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*Impreuna Putem / Together, We Can:
The Movement to Save Berlin's Roma and Sinti Memorial*

ABSTRACT: *Germany's capital Berlin is filled with monuments honoring the victims of the Holocaust, constituting a memorial landscape that facilitates remembrance, sorrow, and growth. While the general public appreciates these monuments as places of information, transformation, and unity, the country's far-Right – including the political party "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD) – is questioning the accuracy of Holocaust scholarship and the need for Holocaust memorials. On the basis of online news coverage, this essay highlights the public dispute over plans of the "Deutsche Bahn" (DB or "German Railway") to construct a rail line underneath the "Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered under National Socialism," a monument opened in 2012 near Berlin's "Reichstag" (the Federal Parliament Building), as these plans are being fought by Sinti and Roma, as well as Germany's Left.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; Germany; Nazis; Holocaust; Sinti and Roma; Berlin; memorial landscape; Alternative für Deutschland (AfD); Deutsche Bahn (DB); news coverage*

Introduction

"Your train took me to my death. Now it will drill through my grave."¹ These words – used by the British writer Damian James Le Bas in his 2020 art piece "Ušte Romane Kokalalen!" – are being turned into signs to protest the plans of the "Deutsche Bahn" (DB or "German Railway") to construct a rail line underneath Berlin's "Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered under National Socialism," a monument designed by the Israeli sculptor Daniel (Dani) Karavan (1930-2021) and unveiled in 2012 near the "Reichstag" (the Federal Parliament Building). The Sinti and Roma are subgroups of central Europe's Romani people; ethnically, they are Indo-Aryans and one of Europe's largest diaspora minorities.² They were persecuted and killed in large numbers by the Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945 as a "racially inferior" threat to Germany's Aryan race.³

In 2020, only eight years after its opening, the memorial became endangered due to construction plans for a municipal railway. These plans would necessitate a temporary closure of the memorial in order to build two railway tunnels underneath the monument, thereby depriving the general public – including Holocaust survivors and their relatives – of the opportunity to visit the site.

Germany's capital Berlin is filled with monuments honoring the victims of the Holocaust, constituting a memorial landscape that facilitates remembrance, sorrow, and growth. While the general public appreciates these monuments as

¹ Lisa Smith, "YTT Editor Reports from Germany: Protest to Protect Memorial for Sinti and Roma Murdered under National Socialism," *Travellers Times*, November 10, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022. See also "Das Denkmal bleibt!" *RomaTrial e.V.*, February 8, 2021, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

² Konstantina Mirtzani, "Romani: Europe's Largest Ethnic Minority, Their Marginalization, and the Way Forward," *The New Federalist*, May 16, 2021, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

³ "Sinti and Roma," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

places of information, transformation, and unity, the country's far-Right—including the political party "Alternative für Deutschland" (AfD or "Alternative for Germany")—is questioning the accuracy of Holocaust scholarship and the need for Holocaust memorials in general. On the basis of online news coverage, this essay highlights the public dispute over the plans to construct a railway underneath the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma, particularly the motivations of those engaged in the protests, namely, the members of the Sinti and Roma population groups, as well as Left-wing Germans. Not only will the proposed railway mar the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma; it will negatively impact Berlin's memorial landscape and soundscape—a key aspect of the city's design. What is more, the protests are not just about the threat to a physical memorial and those intended to be honored by its existence; they serve as a means to denounce those who call the accuracy of Holocaust scholarship into question and dismiss the need for Holocaust memorials, namely, the AfD, Germany's far-Right political party.

I. Historiography

Berlin's Memorial to the Sinti and Roma was first approved by Germany's Federal Government in 1992. Due to prolonged discussions between politicians, the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, and the lead designer, construction did not begin until 2008 and took four years. In 2012, the monument was formally dedicated in the presence of (then) German Chancellor Angela Merkel and (then) German President Joachim Gauck.⁴ In 2020, it was announced that the Deutsche Bahn intended to construct a rail line—the S 21—directly underneath the memorial. Ever since Germany's (and Berlin's) reunification in 1990, there had been much discussion over the once physically divided capital's need to significantly overhaul and expand its public-transportation infrastructure. Thus, initial plans for the S 21 date back to the early 1990s; however, due to the many stakeholders and decision-makers involved in such projects on the federal, state, and municipal level, these plans have repeatedly changed and even stalled for years on end. Until 2020, the general public was unaware that the railway plans might compromise the memorial. The exact extent to which elected officials and members of Berlin's federal, state, and municipal governing bodies were aware of the plans of the Deutsche Bahn remains far from clear.

