

SPECIAL ISSUE

Ignoring Racism in the History of the German Immigration Society: Some Reflections on Comparison as an Epistemic Practice

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The entanglement of the history of racism with the history of migration in Germany has been ignored thus far in German historiography. Exploring the epistemological significance of ignorance in sustaining racial knowledge in democratic, pluralistic societies is a relatively new field of research; in the German case it is virtually absent. Taking seriously Linda Martín Alcoff's dictum that ignoring racism is a substantial epistemic practice of sustaining it, it seems worth studying the hermeneutic means by which German historiography creates this blind spot. One of the central motifs in this context is the "zero hour," according to which German migration history only commenced in the mid-1950s and had nothing to do with how Germans had treated migrants since the turn of the century, particularly those considered as "*völkisch*"¹ undesirable Others. In this article, the methods of comparison and omission are discussed as key epistemic tools for writing the zero hour into German migration history. This narrative path is contrasted with microhistorical accounts that reveal the ongoing production of racial knowledge and ignorance and their entanglement, which formed the basis of a new "art of communicating" about Others after the Holocaust. Racial knowledge is known and ignored simultaneously, so that even a supposedly anti-racist society does not have to erase it as long as it is "dominantly" ignored. This particular relationship reflects the idea that knowledge and ignorance per se are an entangled continuum with a myriad of grey scales where ignorance contains knowledge and knowledge is upheld by ignorance.

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"Revisionist History"

A new generation of immigrant children and grandchildren in Germany, many of them belonging to historically marginalized and persecuted groups, is demanding its share in German memory culture—a movement that was triggered appreciably by racist attacks in Germany in 2019/2020 and the Black Lives Matter movement's crossing of the Atlantic and reaching Germany in the summer of 2020 after the killing of George Floyd. One of the movement's central claims is that the racism they and their forebearers experienced and continue to experience on the ground—as they did previously in the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic—or in the context of German colonial and expansionist history shall be acknowledged and properly addressed. This endeavor entails the representation of this history in university and school curricula, in museums and memorial sites, preceded by thorough historiographic research and reappraisal.²

¹ *Völkisch* derives from the German term *Volk* but cannot be simply translated as "people" since historically it was also used in the sense of an alternative to "race"; *völkisch* does not just imply cultural-biological traits, but superiority as well.

² This discourse is currently taking place mainly in activist circles and formats. For a recent and telling example, see the video of the Zoom-conference, *Umkämpfte Erinnerungen*. The author herself has pointed out in several interventions the significance of historical research in this endeavor. See, for example, Alexopoulou, "Welche Erinnerungskultur."

So far, the entanglement of migration and racism in Germany after 1945 has been ignored by German historiography.³ Analytical concepts such as “race,” “racism,” and “whiteness” are applied mainly by US-based historians who have looked into this issue and whose work has not been broadly received in Germany.⁴ Ignoring this entangled history by marginalizing migration history per se for a long time has somehow become constitutive of the master narrative of post-national-socialist and post-unification Germany as a successful democracy.⁵ All in all, this points to the need for a “revisionist history,” a term which critical race theorists coined to denote the rewriting of dominant narratives that counter the experiences of marginalized and minority groups; their *counterstories* have to be heard, collected, and searched for in archival resources to revise and by these measures correct the historiography.⁶

Taking seriously Linda Martín Alcoff’s dictum that ignoring racism is a substantial epistemic practice of sustaining it, it seems worthwhile to study the episteme itself.⁷ By what hermeneutic means did German historiography ignore racism, especially in the face of its exceptional history in Germany?

In the following, I will focus on one central omission and analyze how it is methodologically grounded in the practice of comparison. This omission surely is not the sole blind spot⁸ that has led to the erasure of post-1945 racism from German historiography. The “conjunctures of racism”⁹ in Germany that peaked in racist violence and terror again and again—in the numerous murders of and arson attacks against *Ausländer* (foreigners)¹⁰ in the 1970s and 1980s, in the “baseball-bat-years” in the 1990s,¹¹ in the *National Socialist Underground (NSU)* terror in the 2000s,¹² the countless acts of violence against refugees since 2015, the antisemitic attack in Halle in October 2019, the racist terror of Hanau in February 2020—cannot be persuasively explained as coincidental events or merely as signs of economic or identity crises, problems caused by the migrants’ cultures, “foreignness,” or their mere presence. Such conjunctures seem only conceivable as manifestations of the ongoing history of racism in Germany. Following the trail of the continuous circulation of racial knowledge in structures, mindsets, and practices leads to a revised narrative of contemporary German society.¹³

Comparison as Epistemological Boundary

One major epistemological obstacle for studying the history of racism in Germany is posed by the method of comparison. Comparison is a very common approach in historiography, and historians often perform comparisons without even signifying them, for instance, when they define or validate a *caesura*, a particular point in time where discontinuities surpass continuities.¹⁴ The so-called “zero hour” followed by a tabula rasa in postwar Germany is such a *caesura*. Although this notion has been challenged in many respects, the year 1945 still stands as a moment between two epochs in which a discontinuity occurred affecting almost every aspect of life, society, and the polity in Germany.¹⁵ The exceptional manifestation of racism in the Third Reich, which reached its apex in the Shoah, made a special contribution to this conviction, implying that racism in this era, particularly the Shoah, cannot be compared to anything else. This conviction was codified to some extent after the so-called *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute) in 1986/87: a struggle between historians and other intellectuals fought out primarily in newspapers around the question of whether atrocities committed by Stalinist Russia were comparable to the Holocaust.¹⁶ After unified Germany elevated the Holocaust remembrance to a *raison d’état*, its incomparability was cemented virtually all over the world.¹⁷

³ Alexopoulou, “Rassismus als Leerstelle.”

