

# A matter of state: The politics of German anti-anti-Semitism

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/est](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/est)**Wolfgang Streeck** *Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Köln, Germany*

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Accessing and explicating the complexities of the collective subconscious that underlies a culture requires a hermeneutic skill and a richness of concepts and examples that is not at my disposal. I have nothing to add to Heidrun Frieze's insightful psycho-analysis of the *Tätervolk* that wants to draw a *Schlussstrich* by insisting that it doesn't want to draw a *Schlussstrich*, offering reparation, *Wiedergutmachung*, for what cannot be repaired, hoping to be forgiven the unforgivable by declaring it unforgivable. I will instead focus on a simpler subject, one that lends itself, I hope, to be treated with the less sophisticated toolkit of the political scientist: not the depths of culture but the heights of politics, of government, of state, in particular the contingencies and constraints faced by a German state which had chosen to be the successor state of the *Drittes Reich*, in its dual relationship with its international context and its domestic society.

When the Federal Republic was founded by the three Western Allies in 1949, its first Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, had to govern with what the unconditional surrender had left of the Nazi killing machine. There was hardly anybody else, on both the conservative and the social-democratic side, who knew how to run a ministry, a secret service, a police corps, a court of justice, or injustice as the case might have been. Adenauer, a devout Catholic whom the Nazis had in vain tried to find in his various hideouts, one of them a monastery, appointed as chief of his chancellery a man named Hans Globke, author of the official commentary on the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1936 (*Nürnberger Rassegesetze*). Even so, Adenauer's foremost aim was to get West Germany recognized as a *bona fide* nation-state among others—no Morgenthau solution to the “German question”!—avoiding unification with the Soviet occupation zone which might have led to the neutralization of

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## Corresponding Author:

Wolfgang Streeck, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies, Paulstraße 3, Köln 50676, Germany.

Email: [streeck@mpifg.de](mailto:streeck@mpifg.de)

Germany, demanded by the Soviet Union. Adenauer knew that for this his new state needed another new state, Israel, and its American supporters. It was his good luck that in Israel there was David Ben Gurion, someone who also needed friends, a political realist like Adenauer, at age 63 only ten years younger in 1949 than Adenauer, who was already 73 when he became Chancellor. For Ben Gurion, the continuities between the West German state and the Nazi *Reich* were no reason not to deal with it to mutual advantage. In the years that followed—both men were in office until 1963, when Ben Gurion resigned a few months before Adenauer—he didn't take offense when the Federal Republic did not officially recognize Israel as a state, for fear that the Arab states would in response recognize the German Democratic Republic, subsequent to which West Germany would have to break off diplomatic relations with them, under the so-called *Hallstein-Doktrin* put in place by Adenauer himself.

It is not easy to say exactly what went on in the early years of Israel and the Federal Republic in the triangle between Washington, Tel Aviv, and Bonn. West Germany's Nazi legacy was soon forgiven, certainly by the United States. The US was not just happy to work with the likes of Globke and, for another example, Reinhard Gehlen, chief of the West German foreign intelligence service, who had from 1942 to 1945 been head of *Fremde Heere Ost* (Foreign Armies East), the intelligence service of the German military.<sup>1</sup> The US had also made friends with the Nazi rocket scientist, Wernher von Braun, whom they relocated to Texas together with his team. All of them had been busy until the last days of the war trying to build a miracle missile for Hitler's final victory, the V2, in the process working to death thousands of forced workers in an underground factory; von Braun later famously became the chief of the American space program.

What exactly the Federal Republic did to get Israel to forget who they were dealing with we don't know. Nor do we know whether what the West German state did for Israel was always known to the United States. Future historians will have to find out, for example, whether German aspirations in the 1960s to acquire a nuclear bomb, which finally came to an end when in 1969 Nixon and Kissinger made Germany sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,<sup>2</sup> were secretly aided and abetted by Israel—another country eager early on to become nuclear. Unlike Germany, Israel had access to South Africa's uranium supplies. It also should have had more than a few nuclear physicists capable of working with German colleagues, some of them German-trained.

