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# German Historical Institute London Bulletin

## ARTICLE

Beyond Victimhood: German Muslims and the Minority Question  
after the Holocaust

*Sultan Doughan in conversation with Mirjam Sarah Brusius*

*German Historical Institute London Bulletin*

Vol. XLIV, No. 2 (Nov. 2022), 86–98

ISSN 0269-8552

# BEYOND VICTIMHOOD: GERMAN MUSLIMS AND THE MINORITY QUESTION AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

SULTAN DOUGHAN IN CONVERSATION WITH  
MIRJAM SARAH BRUSIUS

*In her research, Sultan Doughan shows how the memory of the Holocaust is mobilized in tolerance education and extremism prevention as a means of integrating Muslims into German society. Yet while the German government invests in memorials and museums that commemorate the Holocaust, Doughan argues, it also extricates itself from current forms of violence. Holocaust commemoration as a European project is part of a triumphalist narrative that presents Vergangenheitsbewältigung as a successful transition to liberal democracy – a reality that minoritizes and racializes Middle Easterners as Muslims. In this interview with historian Mirjam Sarah Brusius, anthropologist Sultan Doughan examines how Middle Easterners in Germany relate to the figure of the Jew. Muslims and Jews operate in this governed structure as opposing figures who must be religious and historical enemies. While both have clearly assigned roles in German public discourse, Doughan approaches their historical and contemporary positionalities beyond clear-cut concepts of Opferkonkurrenz, and thus rethinks this discourse and points to past and future alliances.*

MIRJAM SARAH BRUSIUS (MSB): In your research, you ‘address the minority question as one that cannot be asked in Germany’.<sup>1</sup> What do you mean by that?

SULTAN DOUGHAN (SD): This is the concluding statement of an interview about how Holocaust memory centres a particular notion of humanity as universal. What I mean by this is that Muslims, like Jews, are not governed as a religious minority in Germany, but are directed towards assimilation and the shedding of traditional differences that do not easily align with Protestant notions of modernity. Historians

<sup>1</sup> Jonathon Catlin, ‘A New German Historians’ Debate? A Conversation with Sultan Doughan, A. Dirk Moses, and Michael Rothberg’, *Journal of the History of Ideas: Blog*, 2–4 Feb. 2022, at [<https://jhiblog.org/2022/02/02/a-new-german-historians-debate-a-conversation-with-sultan-doughan-a-dirk-moses-and-michael-rothberg-part-i/>], accessed 20 July 2022. Quotation in part II.

and scholars of the Holocaust have pointed out that Holocaust memory has been 'de-Judaized' and assimilated into secularized Christian notions of human suffering.<sup>2</sup> Holocaust memory, when displayed for national purposes, has the power to gloss over and elide traditional Jewish difference. In the context of Germany, Holocaust memory has also become central in managing Muslims and inculcating in them the liberal values that prioritize state-sanctioned narratives over communal narratives, national memory over social memory, and the ideal of the citizen over the reality of social personhood embedded in a community. On the face of it, these are national achievements and serve the purpose of safeguarding liberal democracy.

MSB: What is problematic about this approach for those who are not fully part of majority society in Germany and who are the target audience for the forms of national commemoration that you describe?

SD: This picture is too idealistic to account for the complex realities that many Germans with migrant backgrounds live with, especially if a catastrophe as big as the genocide of European Jewry is the paradigmatic example of racism, racialization, and political inequalities. How do you make a case for your lived and experienced forms of inequality, discrimination, racism, and even racist murders? How do you account for being minoritized and treated as different, while at the same time being asked to act more in accordance with majoritarian norms and values? Holocaust education often claims that it has progressively overcome all the evils of the past. Can you use the German term *Rasse* (race) if you want to name the governing effects on certain groups, or is that term exclusive to a genocidal past? This is the social side of my statement; it also has a historical side.

