



Verantwortungsbewusstsein - On German Responsibility

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For many years now we have met Germans who declare that they are ashamed of being German. I have often felt tempted to answer that I am ashamed of being human. - Hannah Arendt

Because I am German I take my country's genocidal history seriously, and because of this I stand for the freedom of the Palestinian people. In fact, I believe we have a responsibility to do so. The path from *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* to *Verantwortungsbewusstsein* - from knowledge of our past to a sense of responsibility for it - is what this piece is about.



Since my early childhood, I carry the weight of what it means to be German in the face of the unfathomable horrors of the Holocaust. Growing up, I have been guided through the process of reckoning with my country's past. And through this *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* I have come to know that in order to be German, to be human, I have to commit to the motto "Never Again".

Yet, in Germany, we [struggle](#) to apply this very same principle to our own colonial past. An observation that has too often been relegated to a footnote, but which is of utmost importance to understanding the current state of racially grounded historical amnesia regarding the conflict in Gaza. Is it really *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, when we turn a blind eye to the creation of the state of Israel, one that is inextricably linked to colonialism?

We know so little of the history of the region and of Europe's imperial part in it. Palestine was a British mandate (as part of the British Empire), and despite having been [promised](#) freedom, the land was also promised to Zionists looking to establish a Jewish homeland in the face of centuries of persecution. In 1947, after the horrors of the Holocaust, the land was partitioned, in a political move that was in keeping with the imperial habit of partitioning and occupying lands where other people already lived (see the creation of the USA, South Africa, and German South West Africa, to name a few). In 1948, British forces left, war broke out, and Israel claimed independence. In what is known as the '[Nakba](#)', over 700,000 Palestinians (half of the population) were forced out of their homelands and over 500 Palestinian villages were 'de-populated' and destroyed, in what can only be called an ethnically motivated expulsion. Ever since, Israel has been expanding its territory, occupying Palestinian land, refusing Palestinians' right of return, and, according to the [UN Special Rapporteur](#), "wilfully pursuing the 'de-Palestinianisation' of the occupied territory." This makes it a settler-colonial state. We must face this truth.

This [settler colonial state](#) has since engaged in the dehumanisation of the Palestinian people in order to justify its own existence. The use of racial typology is an import of imperial Europe, and has for centuries been used to justify colonial



dispossession and oppression. Douglas Duff, a British imperial officer stationed in Palestine in the early 1930s, [referred to](#) the Palestinians of Haifa as such: “Most of us were so infected by the sense of our own superiority over these ‘lesser breeds’ that *we scarcely regarded these people as human.*”

This colonial legacy is lingering. In the wake of the recent horrific attack of Hamas, on October 9th Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant justified the siege of Gaza in the following de-humanising terms: “We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly.”

Human animals.

He subsequently [vowed](#) that “Gaza won’t return to what it was before. We will eliminate everything.” Since, Israel has engaged in a bombing campaign of Gaza that is so forceful that it can only be [called out for what it is](#): genocide. *Again.*

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For us Germans and, in fact, for Europe, facing up to the Holocaust means facing up to a crime against humanity. “Never again” means never again shall we take part in, or stand by when people are denied their status as humans and subjected to genocidal violence and ethnic cleansing. It is that simple. And if the state of Israel is the perpetrator, then we have an obligation to stand against it.

Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz, however, pledged unconditional support to the state of Israel. [Declaring](#) that “Our own history, the responsibility we bear as a result of the Holocaust, make it our permanent task to stand up for the existence and security of the state of Israel. This responsibility is our guide.” Further, Friedrich Merz, the leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), has [called for](#) anyone wishing to acquire German citizenship to pledge allegiance to the state of Israel. What twisted logic, for our nationalist past to be tied to a nationalist



present!

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Despite Scholz calling his politics “responsibility,” Germany is driven by its historical guilt. In what it believes to be an act of atonement for the Holocaust, it has pledged unconditional support to the state of Israel. Guilt will always drive inward-looking and self-serving politics. We need to be braver. How is it *Verantwortungsbewusstsein* when we pledge support to a state that has set out to eliminate an entire population? Are we afraid to call out Israel because it is framed as anti-Semitism? It is as if our support of Israel were a cocoon we can nest in to nurse our sense of guilt.

Germany – followed by much of Europe – silenced by its guilt-driven allegiance to Israel, has not only been silent on the ongoing genocidal violence. It has also engaged in a kind of [censorship](#) forcing the German people, once again, to be complicit in a genocide. We should be enraged at our history being used to fund, abet, and justify another genocide. The justification of one genocide based on our history of another. It is a perverted logic. A logic that is composed not of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, but of colonial amnesia and not *Verantwortungsbewusstsein*, but of guilt. Never Again.

It is our responsibility not to simply call for peace, but to also call for freedom. Palestinians cannot be forced to return to an [open air prison](#) and continue to be classified as sub-humans in an [Apartheid system](#). As Germans, as Europeans, in fact as humans, let’s take responsibility and say, “we got this wrong.” Let’s take our *Verantwortungsbewusstsein* seriously, and fully engage our *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, our history, and our complicity, and invest in finding a solution – one where everyone can be free from persecution.

They say we will be judged by history, but I hope we can use our history to ensure that this will *never again* happen in the present. Before it is too late.