⁴ Fehrenbach, Chin, and Höhn, just to name a few. See some of their relevant titles in the bibliography.

⁵ Alexopoulou, “Vom Nationalen zum Lokalen.”

⁶ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*, 24, 43–52.

⁷ Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance,” 39.

⁸ At first I had planned to develop my argument additionally around the “double return myth” of guest workers, but this would have clearly gone beyond the constraints of this article.

⁹ Demirović and Bojadžijev, *Konjunktoren des Rassismus*.

¹⁰ *Ausländer* in this context does not mean all aliens or foreigners, but those othered migrants considered inferior to Germans and being subjected to racialization practices. See Alexopoulou, “‘Ausländer’—A Racialized Concept?”

¹¹ Lierke and Perinelli, *Erinnern stören*.

¹² Karakayali et al., *Den NSU-Komplex analysieren*.

¹³ I use “racial knowledge” as a heuristic device for my historiographic analysis. See Goldberg, “Racial Knowledge,” Goldberg, *Racist Culture*. On the circulation of knowledge, see Östling, “Circulation.”

¹⁴ Kaelble, “Historischer Vergleich”; Epple and Erhart, “Die Welt beobachten.”

¹⁵ For various aspects of this notion, see Bundeszentrale, “1945.”

¹⁶ Große Kracht, “Debatte: Der Historikerstreit.”

¹⁷ Stein and Lewy, “Von Einzigartigkeit”; Diner, *Gegenläufige Gedächtnisse*.

At the same time, there are plenty of examples of academic and non-academic assertions of incomparability by implicit comparison. One of the first sociological contributions to the supposedly new phenomenon of *Ausländerfeindlichkeit* in 1983 is just one of the countless examples. “Hostility to foreigners” had appeared as a concept in Germany in the late 1970s to name everyday discrimination, racist hate speech, and hate crimes against migrant workers and foreign refugees, mainly south-European and Turkish guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*) and non-European asylum seekers. The reason that even critical writers like Tsiakalos deliberately chose not to name this phenomenon “racism” (although in a later part of his study he diagnosed a “cultural racism” in Germany at the time) is implied in the following remark:

There is confusion over understanding what *Ausländerfeindlichkeit* means. Every comparison with the cold-blooded organized genocide in national-socialist times is exaggerated, historically inaccurate, and thus misleading and wrong.¹⁸

Despite the supposed incomparability, since 1945 such comparisons have been performed constantly in the context of migration. In her study on migration in Stuttgart and Lyon in the 1960s and 1970s, Bettina Severin-Barboutie observed that comparisons of practices and events concerning discrimination against migrants and othered groups using Nazi practices were a preferred means of pointing out racism for those affected—and not just in Germany.¹⁹ Esra Özyürek referred particularly to immigrants of Turkish background in Germany who likened themselves to Jews in the context of racist hate crimes in the early 1990s to bring attention to their marginalization and analyzed the reception of such comparisons performed by young German Muslim pupils when attending Holocaust education programs. Their comparisons were rejected by the majority of Germans as disrespectful to the Shoah, inappropriate, and even antisemitic. According to Özyürek, mainstream German educators nevertheless assumed that these youths were already antisemitic because of their Turkish or Arab origin—thus racializing their anticipated antisemitism—and discredited them still further for comparing their situation in Germany to this singular historic event.²⁰

Guest workers, who had experienced the war or German occupation as young adults, children, or as part of the memory culture in their family, also refer to the Holocaust when reflecting on their situation in Germany. An older Greek woman and former factory worker I interviewed in 2005 for a documentary film project told a story about such fears. Her father had died during the German occupation of Athens and her elder brother had been drafted under constraint as a “civilian worker” for Germany and ended up in Mannheim after the war where she followed him in the 1950s. When, at the end of the 1970s, racist sentiments and crimes against migrant workers and asylum seekers reached their first peak, rumors began circulating among Greek workers at factories in the Mannheim area that Germans might be planning to make soap or food for their dogs out of them as they had done with the Jews. According to the rumor, one German foreman at a factory had made such threats. She recounted that, like many other Greeks, she and her family visited the concentration camp in Dachau once and asked themselves what this part of German history meant for them as marginalized “Ausländer.”²¹

