Indeed, all these catch phrases may be rejected as misleading, if it means believing that the work of remembrance can ever be completed.[12] However imperfect it may be, the German memory work could be considered a sincere attempt to meet the challenge of unmeasurable guilt, at least since the 1970s and 1980s and the growing awareness of the Holocaust. Pointing to what they call the "theater of reconciliation" critical voices like Y. Michal Bodemann, Eike Geisel or Max Czollek have certainly continued to warn of the gap between a "feel-good" rhetoric of memory and the practices actually implemented. They emphasized the illusion of believing that every past can be fixed and that everything

9 Reinhart Koselleck, "Formen und Traditionen des negativen Gedächtnisses," in *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, ed. Volkhard Knigge and Norbert Frei (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002), 21-32; English version: Reinhart Koselleck, "Forms and Traditions of Negative Memory," in *Sediments of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 239sqq.

10 The concept was coined in the 1990s following Christoph Cornelissen and, even more so, the influential writings of Aleida and Jan Assmann. See Christoph Cornelißen, "Was heißt Erinnerungskultur? Begriff, Methoden, Perspektiven," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 54 (2003): 548-563.

11 Theodor W. Adorno, "The Meaning of Working through the Past" (1963), published in *German History in Documents and Images*, https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-5059 [Last view 28 September 2025].

12 Susan Neiman, *Left Is Not Woke* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023); Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

will be fine again someday.[13] But Susan Neiman was certainly not the only one, nor the most famous, to praise the effort and the changes in German society that the work of remembrance actually brought about. Author of *Fatelessness* and *Kaddish for an Unborn Child*, winner of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature, Auschwitz survivor who became a Berliner at heart after 1989, Hungarian writer Imre Kertész repeatedly expressed his confidence in the "strength and maturity" of German democracy, as on German Unity Day on October 3, 2003.[14]

What has happened to cause this widely shared satisfaction to give way to concern today? Even though Germany's particular responsibilities due to the history of national-socialism, the Second World War and the Shoah continue to be invoked ritually as a foundation of German democracy, one can feel a growing "unease in the memory culture", as Aleida Assmann wrote.[15] The unease goes far beyond the simple observation of a loss of illusions concerning the efficiency and success of a democratization through memory, illustrated by the rise of the AfD and the increasing anti-Semitic and xenophobic violence in Germany in the last decade: certainly, the naive hope that "negative memory" would somehow be automatically performative is no longer an illusion; and at the same time, the dream of a peaceful future without the far right seems far off.

But the problem goes deeper than simply counting anti-Semitic and xenophobic crimes and offenses and the electoral successes of extremist parties (such as in the regional elections last fall in Thuringia, Saxony, and Brandenburg, where the AfD came in first or second with more than 30% of the vote). At least since the Israeli assault on Gaza in response to 7 October 2023, there has been a clear disconnect between

13 Max Czollek, *Versöhnungstheater* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2023); Max Czollek and Hadija Haruna-Oelker, *Alles auf Anfang. Auf der Suche nach einer neuen Erinnerungskultur* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 2025). Eike Geisel coined the ironic concept of *Wiedergutwerdung* [Being fine again] imitated from the well-known German word for reparation: *Wiedergutmachung*. Eike Geisel, *Die Wiedergutwerdung der Deutschen. Essays und Polemiken* (Berlin: Fuego, 2015).

14 https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/imre-kertesz-duennes-eis-deutsches-wasser-1129795.html [Last view 21 November 2024].

15 Aleida Assmann, *Das neue Unbehagen an der Erinnerungskultur. Eine Intervention* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2013).

the official German discourse (which continues to emphasize the rule of law and Germany's "special historical responsibility") and the harsh reality of Berlin's geopolitical *Realpolitik* and *raison d'état*, especially regarding to the de facto unconditional support for the Netanyahu government's policy. This positioning is deeply contradictory with Germany's traditional identity as a pillar of international law, to say the least, especially since the Israeli Prime Minister is officially the subject of an ICC arrest warrant for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

All of this invites to ask a more fundamental question, for these German geopolitical choices are based on – or trapped by – well-established elements of German memory culture, developed over the long postwar period.

As inevitable as a general reset may be, the crisis in the German memory culture will be painful, given that this political and cognitive model seemed to have reached a certain degree of perfection and exemplarity – roughly speaking during the 1990s and 2000s, at a time when, despite of a thousand heated controversies, the successive inaugurations of the Jewish Museum and the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin (in 2001 and 2005) nonetheless enjoyed international unanimity.