MSB: Current discussions in the history of race in Germany touch on how 'race' and *Rasse* might be used as historical and analytical terms in future. This is complicated, especially for German-speaking academic circles inside Germany. *Rasse* is a historically troubled term. 'Race' as an analytical term that marks race as a social construct, on

<sup>2</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 1999); Paula Cowan and Henry Maitles, *Understanding and Teaching Holocaust Education* (London, 2017); Reinhart Koselleck, 'Wer darf vergessen werden? Das Holocaust-Mahnmal hierarchisiert die Opfer. Die falsche Ungeduld', *Die Zeit*, 19 Mar. 1998.

the other hand, is often considered to be imported from a US context and not always applicable to German matters, past and present.<sup>3</sup> Your answer, in other words, is timely, pointing to the temporal and cultural divisions that are in play when we write post-war histories of race. Your work looks at the centring of the figure of the Jew as the historical and categorical victim of racism. Yet we know that anti-semitism and racism are both grounded in a complex entanglement between race science, social projection, and prejudice. Do you also see failures in terms of how the pre-war history of race in Germany was written? Does a historical view which takes into account the *longue durée* of the history of race help you to engage with the 'minority question' in your work?

SD: Absolutely, I am invested in understanding the genealogy of the minority question in the modern nation state. The emergence of religious minorities has been historically circumvented in Germany. German Jews, by virtue of collective emancipation, were expected to assimilate into German liberalism. Judaism did not disappear during the nineteenth century, but was reorganized in ways that became acceptable within the various national contexts.<sup>4</sup> Yet Jews could never be German, French, or Italian enough. They remained ambiguous, even if they only claimed a Jewish identity. Racial ideology as expressed in eugenics and later in Nazi laws clearly demarcated European Jews as essentially foreign, essentially Semitic, and territorially from outside Continental Europe. This is the starting point for my thoughts about the predicament of Muslims 'after the Holocaust'. Muslims are not disappearing, but they are being reclassified so that certain historical, ethnic, and class differences are associated with being Muslim, and these are ossified as a 'Muslim problem'. In a way, the promise of

<sup>3</sup> Workshop: Race, Rassismus und Geschichtswissenschaft, held online, 21 Feb. 2022; see the conference report by Pia Marzell, 'Race, Rassismus und Geschichtswissenschaft', *H-Soz-Kult*, 1 Apr. 2022, at [<https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/fdkn-127929>], accessed 20 July 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Lisa Silverman, *Becoming Austrian: Jews and Culture between the World Wars* (New York, 2012); Shira Klein, 'Challenging the Myth of Italian Jewish Assimilation', *Modern Judaism: A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience*, 37/1 (2017), 76–107; Ethan B. Katz, 'An Imperial Entanglement: Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and Colonialism', *American Historical Review*, 123/4 (2018), 1190–209.

integration has made it possible to further mark out former migrants as Muslims. I am therefore interested in pointing out contradictions and making invisible frames visible.

By addressing the minority question, I am dealing on the one hand with practices that appear as religious differences, including ethnic, class, and linguistic differences. On the other, the situation in Germany is one in which certain differences are discursively anchored in traditional Islam to demarcate danger, threat, and incompatibility with the liberal order and secular modernity. Muslims are not a legally recognized ethnic or religious minority. Unlike legally defined ethnic minorities in Germany, Muslims do not have a historical claim to national territory. In this sense, the minority question cannot be directly asked when it comes to Muslims. Yet I address the issue of how Muslims are legally and politically minoritized even in the context of the memory of the Holocaust. Why have descendants of former Middle Eastern migrants not been accepted as Germans, despite having German citizenship? Instead, they are seen as Muslims.<sup>5</sup> Further, given all the state-funded integration and extremism prevention programmes, how are they addressed and educated to be German? What role does Holocaust memory play in all of this?

MSB: Racism (and in fact antisemitism) against multireligious Middle Eastern communities did not start with the generation of *Gastarbeiter* (foreign workers invited to West Germany after the Second World War). It, too, has a longer history. Ulrich Herbert reminded us recently that *Gastarbeiter* were perceived as a continuation of *Zwangsarbeiter* (forced labourers during the Second World War).<sup>6</sup> Recent

<sup>5</sup> Sultan Doughan, 'Desiring Memorials: Jews, Muslims, and the Human of Citizenship', in Ben Gidley and Samuel Sami Everett (eds.), *Jews and Muslims in Europe: Between Discourse and Experience* (Leiden, 2022), 46–70, at [[https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004514331\\_004](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004514331_004)]; Sultan Doughan, 'Minor Citizens? Holocaust Memory and the Un/Making of Citizenship in Germany', *RePLITO*, 4 Feb. 2022, at [<https://doi.org/10.21428/f4c6e600.d6dbedf3>].