In the 1990s, during another peak of racist violence after German unification, a time of newly arisen *völkisch*²² sentiment combined with a hatred of and agitation especially against asylum seekers, one finds many statements in the media like that of a young man of Turkish background who had recently acquired German citizenship: “Could I even go back to Turkey now, or am I a human being like the Jews in former times, without a homeland?”²³ This analogy was also drawn by Manuell Alexandre Nhacutou, a former so-called *Vertragsarbeiter* (contract worker) from Mozambique living in the German Democratic Republic who experienced the racist pogroms in Hoyerswerda in September 1991. Having been ordered to leave Germany within a week after their contracts were dissolved, Nhacutou and the other migrant workers he lived with were making preparations for their departure when their rooming house was attacked by a mob of radical Neo-Nazis and “normal Germans”—neighbors and former co-workers—an experience he recounted in a documentary made by a student group in 1992. The police did not intervene, and they had to defend themselves. But in the end, they had no choice but to leave, as German politicians and the *Volk* had

¹⁸ Tsiakalos, *Ausländerfeindlichkeit*, 9, 98–117.

¹⁹ Severin-Barboutie, *Migration als Bewegung*, 314.

²⁰ Özyürek, “Rethinking Empathy”; Özyürek, “Export-Import Theory.”

²¹ Oral history interview with Ageliki Gountenidou.

²² *Völkisch* derives from the German term *Volk* but cannot be simply translated as “people” since historically it was also used in the sense of an alternative to “race”; *völkisch* does not just imply cultural-biological traits, but superiority as well.

²³ “Weder Heimat,” 21. On this topic, see also Mandel, “Cosmopolitan Anxieties.”

demanded, because otherwise “we probably would have to die like the Jews back then . . . and be torched alive.”²⁴

Despite the seemingly hyperbolic character of such fears, these specific comparisons still constitute authentic sources for bringing awareness to the entanglement of racism, Otherness, and migration in Germany, which must be acknowledged, analyzed, and interpreted and which until now has mostly been ignored by historiography. The Holocaust seems to serve as a symbol for the most serious warning signal possible, whereas the real object of comparison appears to be the history of Jews because they are “the” discriminated and persecuted minority in German history and because of the degree to which they have suffered from racism.

These accounts also reveal that mentioning racism in Germany automatically invokes the Shoah itself as part of the equation. This holds true whether there is an explicit or just an implicit comparison and whether it is performed in a scholarly manner or in the media, in politics, or in everyday life.²⁵ This means that every form of talking about racism in Germany is framed per se as a comparison. Because these comparison projects are virtually enveloped in a normative superstructure, normativity and methodology overlap: the moral abyss of the Holocaust as an upper extremity of every form of racism in German and world history forbids any kind of comparison, or at least makes it questionable—even if the respective comment or assertion contains no comparison at all.

The normative superstructure encasing the question, if there even is a German history of racism apart from the Holocaust, functions virtually like a trap, as the following example shows: Michael Rothberg and Jürgen Zimmerer, two of the leading figures of what has become known as the *Historikerstreit 2.0*,²⁶ are currently trying to establish the missing parts of German historiography and remembrance of colonial racism and atrocities not only through their academic work but also through their media presence in high-profile journalistic venues, for instance, in their recent article with the telling title “De-taboo comparison!”²⁷ Aside from the main issues of this current dispute encircling German *Erinnerungskultur* (memory culture), Angelika Epple, an expert on the history and methodology of comparison, noted that Zimmerer and Rothberg defend comparison without even applying the method correctly. According to Epple, they just point to relationalities but do not perform a proper comparison, as they designate no *tertium comparationis*, a specific aspect of the *comparanda* that must be evaluated to assess similarity, dissimilarity, and, as a consequence, (in)comparability. In Epple's view, Rothberg and Zimmerer argue morally, too.²⁸

In a seminal article on comparison, Radhakrishnan wrote that epistemologically “the real motivation behind the comparatist project is the desire and the will for a new knowledge.”²⁹ Epple points out that methodologically incorrect comparisons can even impede or hide knowledge.³⁰ Aside from this, there is also a power aspect involved in performances of comparison that have a decisive impact on what new knowledge is produced or if ignorance is the final outcome. According to Walter Mignolo, “[c]omparison is minimally a triangular business. There are two entities (processes, events, texts, signs, cities, stories, etc.) to be compared, plus the subject who performs the comparison.” The subject performing the comparison has to be considered too, together with their agendas, perspectives, and aims.³¹ Mignolo suggests that comparison as a method is per se erroneous because it is “founded on the epistemology of the zero point,” where the performer is imagined as a “detached observer comparing two independent entities” that in reality are interconnected and situated in a complex power matrix.³²

So, the problem with comparisons is not just a question of whether they are “morally allowed,” performed methodologically correctly, or if the subject performing the comparisons is per se positioned and thus normatively biased, but whether comparison as a method is at all suited for grasping phenomena embedded in different temporal (or spatial) contexts and yet interconnected. At least it seems obvious that the verdict of incomparability has produced a great deal of ignorance in the entangled histories of migration and racism in Germany, as incomparability makes it possible to put aside those aspects, that is, *tertium comparationis*, that may point to similarities or rather may lay open continuities and their far-reaching consequences.