It is worth noting here that certain respected voices like Reinhart Koselleck spoke out early on against the false assumptions underlying this consensus. During the heated public debates that took place in the 1990s concerning the memorials that were to be erected in Berlin in remembrance of the atrocities of the 20th century and German guilt, Koselleck, as the most influential maverick in his field, bravely took a stance against an exclusive memorial for the Jewish people. In 1999 he wrote, to no avail, in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*:

> As Germans, that is, as the nation that brought forth the perpetrators, can we limit ourselves to commemorating only the murdered Jews, excluding all others who were also murdered by us? The danger of having fulfilled all our obligations of mourning and completed all our mourning work with a Holocaust memo-

> rial cannot be overlooked. But what will then remain? We will have an anti-anti-Semitic memorial, but the question will remain: where are our other murder victims in our memorial space – the millions of people who were also gassed, beaten to death, shot or killed in other ways – are they to be omitted from the then officially sanctioned national mourning? [...] As the perpetrator nation, we have a duty to remember everyone if there is to be a national memorial in Berlin.[16]

Some of these observations seem rather prophetic today. Faced with the return of historical tragedy, the glaring discrepancy between the acute geopolitical crises of the moment (Ukraine, Israel, Palestine, etc.) and the German entrenchment in old certainties, asserted in an increasingly dogmatic and unrealistic manner, appears even clearer – against the backdrop of very real arms deliveries to Israel, the volume of which increased tenfold between 2022 and 2023. The proclaimed virtue of the culture of remembrance seems to be undermined by the inability to name what a growing number of international institutions, NGOs, and specialists in mass crimes consider to be an ongoing genocide in Gaza.

Misuse of a dogma: the case study of the Bundestag resolution on antisemitism of November 2024

Evidence of this disconnect, or worse, a sign of the blatant instrumentalization of memories, is the resolution "Never again is now! Protecting, preserving, and strengthening Jewish life in Germany" [*Nie wieder ist jetzt: jüdisches Leben in Deutschland schützen, bewahren und stärken*], adopted by the Bundestag on 7 November 2024. It is this resolution, albeit cloaked in the best of intentions, that has led Susan Neiman and renowned intellectuals, to express concern about illiberal

16 Reinhart Koselleck, "Die Widmung. Es geht um die Totalität des Terrors," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 3 March 1999.

tendencies at work – even imagining the censorship of Hannah Arendt mentioned in the introduction.

Amidst the turmoil caused the day before by Donald Trump's second election in the United States and the collapse of the coalition government in Germany following the withdrawal of Finance Minister and member or the Liberal Party Christian Lindner the same day, the adoption of this resolution by the Bundestag on November 7, two days before the commemoration of the anti-Semitic pogrom of *Kristallnacht* on November 9, 1938, would have gone almost unnoticed. However, the resolution "Never again is now!", commonly referred to as the "resolution against anti-Semitism" was soon criticized by several defenders of rights. It "risks in fact limiting fundamental rights and human rights": that was the warning issued by a number of well-established NGOs: Amnesty International, the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, Weltfriedensdienst [International Peace Service], the Association of Democratic Lawyers, Pax Christi, Medico International, etc.[17]. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at its provisions, behind the consensual and unassailable facade of its stated objective: the "anti-anti-Semitic" fight.[18]

Several provisions pose serious problems, starting with the explicit listing of social groups designated as prime vectors of anti-Semitism. "The situation since October 7, the Bundestag resolution says, has been marked by a rise in anti-Semitism, which is expressed in an increasingly open and violent manner and which stems both from far-right and Islamist circles and from tendencies to relativize and question Israel, which are characteristic of the anti-imperialist left." The original German sentence, which is catch-all and clearly the result of successive additions, is very confusing here. Above all, what does "*israelbezogen*" really mean, simply "relating to" Israel or "implicating" Israel? Next,

17 Julia Duchrow *et al.*, "Deutschland: Geplante Antisemitismus-Resolution gefährdet Grundrechte," Amnesty International, 18 October 2024, https://www.amnesty.de/aktuell/deutschland-antisemitismus-resolution-gefaehrdet-grundrechte [last view 18 November 2024].