<sup>6</sup> 'Bielefelder Debatten zur Zeitgeschichte II: Antisemitismus und Rassismus. Konjunktoren und Kontroversen seit 1945', discussion convened by the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung (ZiF), Bielefeld University, 11 Feb. 2022. Details at [<https://aktuell.uni-bielefeld.de/event/bielefelder-debatten-zur-zeitgeschichte-ii-antisemitismus-und-rassismus-konjunktoren-und-kontroversen-seit-1945/>], accessed 20 July 2022.

research by Marc David Baer discusses citizens of the Turkish Republic living in Germany during the Third Reich, who feared being mistaken for Jews during the November pogrom of *Kristallnacht*.<sup>7</sup> While some could have been Jewish, others might have identified with different or mixed ethnicities. A recent thesis by Anita Klingler that won the GHIL Ph.D. prize in 2021 mentions a 1931 incident on Kurfürstendamm in Berlin when the Sturmabteilung engaged in violent antisemitic rioting on the evening of Rosh Hashanah. As Klingler notes, the victims included ‘many non-Jews, who are German citizens, but also foreigners, such as Romanians, Armenians, etc.’ An Egyptian student was also reported as having been punched in the face while leaving a vegetarian restaurant.<sup>8</sup> This reminds us that it was the Nazis who determined who was perceived as Jewish, Sinti, or Roma. The recent history of racism and antisemitism is also entangled: the perpetrator of the antisemitic attack in Halle in 2019 went to a kebab restaurant after his attempt to kill Jews failed. He was searching for alternative victims and targeted Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrants or their descendants. To what extent do you think that highlighting the entangled histories of racism and antisemitism would help recognition of their entanglement today?

SD: Entanglement is an interesting concept. If I understand it correctly, it weaves together separate strands of history into a reality where various political and social issues intersect. This is one way to overcome nationally divided histories like the ones you have described in which members of particular groups, such as the Egyptian student in Nazi Germany or the mistaken Middle Easterner in the kebab restaurant in Halle, become victims of collateral damage.

Entanglement seems to be premised upon separate histories. If you focus on migration and ethnicity, you can make the case that

<sup>7</sup> Marc David Baer, ‘Mistaken for Jews: Turkish Ph.D. Students in Nazi Germany’, *German Studies Review*, 41/1 (2018), 19–39, at [https://doi.org/10.1353/gsr.2018.0001].

<sup>8</sup> ‘Though I am not a Jew, I may be taken for one from my appearance’, one witness reported. Both quotations are taken from ‘Die Opfer der Meute’, *Vorwärts*, 19 Sept. 1931. Cited in Anita Klingler, ‘Negotiating Violence: Public Discourses about Political Violence in Interwar Britain and Germany’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2020), 200.

the Egyptian man is an upper-class student in Nazi Germany and completely unrelated to the internal politics of the German racial state. Similarly, the perceived Middle Easterner targeted in the kebab restaurant seems to belong to an altogether different labour migration history, separate from the historical trajectory of Jewish life and the Holocaust, yet becoming 'entangled' in its lethal reality. Again, this is an interesting approach which can show how much broader the problem of antisemitism is. Even though it is centred on the figure of the Jew, it creates these larger effects. But I wonder if entanglement as an analytical lens does not, in the end, reify the logic of nationally separated histories.

My own starting point is a different one. I do not focus on anti-semitism and racism as separate objects, although they direct specific work onto different target groups. I am concerned with the framework that makes these differing forms of discrimination and racialization possible in the first place. As you said, racism did not start with the *Gastarbeiter* generation, and antisemitism did not start with the Holocaust, as we know. Where we start the analysis, therefore, is determined by what exactly we want to demonstrate.