²⁴ Dietrich et al., “Viele habe ich erkannt,” 19:56–20:13 (video).

²⁵ At the beginning of the new century this led to some media scandals: see Yurdakul, “Juden und Türken.”

²⁶ Rothberg, “Comparing Comparisons.”

²⁷ Zimmerer and Rothberg, “Enttabuisiert den Vergleich.”

²⁸ Epple, “Reflektieren statt Moralisieren.”

²⁹ Radhakrishnan, “Why compare?” 18.

³⁰ Epple, “Reflektieren statt Moralisieren.”

³¹ Mignolo, “On Comparison.” 99.

³² *Ibid.*, 116.

I want to explicate this by looking closely at some of the arguments in an authoritative study that for a long time was the only monograph that covered the entire immigration history of the modern German nation-state.³³ This choice is surely not arbitrary, as Ulrich Herbert's *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik* (History of Policy towards Foreigners) was and still is very influential in German migration history and especially in German contemporary history. And Herbert is not only one of the most respected historians but also an ardent promoter of the narrative of Germany's constant path of liberalization and democratization.

Writing the "Zero Hour" into German Immigration History

In his introduction, Herbert rightly diagnoses the strange amnesia in Germany about how long this society has been experiencing immigration, an amnesia that affects political and societal debates on immigration in which the arguments and standpoints are treated as new ones again and again. In reality, most of them have a history reaching back to the last decades of the nineteenth century, but German society continues to forget this. Surprisingly, in his book Herbert does not really ask or explain why this is the case.

Herbert begins his narrative with the seasonal work migration of Poles and Italians in the *Kaiserreich* (German Empire) and then turns to the millions of forced laborers during the Third Reich who were mainly from Eastern Europe. Next, he moves to the guest workers in the 1960s and the asylum seekers in the 1990s. He does not unwind the entangled histories of migration and racism, but he still describes processes of racialization (without labeling them in this way) and how immigrants' origins were hierarchized during the first period of work migration in Germany—which was only second after the United States in numbers of in-migration—during the first decade of the last century.³⁴ He then writes in detail about forced and slave labor during the Third Reich and displays the racial hierarchy in which these workers were ordered and categorized based on their origin. With the end of the war and the Nazi era, Herbert breaks up this interconnection between migration and racism.

He does not establish this *caesura* by referring to the Holocaust but by comparing the conditions of the life of forced laborers and the later guest workers. He comments on this by explaining that although structural similarities existed in that both groups were migrant workers, assessing a continuity "would mean to treat the difference between the situation of a Russian internee in the mines, who was nearer to death than to life, and that of a Spanish guest worker in the 1960s as negligible."³⁵

In an earlier passage, he even compared migrant workers before and after 1945 en bloc. The result is, once again, that the way they were treated and looked upon pre- and post-1945 can hardly be compared:

The employment of Polish seasonal workers in the still patriarchally structured agriculture in the East of the German *Kaiserreich* at most is comparable in the abstract with the situation of the Turks at Opel in Rüsselsheim, and the forced labor of a Soviet *Ostarbeiter* (Russian forced laborer) in 1943 cannot be compared to the life of an Italian pizza baker in the Federal Republic in 1983 or the residence of a Kurdish asylum seeker in 1995.

Herbert points out that every single stage in the history of Germany's *Ausländer* policy needs to be analyzed in its historical context, as there is no such thing as a continuum but rather a mix of continuities and discontinuities.³⁶ He does not explicitly name what his *tertium comparationis* is or which discontinuity exactly is relevant in 1945. Basically, like many other German historians, Herbert views this discontinuity mainly from a state-oriented perspective. Nineteen forty-five brought an end to the racial state, its ideology, and its openly pursued racial policy. Surely, neither Herbert nor others have ever implied that racist traces did not still live on as part of some kind of ideology or in the beliefs of former Nazis who started new careers and may have had some influence on their environment, as has been demonstrated in numerous biographical and organizations studies. But there existed many more means of transmission that ensured the continuous circulation and production of racial knowledge that continue to be locked in a historiographical black box.

This is especially the case for the period between 1945 and 1955.³⁷ Nineteen fifty-five, the year the first recruitment agreement between Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany was concluded, is considered as the inception of a new migration history in Germany.³⁸ Omitting the ten years between the end of the

³³ For a fresher look at this issue, see Alexopoulou, *Deutschland und die Migration*.

³⁴ Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik*, 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁷ Cf. Holian, "A Missing Narrative."

³⁸ An exception is Eder, "Displaced Persons."

last regime and the alleged beginning of the new one is a significant prerequisite for postulating this discontinuity. This conclusion was initially drawn by comparing the life conditions of work migrants in subsequent historical phases, which surely were different due to the changed political regimes. For Herbert, the *tertium comparationis* is the extreme racism of the Nazi racial state, implying that this is the only form of racism or racism per se. The result of Herbert's comparison—incomparability—also allows him to omit parts of the story that directly bind together pre- and post-1945 immigration history in Germany.

