

Why German State Racism Is Now Directed at the Palestinians

The Holocaust serves, paradoxically, as an alibi for Europeans to assume they are morally superior to others, as the cancellation of an arts prize to Caryl Churchill shows

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There are troubling insights to be gained into modern European racism from the German arts community's decision to [revoke](#) a lifetime achievement award to the respected British playwright [Caryl Churchill](#) over her trenchant support for the [Palestinians](#).

On 31 October, Churchill was stripped of the European Drama Prize she had been given in April in recognition of her life's work. The decision was backed by **Petra Olschowski**, the arts minister of the state of Baden-Wurttemberg, who [said](#):

"We as a country take a clear and non-negotiable stance against any form of antisemitism. This is all the more reason why a prize funded by the state cannot be awarded under the given circumstances."

The jury - comprising eminent figures in German cultural life - said they had had their attention drawn, since making the award, to two problems. First, Churchill had backed [BDS](#), a Palestinian grassroots movement calling for a boycott of Israeli institutions directly involved in [Israel](#)'s decades-long oppression of the Palestinians.

Back in 2019, an overwhelming majority of the German parliament designated support for [BDS as "antisemitic"](#).

And second, the panel had been reminded of a short play called [Seven Jewish Children](#), written 13 years ago in the immediate aftermath of Israel's savage and extended bombardment of [Gaza](#)'s besieged Palestinian population in the winter of 2008-09. In a statement, the German jury [said](#) the play could "be regarded as being antisemitic".

In Churchill's now largely forgotten play, Jewish parents articulate their trauma generation by generation.

Palestinians are not present. They are shadows. They are the referred pain of a wound from Europe. Instead, the play contextualises the suffering in Gaza through a series of monologues as each generation of Jewish parents struggles to decide what they should tell their children and what realities they should hide – be it about the horrors of [Europe](#), the crimes involved in the creation of Israel, or the bombardment of Gaza.

The play hints at uncomfortable truths: that the oppressed can turn into oppressor; that traumas do not necessarily heal or enlighten; and that their effects can be complex and paradoxical.

Friends to tormentors

One conclusion to draw from the revocation of Churchill's award – the latest episode in Europe's endless "antisemitism rows" – is that German elites, who control the public discourse, have signally failed to internalise the Holocaust's key lesson.

It is a universal one: that we should never tolerate the demonisation of oppressed and marginalised groups, or those who stand in solidarity with them, especially when the state itself or its representatives are behind such demonisation. That way lies pogroms and gas chambers.

How has support for the Palestinian cause of BDS – for boycotts of those directly involved in Israel's decades-long oppression and ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians – come to be reinterpreted as racism against Jews?

This, of course, is not a uniquely German failing. Most western states – including the [US](#), [France](#) and [Britain](#) – have willingly conflated criticism of Israel over its oppression of Palestinians with antisemitism, and sought to silence or criminalise calls to punish Israel through boycotts.

But this failure ought to be all the more surprising given the enormous efforts Germany has expended over many decades in [Holocaust education](#), supposedly to eradicate the susceptibility of Germans to state-sponsored racism. How have they switched – so easily, it seems – from one kind of state-sanctioned racism, antisemitism, to another kind, anti-Palestinian racism?

But even more paradoxically, Germany has smeared not just Palestinians and their supporters through its crackdown on BDS, but Jews too. It treats them all as inherently responsible for the actions of Israel, a state that no more represents all Jews than [Saudi Arabia](#) represents all Muslims.

Germany's ostentatious philo-semitism – expressed in its reflexive support for Israel – is simply antisemitism-in-waiting. If Jews are viewed as intrinsically tied to Israel's actions,

then their fate depends on how Israel is viewed at any particular moment. Should western elites support Israel, as they do now, then Jews are safe. Should western elites turn against Israel, then Jews are not safe.

Crucially, what Caryl Churchill and the vast majority of Palestinians and their supporters are highlighting is that Israel and “the Jews” are not the same. Criticism of Israel is not criticism of Jews. And those who claim it is are playing with fire. They are providing the conditions for those they now regard as friends to later become their tormentors.

‘Reeks of fascism’

So how has Germany reached the point where it can cancel an award to a renowned playwright – and smear her as antisemitic – because she supports the right of Palestinians to freedom and dignity and because she wishes to speak out against their silencing in Europe? How has Germany so casually, so unthinkingly, become racist towards Palestinians and their supporters, and once again to Jews?

As Mike Leigh, a famous British film director who is Jewish, [has observed](#) in Churchill’s defence, the decision to revoke the prize “reeks of the very fascism it affects to oppose”. There is a wider context to Germany’s repurposing of its racism.

The same elites who were attracted to a worldview that blamed the Jews, and others, for the subversion of a supposed “Aryan civilisation” are now attracted to a worldview that blames Muslims – including Palestinians (not all of whom are Muslim, it is too often forgotten) – for the subversion of European civilisation.

This monochrome worldview is appealing because it sweeps aside complexity and offers simple solutions that turn the world upside down and place the oppressor, western elites, on the side of Good and those they oppress on the side of Evil. Back in the 1930s and 1940s those solutions propelled Germany towards the horrors of the death camps.

The same racism that fuelled the Holocaust does not, of course, have to lead precisely to another industrial-scale genocide. That supreme crime has nephews and nieces, some of whom ostensibly look less ugly than their older relative. It can lead to exclusion, demonisation and McCarthyism, all of which serve as a prelude to worse crimes.