For West Germany, to be a reliable supporter of Israel, even if much of that support remained covert, it was essential to make its public generally feel good about the new Jewish state, to generate a positive image of Israel as a country, so as to make supporting it appear as a matter of course, even without reference to the past. In the 1950s, Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation sprang up in cities and towns, organized by local Catholic and Protestant parishes. In schools in the late 1950s, well before the Auschwitz trials, movies were shown of life in the kibbutz, and Israelis were commended for turning the desert, left barren by the Arab nomads, into productive farmland where they grew oranges and other delicious fruit and vegetables. Teachers who were former Nazis, this writer remembers, were full of admiration for Israel's citizen soldiers: everyone had to serve, even women; there were, it was claimed, no conscientious objectors; military service took long and training was demanding. There was hardly any mention at the time of what later became known as the Holocaust, and none of the Nakba.

Essentially, Germans learned that the state of Israel had been founded on uninhabited land, somewhat like the expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century into the endless uninhabited spaces west of Appalachia.

This, of course, was not to remain so. With the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and the 1963 to 1965 Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt, the full monstrosity of the German genocide of European Jewry slowly became common knowledge, forcing address of the question of what Germany's Nazi past meant for Germany's democratic present and future. Shortly thereafter, the Six-Day War in June 1967, when Israel captured the Sinai, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, began to divide German opinion on the Middle East; this continued after the Yom Kippur War in the fall of 1973 and with the accumulating indications in its wake that Israel was preparing to annex the conquered lands. In the years that followed, the Jewish settlements in the occupied areas, the destruction by bulldozer of Palestinian villages and farms, the mass incarceration of Palestinians, later the invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 (the latter named Operation Peace for Galilee), the violent suppression of the First Intifada from 1987 to 1993 and the many similar events and developments that followed, undermined pro-Israeli sympathies especially among the German left, ultimately raising the question whether the new democratic Germany owed the state of Israel unconditional support as atonement for the mass murder of Jews under the Nazis.

When in the 1980s and 1990s, it gradually but unmistakably became clear, at the latest after the murder of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, that the Oslo Accords of 1993 and 1995 had been dead on arrival and that Israel would never accept a two-state solution, instead placing its hope for its future as a Jewish state not on a negotiated peace settlement but on military superiority, colonialization and annexation of the occupied areas, and apartheid-like domestic repression. When as a result international hostility against Israel escalated, especially in the Global South, pressures on Germany rose, from Israel and the United States, to intensify its support; today Germany is effectively the only remaining ally of Israel apart from the US. With Israel's survival at stake in an increasingly likely next Middle Eastern war, the German government found itself compelled to revise its reading of the lesson of the *Drittes Reich*—its post-fascist *Staatsraison*.<sup>3</sup> While originally the moral obligation for the German state after Nazism was understood to be to support equally international law and the Jewish state of Israel, now the balance shifted in favor of the latter and at the expense of the former, changing from a universalistic to a particularistic interpretation of Germany's historical debt.<sup>4</sup>

Associated with this was one of the most consequential strategic decisions of the German state in its alliance with Israel. Between 1997 and 2000 Germany supplied three nuclear-capable submarines of the so-called Dolphin Class to the Israeli navy, subsequent to the Gulf War of 1990–1991 which Germany had refused to join. For two Germany paid about half of the costs, the third it paid in full, apparently as compensation for German chemical firms having allegedly sold dual-use chemicals to Iraq in the 1980s. Two more submarines, of an upgraded version (Dolphin II), were ordered in the final months of the Schröder government and delivered in 2014 and 2015, followed by another one in 2019. Another three, upgraded further, are scheduled to be delivered between 2027 and 2029, also partly funded by Germany.

The six Dolphin submarines currently in use are Israel's only ones. While Israel and Germany do not comment on the subject, it is widely taken for granted that Israel has

refitted its submarine fleet for submarine-launched cruise missiles (named “Popeye Turbo”) with nuclear warheads. Israel has neither confirmed nor denied that it is a nuclear power; it is however known to be in possession of the full so-called nuclear tripod, with land-, air- and sea-based carrier systems. Discussion of Israel’s conduct of its wars hardly ever touches on its status as a nuclear power. It is hard to believe, however, that its nuclear capacity, and in particular its possession of unlocalizable submarines that can fire nuclear missiles from any place in the Mediterranean or the Indian Ocean, should not be a major factor explaining Israel’s remarkable intransigence to demands, including American ones, for military moderation, less ambitious war aims, and diplomatic conflict solution.