Unlike other historians, Herbert does not completely leave out the period between 1945 and 1955. He mentions the millions of Displaced Persons (DPs) in Germany who were mainly the former forced laborers. But he implies that these foreigners were not an issue in Germany at the time, as the integration of German refugees from other parts of Central Europe was the dominant problem. According to Herbert, this gap resulted in a discontinuity in the perception of Germans. German refugees arriving from the East of the Reich at the end of the war and Germans fleeing the former Soviet Zone before the Berlin Wall was built in 1961 filled the low-wage and hard-labor jobs that foreign migrant workers had occupied earlier. According to Herbert, these German immigrants also acted as a buffer between the foreign forced and slave workers and guest workers who were beginning to arrive in greater numbers in the early 1960s. When non-German migrants took over again after the "Economic Miracle" (*Wirtschaftswunder*) got underway, replacing those German immigrants whose prospects had improved, the public simply did not relate them to the older cohorts of foreign workers or even forced or slave workers. They literally had forgotten them.³⁹

Herbert offers a merely functionalist interpretation of how migrant workers were perceived, as if they had been reduced to just their underclass status, as if it were totally insignificant who had performed this underclass role in the employment market and national economy, as if origin were no issue at all. This is certainly not true, as (work) migration since the turn of the century was entangled tightly with questions of Germanness and Otherness that led to various processes (discourses, legislations, administrative, and everyday practices) during which a racial knowledge pool was constructed based on notions of blood, purity, and a hierarchy of origins that determined who and what constituted the German *Volk* and the *Volksfremde* (persons foreign to the *Volk*)—the *Ausländer*. The national-socialist racial ideology radicalized and embedded this *völkisch*-racial knowledge in a universal racial order and used it to legitimize their practices of industrial mass murder.⁴⁰

Later in his narrative, Herbert returns to his argument that origin did not particularly matter to the German public, claiming that West Germans ignored the guest workers anyway, taking them for granted. At most, Germans perceived them as an integral part of their consumerist world, which proves that there was no widespread xenophobia—let alone racism, a concept he does not even say anything more about in this context.⁴¹

Leaving aside the fact that by endorsing this German oblivion and ignorance, Herbert himself reproduces racial notions of migrant workers as mere usable objects, it is very easy to disprove his contention that Germans simply forgot the forced and slave workers in 1945 or did not relate them to the guest workers who started to arrive ten years later. The gross omission of the next part of the story is decisive for upholding this narrative. At the same time, the incomparability argument he uses derives its evidence mainly from the normative superstructure built upon the question of racism in Germany and not from the proven fact that it was confined to the Nazi racial state.

Omitting the "Doing of the Zero Hour"

Germans surely did not forget the forced and slave laborers from the war and all the horrors these migrants had to endure while they lived or at least worked closely at their side.⁴² A part of these approximately eight million coerced workers stayed longer in Germany, particularly East European Jewish and Polish DPs. The historian Ulrich Müller, author of one of the few early books about DPs in Germany written in German even claimed that negative experiences with the DPs were the single most "common post-war memory of the German *Volk*."⁴³ Accounts that hew more closely to local histories reveal the unrestrained hatred the DPs faced from local populations and even municipal authorities who took over executive functions a few

³⁹ Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik*, 184–201.

⁴⁰ Alexopoulou, "Wir sind auch das Volk!"

⁴¹ Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik*, 221–22.

⁴² This subchapter draws on findings, that will be published in a forthcoming article: Alexopoulou, "The "Niemand." See also Alexopoulou, *Deutschland und die Migration*, 2020, 64–94.

⁴³ Müller, *Fremde in der Nachkriegszeit*, 19.

months after the war. The Poles, in particular, were singled out as being unsocial, filthy, and criminal, “simply stabbers (*Messerstecher*)” and a “plague” that had befallen the German *Volk*.⁴⁴

When the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was ordered by the Allied High Command in July 1950 to assume responsibility for the last “hardcore” DPs who were still in Germany, the reactions on the regional and local levels were more than hostile and unwilling. About 200,000 DPs had not been resettled by the International Refugee Organization (IRO) because they were too ill—mostly with tuberculosis or psychological ailments, the result of many years of poor living conditions—too old, had too many or sick children, or were convicted criminals (1 percent of those rejected) and were either not accepted by any country as immigrants or simply wanted to stay in Germany.⁴⁵ The Americans wished the DPs would integrate into the labor market with appropriate housing and not segregated ghettos, and the regions and municipalities were obliged to assume their share of DPs. The executive director of the Association of Cities in Württemberg-Baden had pointed out repeatedly in his correspondence with the German municipal and state authorities that this was impossible, as many of the DPs would be a burden on social welfare while the rest were criminals. How could they convince employers to offer them a job given their poor reputation, which had resulted from their “whole behaviour (aversion to work, black market, thieving etc.)?”⁴⁶ At a meeting of the same Association, the *Bürgermeister* (mayor) of Ludwigsburg countered this request with the remark that

the German population is not inclined to become accustomed to the expelled *Ausländer*, or to mix with them, as they lately enjoyed some privileges that scandalized wide sections of the *Volk*.

