

We have come much further: The dispute over Achille Mbembe ignores a longstanding debate about the comparability of the Holocaust

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Since accusations of antisemitism were made against the Cameroon-born philosopher and political theorist Achille Mbembe by the *Antisemitismusbeauftragter der Bundesregierung*, Felix Klein, the political and public debate surrounding Mbembe's continues to gain attention both in Germany and internationally. On 25 March, Free Democratic Party (FDP) group spokesperson of the party's North Rhine-Westphalian faction, Lorenz Deutsch, criticised Stefanie Carp, director of the Ruhrtriennale, for inviting Mbembe to give a speech at the opening of the major international cultural festival. In an interview on 15 April with the *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, Klein supported Deutsch and accused Mbembe of questioning Israel's legitimacy and of relativizing the Holocaust in his work. According to Klein, Mbembe drew comparisons between South Africa's apartheid system and the Holocaust which, for Klein, "is prohibited in view of the unprecedented crimes during the Nazi era, in particular given Germany's historical responsibility for them." („was sich angesichts der beispiellosen Verbrechen in der NS-Zeit und insbesondere angesichts der historischen Verantwortung Deutschlands dafür, verbietet.“)

German media has largely followed Klein's assessment and portrayed the notion of comparing or juxtaposing the Holocaust with colonialism and colonial violence as a delicate topic. In line with this view, Mbembe noted in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on the 15 May that he respects the "German taboos, but they are not everyone's taboos." („Ich respektiere die deutschen Tabus, aber es sind nicht die Tabus aller anderen Menschen . . .“) The stances of Deutsch, Klein and indeed certain media publications would seem to point to the existence of "German taboos" regarding limiting comparisons with the Holocaust. However, the theory of a

moral or scholarly prohibition on such comparisons is, in fact, a generally outdated one within the field of Holocaust Studies. For almost twenty years, historians have seriously debated the potential similarities and links between not only colonialism and Nazi expansion into Eastern Europe, but also between colonial violence and the Holocaust. While certain historians have explored the potential for direct lines of causal continuity between German colonial violence in Africa and the Holocaust (for example, the historian Jürgen Zimmerer), others have placed the Holocaust within the context of Nazi Germany's imperial fantasies.

Although not all historians endorse the Holocaust's comparative potential and some argue that the Nazi crimes are a break from earlier colonial patterns of violence, the debate is still very much ongoing. The discussion has hitherto demonstrated that viewing the Holocaust in total comparative isolation hinders our ability to attempt to fully investigate it. Recent research has begun to move past theories of any direct causal linkages between the African colonies and the German-conquered Eastern European territories and instead investigates empirical similarities, as well as dissimilarities, between the Third Reich and European colonial powers. These include such research topics as inclusionary and exclusionary policies, societal hierarchies, discourses and language, motivations of perpetrators and the role of the state in facilitating violence. Specifically, parallels and contrasts between South African Apartheid and the racialized society of the Third Reich have previously been highlighted by historians such as Devin O. Pendas.

The scholarly fields of Holocaust Studies and Colonial Studies have tended to operate in separate realms, yet the debate on the potential areas of comparability between the two has opened up opportunities for scholars of mass violence and genocide to collaborate and deepen discussion and analysis. The workshop "Colonial Paradigms of Violence: Comparative Analysis of the Holocaust, Genocide and Mass Killing", co-organised by the Zentrum für Holocaust-Studien and the Hugo Valentin Centre, is an example of this. The workshop will take place from 11-13 November 2020 at the Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich and will be attended

by both German and international participants. The opening podium discussion on 11 November will provide an insight into the debate on the strengths and weaknesses of comparing the Holocaust with other examples of genocides and mass killing in colonial contexts. During the panels on the 11 and 12 November, as well as discussing Nazi violence alongside projects of settler colonial violence and empire-building, participants also aim to discuss the ideologies underpinning mass violence and the aftermath of atrocities both in and outside of Europe. The Holocaust will thus be integrated into wider investigations of the numerous violent events committed in the name of empire by states and individuals who sought to conquer foreign territories and subjugate perceived ethnic others.

Within the historical debate on comparisons between colonial contexts and the Holocaust, it remains clear that there are not only similarities but also dissimilarities present. However, the aim of historians is not to equalise instances of violence, nor is it to create a morbid genocide spectrum. Rather, comparative analysis is a tool used by historians to help understand both the similarities and differences within processes and patterns of violence. Scholarly comparison does not rob examples of mass killing and genocide of the elements which make them individual or unprecedented; instead, it helps to create a framework through which significant similarities can be identified and assessed. No individual event of mass violence can, nor should, have a monopoly over other events of mass violence. Scholars have gradually begun to recognise this by moving away from the idea of the singularity of the Holocaust and by beginning to embrace alternative avenues of research and interpretation which can assist with the recognition and analysis of longstanding traditions of violence. As the Mbembe case has highlighted, it is time for others to also embrace these alternatives.