MSB: Your research on citizenship shows that Middle Eastern immigrants and their descendants were moved from the category of *Ausländer*<sup>9</sup> to that of Muslim, and suggests that at this time, Holocaust memory took the role of a moral compass. How would you explain your analytical approach to account for this template?

SD: My analytical starting point is 'the secular', through which the purpose of knowledge production emerged as the governance of those lives that seemed valuable within the logic of a modern nation state. Racist and humanist notions of the willed individual man are the outcome of secularism. It could certainly be said that Jewish, Muslim, and Black lives are entangled in Europe today, and one could go on to show how these groups are similarly discriminated against, and how they and their suffering are hierarchized in public discourse. These are all important steps towards acknowledging and showing that racism has

<sup>9</sup> Sultan Doughan, 'Memory Meetings: Semra Ertan's *Ausländer* and the Practice of the Migrant Archive', *Transit: A Journal of Travel, Migration and Multiculturalism in the German-Speaking World* (forthcoming, 2022).

real effects. But in the end, antisemitism, racism, and Islamophobia are all shorthand terminologies connected to more fundamental and structural issues of political equality. And this political equality can currently only be granted from within the framework of the secular state and its institutions. As an anthropologist of secularism, I want to understand why these differentiations emerge, and how they are related to governing institutions.

MSB: What do these terminological problems tell us about current hierarchies – *Opferkonkurrenz* – when it comes to victimhood and discrimination?

SD: Political equality is often only granted to minorities and minoritized subjects when they can make a case for injury, for disadvantage, for discrimination. We can think of the women's rights movement or the US civil rights movement here. As you hint in your question, recognition is key. This is another tricky term. I have been thinking about this when it comes to Muslim communities and the way they have mobilized notions of anti-Muslim racism in certain instances while remaining rather cautious in others. It seems to me that there are at least two problems here. One is that anti-Muslim racism is brought into play when we talk about individual prejudice and physical violence. The language of racism often lends itself to these instances.

If we take other cases in recent history, such as the headscarf debates that had major legal, social, and personal consequences, especially for women who could not take up jobs, we do not talk about racism or even gender discrimination. My point is not to claim that this is real racism, but rather how recognition itself can stand in the way of making a case for equality. The recognizing institution is often a state institution. What do you do when your form of lived religiosity is perceived as detrimentally opposed to secular principles? And these principles are embedded in a range of rights and a particular notion of freedom. What if your way of life is considered not only to be violating the secular principles of the state, but also as causing unfreedom and spreading the wrong ideology? This kind of discourse has been circulating in the last two decades, ever since Muslim communities tried to have Islam officially acknowledged as a religion with a public



status in Germany. This discourse might not physically kill a person, but it is socially and politically deeply disabling and stigmatizing. In addition, it has contributed to a social atmosphere of suspicion of real or perceived Muslims. In other words, a victim narrative grounded in the language of racism is difficult to mobilize here.

MSB: You highlight the differences in governance which the state and legislation directly or indirectly impose on specific minoritized groups, enhanced by public perception through the media, for example. Do you see the potential for alliances in these forms of governance? Could you give us an example of how victim groups have refused to subscribe to these hierarchies?

SD: An example is the circumcision debate in the summer of 2012 that again targeted Muslim communities with the same full legal thrust of liberal discourse.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, circumcision was not banned because Jewish communities perceived this as an attack on the promise of Jewish life after the Holocaust and appealed against the decision. But the language of antisemitism was not used here either. Jewish and Muslim bodies intersected and constituted a joint target, but the main one was the 'Islamic practice' of circumcision. To speak to your question about entanglement, in the end this entanglement shamed the German government into backtracking, and even acknowledging that there were contradictory rights in play (children's rights versus religious freedom). But ultimately it was historical responsibility for Jewish life that undid the circumcision ban.