It is not clear if by “expelled *Ausländer*” he meant Eastern European Jews, the so-called “infiltrates” who had arrived after the capitulation of Germany.⁴⁷

The *Bürgermeister* and the *Landräte* (district administrators) voiced exactly the same misgivings at a meeting in October 1950 in Stuttgart when the Württemberg-Baden Minister of the Interior Fritz Ulrich and the DP-Advisor of the Land Commission J. H. Campbell tried to convince them of the necessary measures for the remaining DPs, an estimated seventy-five hundred for the whole state. But even Ulrich, who was supposed to win the support of the municipal representatives, pointed out that this group of people were not DPs who had been brought to Germany by force in the “*Hitlerzeit*,” (era of Hitler) but others who had left their homelands of their free will. The city and municipal representatives were most content with this kind of remark, displaying their feelings with interjections like “we will need the police to house them” or “our citizens will refuse their allegiance to the state completely if we burden them with this.”⁴⁸

Apart from the openly displayed disdain and bluntly voiced racist terminology, a steady process of redefining the DPs was taking place among all strata of society and the polity. It was a redefinition that deleted the experiences of the majority of this group, including abduction, forced and slave labor, racial discrimination, and displacement. It was performed through continuous complaints about the DPs that constantly portrayed them as unsocial elements, criminals, filthy, and contagious. This racial knowledge corresponded with the notions Germans already had; now they just readjusted, re-positioned, and legitimized it anew. Such an active performance of redefinition had nothing to do with oblivion, silence, or shame, but it was “*doing* the zero-hour”⁴⁹ vis-a-vis the *Ausländer*. The Germans’ hatred and the (re)production of racial knowledge did not need the past, a racial theory, or ideology; it was grounded in the present and legitimized by the scarcity of resources, be it food, housing, or security.

Ironically, this redefinition was completed by the new legal status of *heimatloser Ausländer* (homeless foreigner), which left no clue to the “migration history” of this group. The law that was issued in April 1951 surely reads as an example of fair treatment, as it provided in some domains the same rights as German citizens and was eminently liberal in comparison to the regulations for foreigners in the *Ausländerpolizeiverordnung* (APVO; Foreigners Police Ordinance) of 1938 that was also subsequently re-enacted.

⁴⁴ Leo Barth, Entwurf zum politischen Stimmungsbericht, 30 August 1946, Zug. KE00051, MA.

⁴⁵ According to the figures of the IRO Resettlement Center in Ludwigsburg, in Minutes of Conference, 1 December 1951, EA 2/801 Bü 16, HStAS.

⁴⁶ Letter, 23 May 1950, Zug. 3/1981, Nr. 342, MA.

⁴⁷ Speech, 6 September 1950, Zug. 3/1981, Nr. 372, MA. For the so-called “infiltrates,” see Grossmann, *Jews, Germans*, 92.

⁴⁸ Meeting-Protocol, 2 October 1950, EA 2/801 Bü 16, HStAS.

⁴⁹ “Doing the zero-hour” resonates with the well-known conceptualizations “doing Gender” and “doing culture,” which focus on the performative acts that construct these categories.

But the preferential status of the *heimatlose Ausländer* had been the result of orders and pressures from the Allied High Command on the new federal German government.⁵⁰ At the same time, the German side managed to formulate the provisions of the law to allow the state governments to apply it at their discretion.⁵¹ One of the first measures in Württemberg-Baden after the passing of the law on homeless foreigners was to submit these same people to the *APVO* as well,⁵² a policy later adopted for the whole of Germany by the Ministry of the Interior.⁵³ Two years later in a letter to the state Ministers of the Interior, Kurt Breull, the head of the Foreigners Division of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, emphasized that it was an “exclusive German prerogative” to administer foreigners and it was the prerogative of the local departments to grant the status of “homeless foreigner” and residency.⁵⁴

The *Ausländerbehörden* (foreigners’ registration offices) at police departments also gradually restored their full control over foreigners in their cities. This included the decision of whether they chose to inform entitled foreigners about their option to apply for the better legal status of homeless foreigner or not. This might explain why many of those entitled to it never received it, received it belatedly, or possibly did not know which rights this legal status implied, even when they had acquired it.⁵⁵

Besides, it was certified by law that when *heimatlose Ausländer* petitioned for naturalization, “their special fate” would be taken into consideration.⁵⁶ But, in these cases, the law could be bent as well: to the detriment of the letter of the law, in one of their regular meetings in October 1955, the heads of the division for citizenship law at the state and the federal Ministries of the Interior came to an understanding that DPs would preferably not be granted German citizenship, as they were not able “to be absorbed into the German *Volkstum*” in the face of their “resentments, because of the events during the war and their own behavior towards the German population.”⁵⁷

Later on in his narrative, Herbert acknowledges that Germans created the myth of a new beginning by suppressing the memory of forced labor, while earlier he had written that Germans mentally just did not relate to the different groups of migrant workers, an explanation implying unintended or oblivious ignorance by the German public. The part of the story he chose not to tell displays this ignorance, which resulted not from collective oblivion, let alone tacit collective moral pain, but from an active performance. It was whitewashing from their own participation in a slavery project, a willful and malicious form of ignorance, combining silencing with the redefinition of a group and a new “art of communicating” about racialized migrant Others that established the complex history of the simultaneity of knowing and ignoring the past and present of racism in Germany. At the same time, the binary “German and *Ausländer*” and the hierarchy based on origin was preserved by re-contextualizing racial knowledge in the new realities. This is not to say that all Germans participated in these performances of *doing* the zero hour, but apparently the German public in general was affected by this supposedly oblivious ignorance that later even turned into an amnesic one. This was the dominant outcome.