18 See Elad Lapidot, *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2020).

even though the passage casts a wide net and takes care to make subtle distinctions, the prime suspect ultimately emerges clearly. For only one type of anti-Semitism is mentioned several times, namely anti-Semitism stemming "from immigration from North Africa and the Near and Middle East, countries where anti-Semitism and hatred of Israel are widespread, due in particular to Islamic and anti-Israeli indoctrination by the state [sic]."[19]

This conflation and premature condemnation in a declaratory text with legal implications is surprising. It amounts to drawing up and formalizing a list of suspects in advance. Anyway, these divisive and stigmatizing categorizations based on ethnic origin played a crucial role in the Bundestag resolution. A belated view, and an isolated voice, Green Party member of the Bundestag Lamya Kaddor, an Islamologist born to Syrian parents, was undoubtedly right when she admitted, in hindsight, that "it would probably have been better, in our fight against anti-Semitism, to pay more attention to our postmigration society. Lasting protection of Jewish life will only succeed if we involve all populations in the discussion [...], including and especially Muslim immigrant communities, who must be involved in this work and mobilized, based on the fact that they too are victims of marginalization."[20]

The Bundestag resolution of November 2024, initiated in the wake of October 7, 2023, was the result of a cross-party closed-door process involving the Grüne, the Social Democrats, Liberals, and Christian Democrats, rather than transparent public debate, and was ultimately supported by a large majority. Interestingly, an older idea had already been floated by the far-right AfD a few years ago. On 7 November, 2024, only the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance, a radical party founded at the beginning of the year following a split from Die Linke, and eyeing

19 Deutscher Bundestag, "Antrag der Fraktionen SPD, CDU/CSU, BÜNDNIS 90/DIE GRÜNEN und FDP. Nie wieder ist jetzt – Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland schützen, bewahren und stärken," Drucksache 20/13627, 5 November 2024, https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/20/136/2013627.pdf [Last view 20 November 2024].

20 rbb24, "'Schutz jüdischen Lebens'. Bundestag beschließt Resolution gegen Antisemitismus," rbb24, 7 November 2024, https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/regional/berlin/rbb-schutz-juedischen-lebens-bundestag-beschliesst-resolution-gegen-antisemitismus-100.html [Last view 20 November 2024].

the AfD's electorate, voted against it. The left-wing party Die Linke abstained. This motley "anti-anti-Semitic alliance" thus included the far-right AfD, which was only too happy to grant itself carte blanche for philosemitism after ten years of inflammatory statements by its main leaders, starting with Björn Höcke and Alexander Gauland, the man who had once minimized the twelve years of Nazism by comparing them to "bird droppings."[21]

The thesis that there is a direct link between immigration and rising anti-Semitism has been a favourite topic of the far right for years. "With their migration policy, they [the governing parties, notably Chancellor Merkel's CDU, which was in power during the 'migration crisis' of fall 2015, T.S.] have imported hatred of Jews from the Middle East to Germany," Beatrix von Storch (AfD) insinuated in 2021.[22] While the Bundestag resolution advocates tougher immigration and asylum policies, it also takes care to name the very groups suspected of spreading evil. Neither the Greens, nor the Liberals, nor the Social Democrats avoided the trap.

Anti-antisemitism, maccarthyism, illiberalism

Equally problematic is another provision that describes the scope of application of the Bundestag resolution. To put it cautiously, it is impossible to completely rule out the risk of arbitrary administrative practices, which would be all the more irrefutable as they would be taken in the name of combating anti-Semitism. It is not surprisingly against this provision, which more directly concerns freedom of science, freedom of art, and freedom of opinion, that a timid mobilization

21 Like other far right parties in Europe ranging from Hungary's PM Orbán to the French RN leaders Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella, the AfD under Alice Weidel's leadership is at the same time "pro-Israel and pro-Jewish, and characterized by latent or explicit antisemitism". See Armin Pfahl-Traughber, "Die AfD und der Antisemitismus," *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 10 October 2017, https://www.bpb.de/themen/rechtsextremismus/dossier-rechtsextremismus/257899/die-afd-und-der-antisemitismus/ [Last view 20 November 2024].

22 Andreas Maus and Lara Straatmann, "Antisemitismus der Anderen: Die rechte Kampagne vom 'importierten Judenhass'," *Das Erste*, 27 May 2021, https://www1.wdr.de/daserste/monitor/sendungen/antisemitismus-126.html [Last view 21 November 2024]. On this subject, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Strangers at Our Door* (New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons, 2016).

of intellectuals has emerged. Verbatim: the Bundestag "reaffirms its firm commitment to ensuring that no organization or project receives funding if it contributes to spreading anti-Semitism, questions Israel's right to exist, calls for a boycott of Israel, or actively supports the BDS movement."