Much recent scholarship, especially by political scientists and historians, has been devoted to the rise of the far-Right in Germany. For example, Nicole Berbuir, Marcel Lewandowsky, and Jasmin Siri have analyzed the political positions of the AfD and its Right-wing sympathizers,⁵ showing, on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data that the AfD is an increasingly strong political party in a country that has a history of Right-wing radicalism. AfD's growing popularity is, however,

⁴ For additional details, see Michael Zimmermann, "The Berlin Memorial for the Murdered Sinti and Roma: Problems and Points for Discussion," *Romani Studies* 17, no. 1 (2007): 1-30.

⁵ Nicole Berbuir, Marcel Lewandowsky, and Jasmin Siri. "The AfD and Its Sympathizers: Finally a Right-Wing Populist Movement in Germany?" *German Politics* 24, no. 2 (2015): 154-178.

countered by the activism of Left-wing Germans and their political organizations who consider the AfD's positions detrimental to Germany's future. Just as the basic ideals and issues that rally the far-Right often align, regardless of their country of origin, so do those of the Left, which is why the findings of scholars like Evan Smith and Matthew Worley concerning Left-wing groups and activists in Britain are also applicable to their respective political equivalents in Germany.⁶

The history of memorial landscapes and soundscapes in Europe after World War II is a vibrant and growing field of research. Amy Davidson, for instance, has written on the "war memorial landscape heritage" in England.⁷ Davidson explains the significance of memorial landscapes; she demonstrates that World War I and World War II memorials created to honor the victims of these wars are now often lacking recognition and are underappreciated; and she warns that, in many cases, memorials either collapse due to "piecemeal changes over time" that "alter the original design intention and impact the sense of place" or because memorials become "prime sites for larger residential or commercial development."⁸ Turning to Germany, Henry W. Pickford's work on memorials in Berlin discusses the impact of such monuments on the general public and German identity.⁹ Meanwhile, scholars like Irit Dekel, Quentin Stevens, Phil Alexander, and Brigitte Schulte-Fortkamp offer additional perspectives. Irit Dekel examines how Holocaust memorials provide a space "for self-realization and transformation."¹⁰ Quentin Stevens considers how memorials in democratic capitals shape their respective city's culture.¹¹ Last but not least, Phil Alexander and Brigitte Schulte-Fortkamp examine the memorial soundscapes of Berlin and suggest that these monuments and their surrounding areas constitute soundscapes that feed off of each other; thus, the memorial soundscapes of Berlin are meaningful expressions of respect and opportunities to delve into the past.¹²

⁶ Evan Smith and Matthew Worley, *Waiting for the Revolution: The British Far Left from 1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

⁷ Amy Davidson, "War Memorial Landscape Heritage in England," *Garden History* 42, supplement 1 (2014): 58-72.

⁸ Davidson, "War Memorial Landscape Heritage," 70-71.

⁹ Henry W. Pickford, "Conflict and Commemoration: Two Berlin Memorials," *Modernism/modernity* 12, no. 1 (2005): 133-173.

¹⁰ Irit Dekel, "Ways of Looking: Observation and Transformation at the Holocaust Memorial, Berlin," *Memory Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 71-86.

¹¹ Quentin Stevens, "Shaping Moral Landscapes: Comparing the Regulation of Public Memorials in Democratic Capitals," *Proceedings of the 12th Australasian Urban History Planning History Conference 2014: Landscapes and Ecologies of Urban and Planning History* (December 30, 2018): 781-796, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

¹² Phil Alexander, "Sounding the Holocaust, Silencing the City: Memorial Soundscapes in Today's Berlin," *Cultural Studies* 33, no. 5 (2019): 778-801. See also Brigitte Schulte-Fortkamp, "Using the Soundscape Approach to Develop a Public Space in Berlin: Perception and Evaluation," *The Journal of the Acoustical Society of America* 123, no. 5 (2008): abstract.