Omitting (Racial) Knowledge of the Past

There are countless references on the history of work migration in Germany in contemporary media accounts and the proceedings of administrative and political decision-making processes, including the years during the Second World War. One example is an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* from June 1961. The author points out that the recruitment and arrival of foreign workers was not a new phenomenon. During the years of the *Kaiserreich*, there had been far more migrants in Germany working under “half colonial, that is disgraceful conditions.” And there had also been the *Fremdarbeiter*, the foreign workers of the Third Reich. The author himself and society as a whole were struggling to find the right term to name these new migrant workers, to separate them from this history.⁵⁸ The term that finally came out of this quest was *Gastarbeiter*, guest worker. But nobody seemed to know or to bother about the fact that the term *Gastarbeiter* had also been used by the Nazis, mostly for foreign workers who had been recruited before the war.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ Jacobmeyer, *Vom Zwangsarbeiter*, 226–31.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 227–28.

⁵² Ordinance, 5 June 1951, EA 2/301 Bü 42, HStAS.

⁵³ See correspondence, EA 2/303 Bü 137, HStAS.

⁵⁴ Letter, 27 March 1953, EA 2/303 Bü 137, HStAS.

⁵⁵ This is suggested by a statistic from 31 December 1952, EA 2/303 Bü 253, HStAS, but also by several figures in Mannheim and the practices at the *Ausländerbehörde*.

⁵⁶ Rechtsstellung heimatloser Ausländer.

⁵⁷ Minutes, 14 October 1955, B 106/73258, Bundesarchiv Koblenz.

⁵⁸ Kroeber-Keneth, “Die ausländischen Arbeitskräfte.”

⁵⁹ Hansch-Singh, “Rassismus und Fremdarbeitereinsatz,” 149.

Ten years later, this history had still not been forgotten and was further reported on. An article in the political magazine *Der Spiegel* from October 1970 made readers aware of the continuities in the discrimination against minorities, who were now called “camel drivers” (*Kameltreiber*) or “mutton-eaters” (*Hammelfresser*) and classified as “uncivilized and stupid.” A psychology professor explained the German uneasiness with these migrant workers as “*Verdrängungsproblem*,” a problem resulting from repressing the time of forced and slave labor.⁶⁰

But this knowledge wasn’t confined to experts or journalists, politicians or administrators. It was—naturally—common knowledge. German factory workers had to be urged again and again not to call their foreign colleagues *Fremdarbeiter*, a term apparently echoing the Nazi era, although at that time they were mainly called *Ausländer*.⁶¹ In everyday situations referring to the Nazi era was not a taboo either. To quote a stark example: in an oral history interview, an Italian who had worked in Mannheim in the 1960s said that his German colleagues at the construction site kept provoking him by calling him, besides all the other racial slurs, an Italian traitor. If Italians had not been such a failure and had not left the Axis in September 1943, Germany would have won the war.⁶²

But this kind of knowledge was also used without openly naming it. During a citizens’ protest in 1961 against the plans of a company to rent a building to accommodate its Italian guest workers in a wealthy district of Mannheim—they feared these “unsocial elements” would spoil the neighborhood because they were all “stabbers” and would chase women—a pastor proposed to house them on the outskirts of the district. The district councilman suggested they should use barracks with military rules and supervision. The protesters hinted that less than fifteen years before there had been barracks for DPs at the location, which was just 800 meters from the disputed building and that the same barracks had housed forced laborers. There had also been many Italian forced laborers in Mannheim.⁶³

At the same time, there was also the opposite endeavor, that is, to use this knowledge to counter such memories: The local paper, *Mannheimer Morgen*, quoted the caretaker of a dormitory for guest workers with the words that despite the strict house rules, he tried to keep order without giving the “impression of a German barrack or a camp of unfortunate remembrance.”⁶⁴

The worry not to evoke any resemblance to the past use of foreign (and forced) labor in Germany was surely one of the main aims of German foreign policy concerning the issue of migrant workers. The German side had already been anxious to meet the allied provisions for homeless foreigners as a prerequisite for the restitution of sovereignty over its *Ausländerpolitik*. The respective top-down ordinances from one governmental level to the other often cite the Allies’ expectation that former DPs would be not discriminated against by laws or bureaucratic practices. This stance resulted primarily from considerations of foreign policy and Germany’s image abroad. Phrases like “the whole issue is under close international observation” were common, even at the regional and municipal levels.⁶⁵

