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Book Reviews

Esra Özyürek. *Subcontractors of Guilt: Holocaust Memory & Muslim Belonging in Postwar Germany*
Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023

Reviewed by Stefan Gunther

As early as 1995, James E. Young, referring to the “social effects of public memorial spaces” (p.20) in Germany, stated that “Holocaust memorial work in Germany today remains a tortured, self-reflective, even paralyzing preoccupation.” (p.21) He continues with a series of questions: “How does a state recite, much less commemorate, the litany of its misdeeds, making them part of its reason for being? Under what memorial aegis, whose rules, does a nation remember its own barbarity? Where is the tradition for memorial *mea culpa*, when combined remembrance and self-indictment seem so hopelessly at odds?” (p.22)

Özyürek’s book seeks to provide updated specificity to the contours and rhetorical guardrails inscribed in the definition and exercise of German memory culture, with specific reference to “members of society who are not ethnically German” (p.1). She argues that German memory culture “regarded racialized groups, such as the Muslim-background Germans who helped to build postwar Germany, as both external and irrelevant to the postwar public German narrative of democratization.” (p.1)

In order to demonstrate the exclusion of Muslim-background Germans from the performative script of Holocaust memorialization in Germany, Özyürek commences her discussion with a condensed history, after World War II, of the genesis and chronological development of Germany’s (both East and West) memory culture.

She locates the origin of today’s memory culture — as well as the current inclination by the majority of the German population to project unparalleled progress towards atonement for the Holocaust — within the propensity by the US occupying power for crafting a “narrative that would explain Nazism as a psychocultural problem specific to German culture” (p.9), which “ignored contemporaneous social and economic explanations for the rise of National Socialism.” (p.9)

This approach, according to the author, resulted in a conception of democracy as “a personal journey one must make” that included the “possibility of learning to empathize with past victims” (p.13).

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However, “[u]nlike ethnic Germans, immigrant-background Germans do not have…Nazi stories to discover in their family history” and, as a result, have no “path forward …to demonstrate they, too, are atoning for the crimes their ancestors committed in the name of the German nation.” (p.19)

Given that the majority of Subcontractors of Guilt consists of a close ethnographic reading of programs around Holocaust memory designed by and for Germans with Muslim background, this introduction feels occasionally argumentatively somewhat foreshortened; a more detailed diachronic approach to the evolution of discourse in Germany around the Holocaust would account for the complexities of this discourse over the last 75 years.

However, Özyürek’s exploration of the positionality of Muslim-background Germans as different from ethnic Germans relative to the commemoration of the Holocaust, is trenchant, especially when she discusses the provisional nature of admission to the German social contract for the former group, unless they participate in the majority-culture discourse around the Holocaust.

Chapter 2, “Rebelling Against the Father, Democratizing the Family” sets up a type of isomorphic relationship between the post-World War II reeducation efforts required of ethnic Germans, which resulted in what some commentators have termed the civic religion of Holocaust remembrance, and a putatively necessary transition Muslim-background Germans have to negotiate — replacing the “authoritarian fathering practices of Muslim families [which] result in violent, paranoid and antisemitic adolescents fit only for, and therefore uniquely vulnerable to, authoritarian ideologies” (p.36) with tolerant attitudes around ethnic and religious diversity, sexuality and violence.

Thus, the implicit argument is that “the ethnic Germans of today have reached the final destination of their seventy-five-year journey toward democratization and may at last unburden themselves of the sins of their Nazi fathers: now Muslim minority groups are ready to take on the democratization mantle and walk in their shoes by rebelling against their own fathers.” (pp.68-9)

Chapter 3, “Export-Import Theory of Muslim Antisemitism in Germany” addresses the widely held assumption in Germany, which underpins the Heroes and Muslims in Auschwitz programs ethnographically analyzed by the author later in the book, that while antisemitism’s origins are to be located in Europe, it is indeed the essential “inadequacies of Turkish and Arab cultures” (p.101) that constitute the main impediment “to a proper, or properly European, repentance.” (p.101)
This theory of course ignores that the vast majority of antisemitic crimes are committed by “right-wing, white Christian background Germans” (p.71) and that the positing of a disjuncture between historical (and ostensibly overcome) ethnic German antisemitism and contemporary antisemitism exhibited by Muslim-background Germans is problematic (not to mention that the implicit diachronic progression between these two modes ignores that aspects of both varieties, to some extent, do coexist currently).

Özyürek concludes that the “most pernicious outcome of understanding antisemitism as a malignant ideology exported from and then imported back into Europe by Muslims is that it makes perpetrators out of marginalized, racialized, and disadvantaged people. Once it is discursively established that Muslims are antisemitic — or worse, that they do not atone for their antisemitism—it becomes difficult to recognize their position as victims in relation to European racism” (p.102).