Further on: "Freedom of opinion and freedom of art and science are precious assets guaranteed and protected by our Constitution. However, there can be no place for anti-Semitism in the arts, culture, and the media."[23] The tone at the very end becomes more threatening: "The causes and background of the major scandals linked to anti-Semitism that have tainted these fields in recent years, particularly at 'documenta fifteen' and during the Berlinale in February 2024, must be thoroughly investigated; consequences must be drawn."

There is certainly need to recall the "scandal" of the 2024 Berlinale, since the documentary film in question, "No Other Land", was released in most Western countries to critical acclaim. But in the eyes of German political and cultural leaders, something was obviously objectionable about this movie, which was named Best Documentary and won the Panorama Audience Award at the Berlin Film Festival. It used the concept of "apartheid" to describe the discrimination of the Palestinians in the West Bank. This word alone seems to have become sufficient evidence of anti-Semitism in today's Germany, even though the main director, alongside Palestinian Basel Adra, is Israeli Yuval Abraham. Abraham must have undoubtedly been subject to "Jewish self-hatred," which German officials are obviously best placed to identify. Indeed, if there is a scandal, it is the somewhat reckless use of the particularly defamatory accusation of anti-Semitism by German officials – without considering the serious consequences for Abraham and his family in the Israel led by PM Netanyahu, Ben Gvir, and Smotrich.

23 Article 5 of the German Basic Law states that "every person has the right freely to express and disseminate their opinions in speech, writing, and pictures" and that "freedom of the press and freedom of reporting by means of broadcasts and films shall be guaranteed, with no censorship".

Instead of learning from this grotesque reversal that had taken place only a few months before, the signatories of the Bundestag resolution, ranging from the Greens to the AfD, seem determined to stand their ground. Thus the "Berlinale scandal," and the "Documenta scandal," before, far from being unique, point to a strong trend toward closing political debates in the cultural field.

If only one more example were needed, we could cite the repeated setbacks encountered since at least 2009 by the critical Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, a specialist in the Nakba, during his visits as a lecturer in Germany, or, more recently and in the post-7 October context, the lectures cancelled by the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich and the Free University of Berlin of the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 Francesca Albanese in February 2025, following pressure of the Berlin governing mayor Kai Wegner, a politician of the conservative Christian Democratic Union.[24]

It should be noted that the so-called "Berlinale scandal," and the "Documenta scandal," are the only two concrete examples of anti-Semitism cited in the "Never Again is now" resolution, and that both of them are two completely non-violent cases, in other words crimes of opinion. The deadly attack on the synagogue in Halle in 2019, perpetrated on Yom Kippur day by a right-wing extremist and resulting in the deaths of two people, which was the most serious anti-Semitic act in recent years in Germany, is not even mentioned.

With this kind of bias, the door is wide open to thought policing, especially since the "Never Again is now" resolution recommends the definition of antisemitism adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in 2016, which was severely criticized even at the time for its vagueness by both lawyers and internationally renowned

24 See Bernd Kastner, "Krieg in Nahost. Berechtigte Kritik oder Antisemitismus?," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27 November 2023, https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/muenchen-vortrag-israel-palaestina-pappe-kuendigung-1.6310208; Bernhard Hübner, "Historiker-Eklat in München Israelkritiker ausgeladen," *taz*, 30 October 2009, https://taz.de/Historiker-Eklat-in-Muenchen/!5153448/ [Last view 21 November 2024].

social scientists. One particular issue was its "inflationary use of the category of 'anti-Semitism relating to Israel' [*israelbezogen*]," as pointed out by Israeli historian Moshe Zimmermann. This would pave the way for "McCarthyism prohibiting any criticism of Israel," according to the well-known Jewish-German essayist Micha Brumlik.[25] Several hundred intellectuals (including Zimmermann, Brumlik, Neiman, Aleida Assmann, Carlo Ginzburg, Philippe Sands, Omer Bartov, and Michael Stolleis) then initiated the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism, a counterproposal that was more precise and concrete than the IHRA definition.