Safeguarding Germany’s intensifying pro-Israelism politically required increased efforts to sell it to the German public. Against the background of the radicalization of the Israeli anti-two-state solution policy especially in the occupied territories, this must have appeared far from easy. Simply combating looming anti-Israelism with public pro-Israelism was obviously deemed not to be enough. The fight against a rise of anti-Israelism that might prevent Germany from doing for Israel what Israel and the United States considered Germany’s historical duty required identification in the public consciousness of anti-Israelism with anti-Semitism, the genocidal pathology that had turned Germany into the Holocaust state. Preparations for identifying abhorrence of Israeli neo-colonialism in the occupied areas of Palestine with a murderous desire to kill Jews, a desire to be suppressed for the sake of humanity by all means, began early and proceeded slowly. Even at the beginning of the Gaza war, there were still official and quasi-official assurances to be heard that *Israelkritik*, if properly expressed, was not necessarily anti-Semitic. Hardly a year later, anti-Israelism and anti-Semitism have successfully been merged into *Judenhass* (hatred of Jews). It would be interesting to know where in the government machinery, perhaps drawing on the expertise of private sector public relations firms, semantic strategies like these are devised and implemented—so that, for example, nobody in the media, public or private, dares say “Hamas” without the epithet “radical-Islamist,” just as nobody dares say “Israeli government” with an epithet like “radical-Zionist.”

Not that before Gaza the increasingly uninhibited renunciation by Israel of international law and the unwavering support by the German state of “Israel’s right to exist,” in any borders it may desire, had been a big issue in the German public. Still, official efforts to identify disapproval of Israel’s abandonment of a two-state solution with anti-Semitism began as the consequences of the radicalization of Israeli politics and society, not just for Palestinians but also for Germany as Israel’s second-most important ally, slowly filtered into the public consciousness. Debates among intellectuals count little in Germany, unlike for example in France. Still, the powers that be became increasingly concerned about any public manifestation of *Judenhass* as defined, especially where opposition against Israel’s one-state solution policy threatened to become opposition also against Germany’s unconditional support for it. Bureaucracies know no sentiments; they don’t feel emotionally burdened by slogans like “From the river to the sea/Palestine will be free” being chanted in German streets. Public opinion, however, if it might potentially interfere with the German state pursuing its *Staatsraison*, is a problem in need of address, if necessary robust address. Too close is “From the river to

the sea” to the Likud program of as early as 1977 which promises that “between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty,” or to Netanyahu in August 2023: “The entire land of Israel, including the West Bank, is the homeland of the Jewish people. This is our land. This is our nation. Non-Israelis can live here and will have individual rights, but they will not have a national right or the right to self-determination as a people.”<sup>5</sup> What is anti-Semitic in the mouth of some would in the mouth of others have to be sold to the public as a legitimate expression of “Israel’s right to exist”—a feat that may require protecting the correct one-state solution by removing the advocates of the wrong one-state solution from civilized political discourse—or, for that matter, putting them in prison.

A leading role for the closure of the German mind was played, of all people, by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Given his status, it seems appropriate to discuss his intervention in some detail. A little more than a month after 7 October 2023, the Israeli destruction of Gaza under way, Habermas, together with three aides-de-camp, issued “A Statement,” as he called it, on “Principles of Solidarity,”<sup>6</sup> thereby setting up a formidable intimidation and denunciation machine ready to be used for character-assassinating anyone calling a mass killing a mass killing. Author of a “theory of communicative action” which made the possibility of democracy and political rationality conditional on the existence of a public sphere that allowed for “*herrschaftsfreie Kommunikation*” (best translated as “dominance-free communication”), Habermas established himself as a gatekeeper for the German public space, by drawing red, or brown, lines for political speech ready to be enforced by the state. In the first paragraph of his edict, Habermas speaks of an “*an Grausamkeit nicht zu überbietenden Angriff der Hamas*,” in literal translation “an attack by Hamas which cannot be surpassed in cruelty,” which in Habermas’ own English translation reduces to “Hamas’ extreme atrocity”—the German original implying that what Habermas calls “Israel’s response” cannot possibly be more cruel, if only because it elevates Hamas’s cruelty to the same level as the Nazis.<sup>7</sup> Next, the Statement declares Israel’s “retaliation” to be “justified in principle,” allowing it to be debated only with respect to its execution; there is in particular no mention of international law limiting the legality of retaliation as such. In this spirit, the following sentence defines a priori and categorically the results of any legitimate debate on the Israeli “response”: “Despite all the concern for the fate of the Palestinian population, . . . , the standards of judgement slip completely when genocidal intentions are attributed to Israel’s actions.”