There was no concern for what this ban would have done to Muslims. It could be asked whether this decision was not in principle about the minorities, but about the kind of nation state Germany wanted to be, and banning Jewish circumcision forged a bad link with an image of the past. This decision laid bare the fact that the secular liberal framework is not simply neutral and universal, but is also historically shaped. The secular as a framework through which we know, govern, are governed by, and are oriented towards the nation

<sup>10</sup> Sultan Doughan and Hannah Tzuberi, 'Still Questioned: Reconfiguring the Jew out of the "Muslim Problem" in Europe', in 'A Forum on Elad Lapidot's *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism*', *Marginalia*, 1 July 2022, at [<https://themarginaliareview.com/still-questioned/>], accessed 19 July 2022.

state as citizens is predicated upon norms and moral values that are based on the experience of the Holocaust in Germany. In a way, this is a German story and relationship with the secular, but Europe as a political project is built upon this.

MSB: The figure of the Muslim thus complicates both the overall picture and the figure of the Jew itself. It has what you have described as ‘a double effect on the figure of the Jew’, that is, ‘the potential to . . . reconfigure Jewish traditions as concrete forms of life’.<sup>11</sup> Were there cases in the past when the kinds of incidents that you describe also led to alliances between Jewish and Muslim interest groups, and what can we learn from such examples?

SD: What the circumcision ban controversy demonstrates is that there are clear victim hierarchies in Germany, and they were reinforced by the debate. This certainly shows us that despite the Holocaust, secularized Western Christianity is still the norm for how an institutionalized religion is organized. The figure of the Muslim makes the figure of the Jew tangible as a member of a living community embedded in a tradition with certain practices. But again, this is rather incidental and triggered by the framework of the secular, in which the Muslim body is constantly reproduced as a problem. From my encounters and conversations with Muslim representatives of Turkish mosques in Berlin, I know that they had given up on the circumcision case and were taken by surprise when Jewish communities forged ahead. There was a sense of relief and gratitude, from what I could tell, but I do not recall that anyone told me about existing Jewish-Muslim alliances or solidarity.

In the past certainly, before Muslims were singled out as anti-semites, the Central Council of Jews in Germany had been vocal against right-wing racism and arson attacks against refugee and Turkish homes in Germany. The Muslim and Jewish organizations I collaborated with during my fieldwork were often run and organized by pious and practising Muslims and Jews, but the organizations were not necessarily religious, such as the Salaam-Shalom Initiative in Berlin, spearheaded by the then rabbinical student Armin Langer.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. See also Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, Calif., 2003).

Langer attracted a great deal of public attention, partly because he sometimes attacked the Central Council of Jews for fuelling anti-Muslim and specifically anti-Arab sentiment, especially during the refugee crisis of 2015. But I think he also attracted attention because he evinced that there was not one single Jewish voice, but a dissenting plurality and much discussion, often not audible to those outside the Jewish communities. The 'Jewish voice' in the German public seems rather monolithically circumscribed, so this young organization that attracted mostly Muslim university students of Turkish background and many Jewish Israelis, who were keen to meet Muslims and Arabs, managed to build some alliances. For Turkish Muslims in Germany, Jews are desirable allies in the project of political equality. But I wonder if the struggle against anti-Muslim racism has focused on finding supporters and has not extended solidarity to other forms of racism, especially anti-Black or anti-Roma.

MSB: Anthropologists working on this issue, including yourself, Esra Özyürek, and Irit Dekel, have shown how aspects of German Holocaust memory culture, such as discourse and memorials centred on a special German-Jewish or Judeo-Christian bond, often exclude and marginalize People of Colour.<sup>12</sup> While some from migrant backgrounds have been charged with 'inherent antisemitism' and accused of lacking empathy with Holocaust victims, your fieldwork suggests that many can strongly relate to the history of the Holocaust as victims of contemporary racism. That said, they relate to the Holocaust in ways that are markedly different from the normative framework.<sup>13</sup> How does this play out in your own fieldwork?

<sup>12</sup> Irit Dekel, 'Jews and Other Others at the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin', *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, 23/2 (2014), 71–84, at [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43234610>], accessed 20 July 2022; Esra Özyürek, 'Muslim Minorities as Germany's Past Future: Islam Critics, Holocaust Memory, and Immigrant Integration', *Memory Studies*, 15/1 (2022), 139–54, at [<https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698019856057>]; ead., 'Rethinking Empathy: Emotions Triggered by the Holocaust among the Muslim-Minority in Germany', *Anthropological Theory*, 18/4 (2018), 456–77, at [<https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499618782369>].