In our supposedly more enlightened age, the same Manichean impulse divides the world into camps of good and evil. Into “white” European natives versus Muslim and Arab invaders. Into moderates versus extremists. And somehow, conflated with these other categories, it pits supporters of Israel against “antisemites”.

To the dark side

This is no accident. Israel has helped to cultivate this divide, while its supporters have richly exploited it. Israel has provided the cover story for western elites to engineer a supposedly civilisational confrontation between West and East, between the Judaeo-Christian world and the Muslim world, between humanism and barbarism, between good and evil.

This morality tale, paradoxically with the Holocaust serving as its prequel, has been written to reassure western publics of their leaders’ benevolence. It suggests that through its repentance, Germany – the epicentre of the genocide of the Jews – cleansed itself and the

rest of Europe of its sins.

Perversely, the industrialised crime of the Holocaust serves as the alibi for an enlightened Europe. The barometer of German and European atonement and redemption is their reflexive support for Israel. To back Israel uncritically is supposedly proof that today's Europe is morally superior to a global south in which many condemn Israel.

Through Israel's creation, according to this morality tale, Europe did not perpetuate its racism – by relocating its victims to another region and turning them into [the tormentors](#) of the native population. No, Europe turned over a new leaf. It made amends. Its better nature triumphed.

To bolster this improbable story, to breathe life into it, a yardstick of difference was needed. Just as “the Jews” once served that purpose by contrasting a pure Aryan race from a supposedly degenerate Jewish one, now the Muslim world is presented as the antithesis of an advanced white European civilisation.

And anyone who sides with those oppressed by Israel – and by a colonial West that inserted a self-declared Jewish state into the Middle East by destroying the Palestinians' homeland – must be cast out, as Churchill has been by Germany. Such people are no longer part of an enlightened Europe. They have gone over to the dark side. They are traitors, they are antisemites.

‘Confected outrage’

This story, absurd as it sounds, carries great weight outside Germany too. One need only remember that a very short time ago a British political leader, [Jeremy Corbyn](#), came within sight of power before he was crushed by the [same antisemitism smears](#) faced by Churchill.

But there is a notable difference.

In the case of Churchill, it has been harder to contain the backlash – at least outside Germany. Prominent artists, including Jewish actors, directors and writers, have [rushed to her defence](#).

Perhaps more surprising still, so have liberal media outlets in Britain, such as the Guardian, which, according to research, was as [deeply invested](#) as the rest of the establishment media in undermining Corbyn and the anti-racist, anti-imperialist left he briefly led.

Take, for example, this comment from **Dominic Cooke**, an associate director at the National Theatre, defending Churchill's play *Seven Jewish Children*, which he directed at the Royal Court.

He is [quoted sympathetically](#) by the Guardian:

“The confected outrage about Caryl's play was designed to divert attention away from this fact [the large Palestinian death toll caused by Israel's bombardment of Gaza in 2009] and scare possible critics of it into silence.”

He is right. But the “confectioned outrage” directed at Churchill is exactly the same confected outrage that was directed at Corbyn – a confected outrage designed in Corbyn's case both to divert attention from the former Labour leader's anti-imperial opposition to Israel's

oppression of the Palestinians and to scare leftwing critics of Israel into silence.

In Labour's case, simply noting that the outrage had been "confected" - or weaponised - was sufficient grounds to [suspend](#) or expel party members for antisemitism. In fact, it was precisely Corbyn's comment about the problem of antisemitism being "dramatically - overstated" for political reasons that ultimately served as the pretext to oust him from the Labour parliamentary party.

Timid cultural world

There are reasons why prominent artists and establishment media outlets such as the Guardian are coming to the defence of Churchill in a way, and using a forthrightness, they avoided with Corbyn.

In a very real sense, the fight to stand up for Palestinians culturally and artistically is now largely a lost cause. Who can imagine *Seven Jewish Children* being produced in the West End now, as it was 13 years ago? Or Peter Kosminsky, another Jewish signatory of the letter defending Churchill, being allowed to make [The Promise](#), as he was 11 years ago by Channel 4, a drama series that revealed the full panorama of violence associated with Israel's creation and its occupation?

Our cultural world is once again far more timid, more intimidated, in exploring and representing the realities of Palestinian suffering, paradoxically even as those realities are better understood than ever before because of social media.

The other reason Churchill is receiving the kind of support denied to Corbyn is that the cancellation of her award is really a skirmish on the margins of the fight to give voice to Palestinian oppression - the reason the Guardian can afford to indulge it. Defending a respected, elderly playwright from the accusation of antisemitism for a play that was quickly erased from memory incurs no real cost.

Far more was at stake in the battle to defend Corbyn. He had the potential power - had he become prime minister - to make real amends for European colonialism, to really atone, by denying British support and arms for Israel to perpetuate that colonialism in the Middle East and continue its oppression of the Palestinians.

More likely, however, had Corbyn been able to form a government, and been in a position to challenge [Europe's collusion](#) in Israel's crimes against the Palestinians, he would have faced even more savage resistance than he endured as Labour leader - and not just from the British establishment but from a wider western one.

That would have risked exposing as a myth the morality tale Europeans have been encouraged to tell about themselves. It would have risked highlighting the absurdity of the Holocaust alibi for European moral superiority.

Caryl Churchill has been stripped of her award because state-sponsored racism still lies at the heart of the European project. Europe's racism was never cleansed. The seeds of fascism did not go away. They simply need a new time and purpose to flourish once more.

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