Finally, the third paragraph turns to anti-Semitism, stating at its outset that “Israel’s actions in no way justify anti-Semitic reactions, especially not in Germany” (less so elsewhere?). After saying the obvious—“the elementary rights to freedom and physical integrity as well as to protection from racist defamation are indivisible and apply equally to all”—the statement finishes with a mysterious last sentence: “All those in our country (not elsewhere?) who have cultivated anti-Semitic sentiments and convictions behind all kinds of pretexts (. . . *die antisemitische Affekte und Überzeugungen hinter allerlei Vorwänden kultiviert haben*...) and now see a welcome opportunity to express them uninhibitedly (*‘ungehemmt’*) must also abide by this.”

Sloppy language can be a strategic tool. The limits of speech (*Volksverhetzung*, incitement to hatred) are set in Germany by the Criminal Code; these, however, are clearly not

meant here. In line with the notorious IHRA definition of May 2016,<sup>8</sup> Habermas defines anti-Semitism as a set of “sentiments and convictions” that, while normally “cultivated” (?) in the privacy of people’s living rooms, may come to the fore, in the form of condemnations of the Israeli mass killings in Gaza suggesting that such killings might turn into, or might in fact already constitute, genocide. But who decides if a suggestion to this effect, if made, is or is not an expression of secretly “cultivated” anti-Semitism? How do Habermas and his co-inquisitors distinguish a suggestion that the Gaza war amounts to genocide made by a decent man or woman from the same suggestion made by an anti-Semite, the former to be admitted to civilized political discourse and the latter to be excluded, given that what makes the anti-Semite an anti-Semite—his or her “behind all kinds of pretenses” secretly “cultivated ... sentiments and convictions”—cannot easily be observed by laypeople? The answer is, simply, that no such distinction is possible, so the solution in practice, if not in the theory of communicative action, is to cease looking for signs of anti-Semitism in observed anti-Israeli utterances but, for the sake of simplification, take such utterings themselves as signs of anti-Semitism. One can be sure that this kind of de-bureaucratization of the “free speech problem” can only be to the taste of officials in state agencies of all sorts who must be grateful to the philosopher for having provided them with a handy tool to convict those not in line with *Staatsraison* of having “cultivated” unacceptable state-subversive “sentiments and convictions.” At the same time, and conveniently, the Habermas denunciation machine leaves no defense to those accused of anti-Semitism for finding the Israeli conduct of the Gaza war to amount to genocide (“Some of my best friends are Jews” is unlikely to do the job.). As a result, to avoid falling into the Habermas trap, those holding critical views about the Israeli state and the German state’s “solidarity” with it and the United States on the Gaza mass killings will, in order to be on the safe side, keep their mouth shut, refrain from “communicative action” and refuse to contribute to a Habermasian collective search for collective reason in the Middle East and in Germany.

Not everybody reads Habermas. Censors and would-be censors, however, in interest groups, state bureaucracies, and the media, in universities, theaters, and museums must be happy not to have to argue with the state’s master philosopher on whether suppressing critical debate on Israel’s way of asserting its “right to exist,” including Germany’s unconditional support for it, can be constitutional in a liberal democracy. It is frequently noted abroad how strangely cold-hearted is the reaction of German society to the massacres taking place before its eyes in Gaza and, increasingly, in Lebanon—and how little the German public seems to care about its country’s irredeemable loss of hard-earned respect if not affection around the world, price for its *Nibelungentreue* with its Israeli ally. There is indeed no other country as apathetically silent like this in the face of the Gaza horror—not even, and certainly not, the United States, the only other remaining supporter of Netanyahu’s one-state solution. It is hard to believe that this should be due to a deeply felt widespread sense of guilt over the Nazi genocides; much more likely, it is *Angst* of being excluded, with the blessing from the highest ranks of philosophy, from the official German *Schuldgemeinschaft*.<sup>9</sup>