There is therefore a fundamental ambiguity surrounding the definition of anti-Semitism in the Bundestag resolution of November 2024; mirroring this, there is also uncertainty surrounding the far too vague definition of the "Jewish life in Germany" that the text promises to "protect, preserve, and strengthen." What exactly does "*jüdisches Leben*" mean? Reading and rereading the text, one searches in vain for clarification. Does it simply refer to "Jewish presence," in other words, Jewish fellow citizens and Jewish residents from other countries, a presence that was thought "impossible" after the Holocaust, and yet is still there eighty years later?[26] In this case, no one will dispute that there is reason to "be grateful," as the Bundestag resolution states. But the systematic use of the singular without an article also gives "*jüdisches Leben*" a raw, absolute character: is it that of "bare life," as understood by thinkers of "biopolitics"? This is a strong hypothesis that needs further investigation. In any case, this brings to mind the reflections of French-Israeli philosopher Elad Lapidot on "anti-anti-Semitism." Anti-anti-Semitism, he writes, has "a propensity to speak about the Jews it seeks to protect. The denial of essentialism is therefore not a pure denial; on the contrary, it presupposes a certain form of collective existence, of Jewishness. It even produces it. But the essence of this collec-

25 Klaus Holz, "Definitionen von Antisemitismus," *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, 25 October 2024, https://www.bpb.de/themen/antisemitismus/dossier-antisemitismus/555654/definitionen-von-antisemitismus/ [Last view 21 November 2024].

26 Lynn Rapaport, *Jews in Germany after the Holocaust: Memory, Identity, and Jewish-German Relations* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

tive existence is precisely that it has no essence. [...] Anti-anti-Semitism is a discourse of legitimization that legitimizes the negative political epistemology of Jewishness".[27]

This subtle philosophical dialectic highlights that a minimum of conceptual precision would have been much needed in a text designed for political implementation. Unfortunately, the resolution adopted by German members of parliament to "defend, preserve, and strengthen Jewish life" simply 'recommends' the use of the IHRA definition – which is not binding – and presents itself as a simple "resolution" – which has no legal force. Precisely, will the semantic vagueness, added to the legal vagueness of an infra-legislative text, not have the effect of promoting administrative arbitrariness, preventive practices, and ultimately censorship and self-censorship, particularly with regard to cultural and scientific subsidies?

However, the text of the Bundestag resolution explicitly calls for the uninhibited use of financial leverage, that wonderful tool for guiding and influencing the research agenda. Quote: "The Länder, the federal government, and the municipalities are required, if they have not already done so, to develop legally binding rules, particularly in the area of budgeting, to ensure that no program or project with anti-Semitic objectives or content receives subsidies."

It is easy to speculate on how these injunctions will now be implemented. The most pessimistic may wonder whether the damage has already been done. There is indeed already a precedent, in the form of the Bundestag resolution "Firmly oppose the BDS movement – Fight anti-Semitism," passed by a Grüne-SPD-FDP-CDU alliance in May 2019 with focus on activities of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement that a large number of German parties considered to be antisemitic in 2019. The resolution "Never Again is now" refers to this previous resolution, explicitly placing itself in line with it. However, experience since 2019 sheds light on the restrictive mindset with which

27 Elad Lapidot, *Anti-Anti-Semitismus. Eine philosophische Kritik* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2021), 9.

the relevant administrations apply this type of text. The Initiative for Openness to the World [*Initiative Weltoffenheit*] had already warned of possible abuses. These abuses have indeed occurred, according to Wolfgang Kaleck, Secretary General of the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, who lists around 100 cultural events, planned by institutions as diverse as the Protestant Academy Bad Boll, the University of Bayreuth, and the famous Volksbühne in Berlin, that have been obstructed or outright banned with explicit reference to the anti-BDS resolution. The list is growing long of international thinkers who have been at the centre of exhausting controversies, from the awarding of the 2023 Hannah Arendt Prize to Masha Gessen to the contested invitation of Achille Mbembe to the Ruhrtriennale (2020). A more recent example is the abrupt cancellation, on the day itself (November 29, 2024), of a debate with Vincent Lemire, a renowned French scholar and former director of the French CNRS-led Centre de recherches français de Jerusalem, who had come to present his popular illustrated *History of Jerusalem*, by the Urania theatre in Berlin. This was only a further step in censorship or self-censorship, on the dubious pretext that the co-debater, Volker Beck (Die Grünen), president of the German-Israeli Society, had suddenly withdrawn.