Especially after Germany resumed the recruitment of foreign workers in 1955 following its agreement with Italy—this was not the first time, it had done so in 1938—there was constant anxiety about how this issue might be perceived abroad. One main public relations topic was to point out that workers coming to Germany from all over Europe was a sign of its Europeanization and its desire for international friendship.⁶⁶ But again—in ignorance or knowingly?—they used propagandistic arguments that were similar to the ones the Nazi press had used to promote the recruitment and employment of foreign workers, such as “European comradery working together at the German home front as a practical materialization of Europe.”⁶⁷

Now and then the referrals to European friendship and international understanding in connection with foreign workers were also directed to the German public whose racist feelings and resentment of foreigners was known: to the Nazi authorities, as the Security Service of the SS kept reporting, and to the authorities in the Federal Republic of Germany that continued to monitor the issue.⁶⁸ The following is just one of countless examples: in December 1963, the State Labor Office of Baden-Württemberg reported to the State

⁶⁰ “Komm, komm,” 60.

⁶¹ Richter and Richter, “*Die Gastarbeiter-Welt*,” 116.

⁶² Oral history interview with Anonymous.

⁶³ Alexopoulou, “*Ausländer*,” 44–45.

⁶⁴ Stolberg, “*Wenn Onkel und Vetter*.”

⁶⁵ For example: Meeting-Protocol of communal and regional political representatives in Karlsruhe, 14 October 1950, Zug. 3/1981, Nr. 342, MA.

⁶⁶ Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik*, 210–11.

⁶⁷ “*Gauleiter Sauckel über die Arbeitsschlacht*,” *Hackenkreuzbanner für Mannheim und Nordbaden*, 14 January 1943, MA.

⁶⁸ There is plenty of evidence in the SD-reports published in: Boberach, *Meldungen*, for example, nr. 287, 28 May 1942, vol. 10, 3760–63.

Ministry of the Interior that great efforts had been made to convince the public that the recruitment of foreign workers was a necessity. But these efforts should be sustained and even extended, especially by the welfare organizations that were assigned by the state to assist foreign workers, as “there still are prejudices against them in all layers of the population.”⁶⁹

These few hints should suffice to counter the notion that pre-1945 foreign workers and guest workers were not associated with each other and that forced and slave laborers were forgotten. These examples in fact display the simultaneity of knowing and ignoring that had constituted a new art of communicating about the past and the presence of racism in relation to migrant Others in hints and without the need to use concepts such as “race.” But there were still the concepts of *Volksdeutsche*, *deutsches Volk*, *Deutschtum*⁷⁰ and others that resonated and sustained *völkisch*-racial knowledge, which were used in abundance in discourses, played a pivotal role in upholding institutional and structural mechanisms, and kept producing *Ausländer* in legislation, practices concerning residency rights and naturalization, and other domains, such as political participation.⁷¹

This new art of communicating has a whole history of its own, which provides more evidence that German society had not “de-learned” racial knowledge accumulated over many decades about migrant Others, but had rather learned to manage it differently, in ways that were suitable to the new realities. Willful and even malicious ignorance, strategic, unintended, unknowing, or oblivious ignorance, and, with time, amnesic ignorance constitute the range of variant modes in this art of communicating. This art of communicating is just a surface mirroring of the ways racial knowledge kept ordering life options, opportunities, privileges, and rights based on a hierarchy of origins. In sum, this forms the substrate for and source of migrants’ abundant knowledge *about* racism, fueling their *counterstories*.

Unwinding the Entanglements

There is much evidence that racial knowledge is known and ignored simultaneously. This seems to be the condition in which it can persist in democratic, post-racial, or color-blind societies. It is not necessary to erase racial knowledge and its systemic effects on society as long as it is dominantly ignored. This particular relationship reflects the idea that knowledge and ignorance are an entangled continuum with a myriad of grey scales where ignorance contains knowledge and knowledge is upheld by ignorance.

Comparison as a historiographical method is not well suited for exposing this complexity, as it fosters false comparison operations, as Epple points out, or can be used to omit relevant parts of a story—simply by the choice of the respective *tertium comperationis*. And in returning to the postulates of the pioneer decolonial thinker Walter Dignolo: there is no detached observer and there are no essential entities in comparisons. The matter at hand is “unveiling the entanglement rather than on comparing the entangled entities.” The entangled histories of racism, migration, and ignorance in Germany cannot be grasped, analyzed, or unwound by an “epistemology of zero point.” Decolonial—and I would add more generally, critical race theory—thinkers “are interested in uncovering hidden relations between events, processes, and entities” in their interconnectedness with power.⁷² In this process, it is important to expose the ignored blind spots in the master narrative and to trace back how they were produced.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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⁶⁹ Report, 9 December 1963, EA 2/303 Bü 271, HStAS.

⁷⁰ All these terms refer to Germanness in a cultural-biological and superiority sense that is not translatable in “ethnic” German or ethnicity in general.

⁷¹ Alexopoulou, “Rassismus als Kontinuitätslinie”; Alexopoulou, “Wir sind auch das Volk!”

⁷² Dignolo, “On Comparison,” quotes on 110, 114, 116.

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