Two peculiar features of German society appear particularly pertinent here. One is a long-honed German skill for anticipatory obedience with what the state may want, even before the state actually wants it, for following an order before it was given, for

taking as an order what is declared to be just a recommendation. The other is a dense network of state institutions and social organizations, closely connected across sectors, reducing Luhmann's "functional autonomy" of social subsystems to absurdity—among them an armada of anti-Semitism commissioners in local communities, federal states and national government, in universities and, soon to be expected, the public broadcasting system, assisted by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) and a plethora of state-funded anti-anti-Semitic non-NGOS, provided with quasi-official status by a series of legally unchallengeable quasi-law Bundestag "resolutions"—a vast capillary substructure for state penetration into society, serviceable for communicating to the public what kind of society the state wants and needs to be installed.<sup>10</sup> Lots of research is waiting to be done here.<sup>11</sup>


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### ORCID iD

Wolfgang Streeck  <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9004-6973>

### Notes

1. Gehlen was kept in his office, supported by his American sponsors, until Willy Brandt as Foreign Minister of the first Grand Coalition (1966–1969) dared fire him in 1968.
2. More precisely, in November, 1969, a few days after Willy Brandt had been sworn in as Chancellor. German nuclear interests were represented in particular by the Christian Democrat, Franz-Joseph Strauss, Minister under Adenauer for Special Assignments (1953–1955), for Nuclear Affairs (1955–1956), and for Defense (1956–1962).
3. The word was first used in this context by Chancellor Merkel in a speech to the Knesset in 2008.
4. In the process the public memory of Nazi mass murder changed significantly. Victims of the regime that had no state to lobby for them were almost completely forgotten as Nazism became identified with, and reduced to, anti-Semitism. But the Nazis were also anti-Roma, killing between 500,000 and 1.5 million of them, depending on estimates that are even more uncertain than other statistics of Nazi atrocities; anti-disabled, with between 275,000 and 300,000 people murdered under the so-called T4 "euthanasia" program between 1939 and 1941, to eliminate "*lebensunwertes Leben*" and "*unnütze Esser*"; anti-Pole and anti-Russian, Poles and Russians being the majority of the 300,000–500,000 *Zwangsarbeiter* that died of maltreatment and starvation in the regime's arms factories; anti-German, with about 40,000 German citizens sentenced to death by German courts and executed in the 12 years of the regime for desertion or whatever counted as criminal offenses; anti-communist, with a conservatively estimated 30,000–40,000 communists, not a few of them Jews, losing their lives in the

- prisons and camps of the regime; anti-homosexual—anti-anything that didn't fit the azis' sick ideas of who was entitled to be a member in good standing of their Aryan *Herrenrasse*.
5. Referencing Israel's *Nation-State Law* passed in 2018.
  6. Deitelhoff, Nicole, Rainer Forst, Klaus Günther und Jürgen Habermas, Grundsätze der Solidarität. Eine Stellungnahme. 13 November 2023. <https://www.normativeorders.net/2023/grundsätze-der-solidarität/>.
  7. Comparing Israeli cruelties instead of Hamas cruelties with Nazi cruelties may be a crime in German law; see Section 132 of the Criminal Code, StGB—which is, however, hardly readable even for professional lawyers.
  8. “Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews.”
  9. There is also of course the normal academic opportunism. For a particularly striking case study see S.B. & A.M. (2024). On the general susceptibility of German society to “moral panic” see the penetrating analysis, with a welter of bizarre details, by della Porta (2024).
  10. For a first overview Streeck (2024).
  11. Better not, however, by the Forschungsinstitut Gesellschaftlicher Zusammenhalt (FGZ; Research Institute Social Cohesion). Set up by the Federal Government in 2020, it is funded by the Ministry of Science to the tune of 10 million euro per annum, with research projects distributed to and located in eight universities, and with all three Habermas adjutants in leading positions.

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## Author biography

**Wolfgang Streeck** was from 1988 to 1995 Professor of Sociology and Industrial Relations at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and from 1995 to 2014 Director at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. His research areas are comparative political economy and the political-economic institutions of contemporary capitalism. His latest books are *Taking Back Control? States and State Systems after Globalism* (2024); *Democracy at Work: Contract, Status and Post-Industrial Justice* (with Ruth Dukes; 2022); *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (2016); and *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* (2014).