Meanwhile, it is clear for all but the German authorities that the hasty assimilation of any criticism of Israeli policy with anti-Semitism leads to a serious withdrawal into oneself, since acclaimed scholars in genocide studies like Israeli historians Raz Segal, Amos Goldberg, Omer Bartov, use the word genocide for Gaza, which is still taboo in German official discourse. Protected by her fame, Nan Goldin, an international star of photography, spoke out loudly at the opening of the retrospective of her work, entitled "This Will Not End Well" [sic], at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin on November 23: "Are you listening, Germany? [...] What have you learned, Germany? [Shouts from the audience: Nothing, nothing!...] – Never again means never again for everyone".[28]

28 The scene was filmed live. See DawnNews English, "Nan Goldin Opens Exhibition In Berlin with Fiery Speech against Israel," *YouTube* [video], 24 November 2024, https://www.youtube.

This situation is not only grotesque but tragic in view of the uninterrupted German arms deliveries to Israel in the midst of the ongoing genocide in Gaza. With a touch of sarcasm, a historian in modern history and the director of the Berlin Wissenschaftskolleg (Berlin Institute of Advanced Study) Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger expressed her surprise at the reversal of roles as soon as November 2024, while commenting the Bundestag resolution on antisemitism:

> Here we have ethnic Germans arrogating to themselves the right to accuse Israeli "leftists" critical of their government, or international researchers, often Jewish, from different countries around the world of being serious anti-Semites who are unaware of their own prejudices, she noticed! She concluded: "When we ask ourselves, as Germans, what should follow from German responsibility and guilt, I don't think the conclusion should be to support Israeli policy unconditionally and in all circumstances; the only conclusion we should come to is to defend human rights unconditionally and in all circumstances.

It must be said that, so far, these wise words do not seem to be shared by the German authorities.[29]

Conclusion

Noticing a "malaise in German memory culture" is nothing new. Memories are by definition plural and subject to debate, so it could hardly be otherwise. *Unease in the Memory Culture* is the title of a book by Aleida Assmann, the leading figure in German memory studies, which dates back to 2013. It might even be better to translate it as *Memory Culture and Its Discontents* because the original German title is a transparent reference to Freud's work *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

com/watch?v=kLfeJhtrqlw&t=435s [Last view 24 November 2024].

29 Massive Kritik an Antisemitismus-Resolution des Bundestages.

For a long time, however, at least as far as the Holocaust is concerned, the diagnosis had focused mainly on the inauthenticity of empty formulas of remembrance – that unpleasant dose of "pathos" and "kitsch" tainting the memory of Auschwitz, to use two terms frequently employed by the writer and former deportee Ruth Klüger (1931-2020). In fact, the most grandiloquent speeches on Auschwitz or Buchenwald can always mask a certain routine, or false theatralization; commemorative practices, increasingly ritualized, become autonomous; detached from their tragic referent, they do not immunize anymore against incomprehension, rejection, or indifference.

These nagging questions are as old as the endless debates on *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) in the 1950s and 1960s. But the new discomfort with memory culture as practiced in today's Germany is of a different nature. It stems from a fatal convergence of two different phenomena. Firstly, there is a clear tendency towards a dogmatic use of what the Australian historian and specialist in genocide studies Dirk Moses provocatively called the 'German catechism', which overlooks necessary doubts and revisions, coupled with a complacent immobility inherited from decades of alleged excellence.[30] Germans are often considered the "world champions of commemoration, after having been world champions of mass crimes," as Götz Aly, one of the most innovative historians of Nazism in recent decades who is never shy of sarcasm, once said.[31]

Nothing illustrates this dogmatic process better, regarding to the complex entanglement of historical guilt, present German-Israeli relationship, and the fear of being accused of antisemitism, than the increasingly frequent and authoritarian, and moreover truncated, use of Chancellor Merkel's famous phrase from her speech to the Knesset in 2008: "Germany's historical responsibility is part [ist Teil] of my

30 A. Dirk Moses, "The German Catechism," in *The New Fascism Syllabus*, 23 May 2021, https://newfascismsyllabus.com/opinions/the-catechism-debate/the-german-catechism/ [Retrieved 19 February 2025].