<sup>13</sup> Sultan Doughan, 'Deviation: The Present Orders', *Member Voices, Fieldsights*, 18 Sept. 2013, at [<https://culanth.org/fieldsights/deviation-the-present-orders>], accessed 20 July 2022.

SD: I should be clear about several things implicit in your question. The figure of the Jew as a former victim of genocide weighs differently in Germany. But this raises the question of whether genocidal pasts are ultimate qualifiers for redress. I am also not suggesting that all forms of antisemitism are equal or that there is necessarily a progression from racism to racially motivated genocide. When it comes to exclusion and marginalization, I would like to further differentiate between what happens in pedagogical practice and the experience of death and survival that goes beyond the usual victim/perpetrator binaries.

Certainly, some views are excluded, but they are never banned from pedagogy. As I showed in my work on German civic education, opposing views can provide welcome opportunities to build a different narrative. In the tolerance projects sponsored by the German state, civic educators did not simply exclude the Palestinian perspective on 1948, but they usually 'corrected' this narrative by explaining that it was the Arab armies who had ordered them to leave, or that wealthy landowners had sold their land legally. The aim of these corrections was to stabilize German victim categories and to defuse antisemitic sentiment.

These examples show that there is an invitation, a bringing in, an address, but this involves a clear structure of how to come in, how to see, and how to relate. There is obviously a range in all of this, and it is not a single story. In principle, however, the perspective on the Holocaust adopted in Germany is that of the historical perpetrator and the current guardian of liberal democracy. It could be said that the perspective of the victim is excluded, unless you are Jewish, belong to another injured party, or are descended from survivors. The normative position, therefore, is that of past superiority founded on racism and present-day superiority built on perpetrator consciousness. I am calling the latter a position of superiority because it is intertwined with a triumphalist narrative of having overcome perpetratorship in ways that many other nation states have not. In other words, what are playing out here are nationalist sentiments in moralizing terms.

A sense of survival and death are crucial for engagement with catastrophes, and these go beyond the clear-cut binaries of victim and perpetrator. In a recent article, I discuss how one student was shocked

to see young children in striped pyjamas with tears in their eyes; another girl discovered her own name in the records at Auschwitz. But there are other unpublished instances in my fieldwork. One student could not believe that there was an agency for labour (*Arbeitsamt*) specifically for Jews in Berlin—it seemed so trivial and strange to him. He also thought that all Jews had been immediately deported; it seemed cruel to him that they were managed in an institution such as the *Arbeitsamt*. These were all intimate engagements with the workings of this genocide that could shift the big categories of victim and perpetrator and create an understanding of genocidal mechanisms as things that are not outside of history, but present and familiar in their own everyday lives. But they were also anchored in something the students brought to these educational sites: a sense of violation and humiliation.

According to a civic educator at one memorial site, practising Muslim students were curious about images in which Jewish religiosity was mocked. Certainly, they could anchor these images of mockery in something they were aware of, if not from the position of the perpetrator or the historical victim of genocide, then perhaps from a sense of shame for their visible religious difference. For Palestinian participants in these tolerance projects, the word ‘Jew’ had a very different meaning. It was at times hard to dissociate the term ‘Jew’ from ‘Israeli’, but when they focused on what had happened and how, the events of the Holocaust were eye-opening for most participants.

MSB: Where do you see an opportunity for solidarity, in light of Germany’s changing demographics? Germany now has a large Muslim population, many Palestinians (who are automatically marked as Muslim), and an influx of more recent immigration by liberal Jews.

SD: In Berlin I have seen Palestinian refugee women and female Holocaust survivors forging friendships and sharing forms of care. Palestine activists know that religious commonalities will not suffice as terms to talk about a range of political issues. Instead, groups like Jewish Voice for Peace and Palestine Speaks have mobilized for a cause beyond religious identities and notions of victimhood. What we can learn from all this is that solidarity alliances organized around

common struggles can take victimhood only as a starting point, a trigger. But they will need to forge a more rooted cause based on the experience of injustice to shift the terms of injury and perhaps the frame of recognition altogether.

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