The second half of the book begins with Chapter 3, “Wrong Emotions/Wrong Empathy for the Holocaust,” which further analyzes the constituent elements of German memory culture (replete with a description of how West and East German memory cultures merged towards the West German model after reunification) and the demands made of Muslim-background Germans for the “right emotional identification.” (p.121)

The author’s fieldwork documents, for instance, the experience elicited by Holocaust memorial sites for Muslim participants, whose reaction, in distinction to their ethnic German counterparts, is one of fear of being discriminated against and persecuted. She argues that when Muslim-background Germans accentuate their own marginalized status as one possible reaction and contribution to Holocaust remembrance, that speech act automatically is in conflict with the expected model of the “repentant German perpetrator.” (p.121)

Drawing on Husserlian concepts of intersubjective connectivity and empathy, she adds that “the emotions triggered by standing in someone else’s shoes begin and end in the shoes one already has on. Beginning and ending their journey in very different shoes, an ethnic majority German and a racialized minority German will feel quite differently when putting themselves in the shoes of the victims.” (p.129)

The remainder of Subcontractors of Guilt consists of Chapters 4, “Subcontracting Guilt, Policing Victimhood” and Chapter 5, “Visiting Auschwitz as Pilgrimage and as Shock Therapy,” and discusses the author’s ethnographic approach to the Muslims in Auschwitz program that seeks to address the question of mitigating the existence of antisemitism amongst some immigrant background German youth.
Through theater projects (whose design includes their immigrant background German youth actors) and visits to Auschwitz for whom participants are meticulously prepared, *Muslims in Auschwitz* aims to examine the “many and varied forms of discrimination towards Jews — everyday slurs, violence toward Jews, vandalism of Jewish symbols, antisemitic propaganda used by Hamas” and how discrimination “can potentially turn into something like fascism and eventually lead to something like the Holocaust.” (p.134)

In this context, Özyürek argues that the project establishes a linkage between antisemitism and genocide and provides its participants with tools to recognize and address those touchpoints, but that it also falls short in not highlighting a nexus between racism and fascism, thus missing an opportunity also to address the “ongoing discrimination against Muslims in contemporary Germany.” (p.134)

She furthermore considers programs like *Muslims in Auschwitz* as a tangible corollary of minority youth’s commitment to the societally sanctioned rhetoric around the memorialization of the Holocaust in Germany and thus a conduit towards acceptance into the larger societal contract via the performance of the proper script.

This script “enables them to insert themselves into public German Holocaust discourse as authorized and acceptable members” (p.152); indeed, these successfully performed narratives give the youth a chance to present social performances of their commitment to German history.” (p.153)

Despite embracing this rhetorical role, however, the author maintains that participants gain “only partial and conditional entry into the German social contract” (p.158), due to institutionally codified racism against racialized minorities and habitual accusations of antisemitism and sexism, notwithstanding their involvement in the program.

Chapter 5, against the backdrop of a group of Muslim-background German youth visiting Auschwitz, charts both the participants’ emerging self-identification as Germans as a result of their visit and the transformative impact their positionality in German society has on the future development of Holocaust memorialization in Germany at large.

The author states that, “[w]hereas family trips [by members of the group] to Turkey, Lebanon, or Iraq made them think about the complicated ties they have with these countries as part of the diaspora in Germany, the trip to Poland made them aware that for the first time in their lives they were being perceived not as Turks, Arabs, or Kurds but as Germans.” (p.186)
While these elements of identity formation were external, participants also spoke eloquently about the internal dynamics resulting from their visit. Özyürek describes participants as having the “strongest feelings when they identified with the victims and likened them to their own family members, their own status of religious minorities, and their own feeling of being German but not accepted as German.”

“Engaging with the Holocaust made them reflect on being German, but it did not always lead them to identify with the white German majority position.” (p.201) Combining a metalinguistic awareness of the defining elements of prevailing Holocaust memorialization discourse in Germany thus allows minority youth to gain the social capital to locate themselves within the German social compact (however tenuously), while at the same time transforming what the author calls “German memory theater” through their unique positionality and experiences qua their minority and racialized status.

As Özyürek states, “genuine critical engagement with the Nazi past [by minority youth], when done … seriously, authentically, and faithfully, opens space for talking about German society as a whole and a unique opportunity to legitimately critique it.” (p.208)

Esra Özyürek’s *Subcontractors of Guilt* is a valuable contribution to the literature about Holocaust memorialization in Germany; the role Muslim immigrants in Germany take on in performing its societally sanctioned script; and the impact their actions will have on transforming this very discourse. It is recommended reading for anyone interested in the “state of Holocaust memory in multicultural Germany.” (p.131)