31 Götz Aly, *Unser Nationalsozialismus. Reden in der deutschen Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2023).

country's raison d'état. This means that for me, as German Chancellor, Israel's security will never be negotiable." This passage was already problematic at the time, because a great democracy cannot fundamentally claim "reason of state," reserved for exceptional situations, when it comes to sacrificing the rights of an individual to safeguard the 'higher' interest of the state, which is by its very nature contrary to the democratic "rule of law"? Even more problematic is the reduction, over time, of this passage from Merkel's speech to a kind of simplistic axiom with quasi-legal force, amounting to saying (or thinking): "Because of Auschwitz, Israel's security is and will always remain Germany's raison d'état." In light of the ongoing massacres in Gaza and the ICJ arrest warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former Defense Minister Yoav Gallant for war crimes and crimes against, a return to more complex thinking is urgently needed.

Secondly, if a dogmatic use of memory culture is no longer appropriate, it is because the world is indeed changing before our eyes. Established haphazardly in the 1980s for the "old" FRG, and after the fall of the Wall for reunified Germany as a whole, the "classic" German memory culture, due to its inadequacy in relation to reality and repeated major discrepancies between principles and practices, is now "threatened with exhaustion." This is a quotation by Karl Schlögel, one of the most renowned specialists in Eastern European history, who received the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 2025. In his "Short guide to organizing your thoughts in the face of world disorder," the last chapter of *Ukraine : A Nation on the Borderland*, the Ukraine specialist starts with "the obsolescence of models and patterns of thought":

> Inexorably, the images we know best, our icons of barbarism and destruction, are currently being overwritten by new images, while our visual and rhetorical vocabulary inherited from history is being overwritten by a lexical layer that refers directly to the present day. [...] It is not possible to simply return to our cultures of memory while ignoring this experience of the present.

> The great rearrangement of the topography of crimes and resistance in Europe that we are currently experiencing will affect all our old concepts to a greater or lesser extent.[32]

This does not mean that Germany should suddenly abandon all its fundamental principles, particularly those relating to overcoming deadly ideologies. The negative memory of the Holocaust, on which post-war German democratic culture was built and which is the focus of this article, rightly remains central. Moreover, it is far from being the only area at the intersection of politics, geopolitics, and memory where there is now a glaring discrepancy between the institutional and financial power of German educational and memorial structures and the obvious weakness of their responses to current challenges. Another example is the disconnect between the field of research on Central and Eastern Europe, which has been remarkably dynamic, innovative, and diverse since the 1990s, and the inertia of a privileged dialogue with Russia, pursued at all costs by German leaders throughout the 2000s and 2010s, until Putin's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These contradictions and missteps call for an urgent critical re-examination of the current triad of memory culture, domestic politics, and geopolitics. Currently, even after the recognition of an independent State of Palestine by 10 Western countries including Portugal, Great Britain, and France at the UN general assembly in September 2025, Germany seems still willing to stick to outdated geopolitical priority partnerships. As its isolation appears even clearer, there are more and more voices who point out that this disastrous choice takes place at the risk of being prosecuted before international justice for complicity in international crimes. The leaders of Germany, including a large part of its political class, as can be seen around the Bundestag resolution, play a fatal role in this situation. But a certain comfort in memory culture, a routine of most cultural, and educational actors, is no longer appropriate either – that of the guardians of memory, humming their lessons and

32 Karl Schlögel, *Ukraine: A Nation on the Borderland* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

perpetuating their positions and programs, without questioning the relevance of their sanitized knowledge in the face of ongoing disasters. "It is relatively easy to place oneself on the right side of history when one has not participated in it and has the privilege of belonging to a later generation," writes Schlögel, "it is much more difficult and risky to choose which side to take today." Whether the German culture of remembrance in its current form is up to date and what a memory culture of tomorrow might look like, the future will show. While coming to terms with Nazi crimes is firmly anchored in the culture of remembrance, other historical traumas remain far less present like the reassessment of colonial crimes[33], (post-)migrant voices, and far right violences in post-Reunification Germany.[34] One can already guess that today's tragic impasses of German foreign policy and the distorsions in German memory culture will also be subject to a painful reappraisal tomorrow.

33 Jürgen Zimmerer, ed., *Kein Platz an der Sonne. Erinnerungsorte der deutschen Kolonialgeschichte* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2013).

34 Efsun Kisilay, "Mölln, NSU, Halle, Hanau – Rechtsterror, Kontinuität und deutsche (Nicht-) Erinnerung," in *Erinnerungskämpfe*, 495-512; Asal Ardan, *Traumaland. Eine Spurensuche in deutscher Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main: Rowohlt, 2025).

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