In addition to studying the respective local contexts of memorials, scholars are interested in these monuments' impact on both survivors and the relatives of victims. A 2013 article by Myfanwy Maple, Helen Elizabeth Edwards, Victor Minichiello, and David Plummer examines the necessity of memorials for families and how they serve as places of grieving and opportunities to maintain relations. The authors present the voices of parents who have lost children to suicide and have created memorial spaces to remember their loved ones.¹³ According to these parents, the memorials are "a way of ensuring that their child's life [is] [...] not forgotten, and [that] their death becomes meaningful."¹⁴ Nadine Blumer's 2011 dissertation draws attention to the importance of memorials as acknowledgments of victimhood.¹⁵ Meanwhile – taking us back to the focus of this essay – Michael Zimmermann's 2007 article, "The Berlin Memorial for the Murdered Sinti and Roma: Problems and Points for Discussion," examines the conflicts and controversies surrounding the establishment and construction of this memorial. Zimmermann discusses the impact the memorial has had on the public, specifically the Sinti and Roma, and how the hurdles that the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma had to face throughout the construction process made the memorial even more significant and meaningful to this community.¹⁶

II. The Significance of the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma

Romani living in Germany viewed the 2012 opening of the "Memorial to the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered under National Socialism" in Berlin as a form of recognition and remembrance of the horrors that their people had experienced during World War II. To many of them, the memorial's proximity to the Reichstag building was especially significant. On October 24, 2012, the day of the memorial's dedication, Romani Rose, the president of the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, stated, "I'm thankful that the German government is opening this memorial to the public, and I see its location, so close to the German Parliament, as an attempt to make amends."¹⁷ Thus, the Sinti and Roma felt as though their voices had finally been heard, that their resolute advocacy against antigypsyism¹⁸ had

¹³ Myfanwy Maple, Helen Elizabeth Edwards, Victor Minichiello, and David Plummer, "Still Part of the Family: The Importance of Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Memorial Places and Spaces for Parents Bereaved through the Suicide Death of Their Son or Daughter," *Mortality: Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying* 18, no. 1 (2013): 54-71.

¹⁴ Maple, Edwards, Minichiello, and Plummer, "Still Part of the Family," 56.

¹⁵ Nadine Blumer, *From Victim Hierarchies to Memorial Networks: Berlin's Holocaust Memorial to Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism* (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2011), iii.

¹⁶ Zimmermann, "Berlin Memorial," 1-30.

¹⁷ Chris Cottrell, "Memorial to Roma Holocaust Victims Opens in Berlin," *New York Times*, October 24, 2012.

¹⁸ Antigypsyism is "racism toward Roma, Sinti, Travellers and others who are stigmatized as 'gypsies' in the public imagination;" see "Reference Paper on Antigypsyism," *Antigypsyism.eu: Online Platform against Antigypsyism*, January 23, 2022, [online](https://antigypsyism.eu/), accessed June 18, 2022.

finally been successful, and that Germany’s official, “verbal” acknowledgment of the Sinti and Roma Holocaust – also known as “Porajmos” (“Destruction”) – was finally substantiated by a tangible, “physical” reminder.¹⁹



Figure 1: Memorial to the Sinti and Roma, Berlin, Entrance. Photo by Gregory Leighton (2022); used by permission.

The Memorial to the Sinti and Roma is designed to honor the victims of the Sinti and Roma Holocaust. It serves as a gravesite for those killed under the Third Reich (1933-1945), and Romani view the memorial as a burial place for their ancestors. According to a 2020 press release by Germany’s national Romani organization, “[m]any of our people have no grave. They were gassed in death camps, shot in forests, buried in mass graves. Our memorial in Berlin is the place where we mourn the dead without graves.”²⁰ Thus, a disruption or, worse, a removal of the memorial would leave the survivors and their communities severely distraught. To Roxanna-Lorraine Witt, a descendant of Romani Holocaust victims, “[t]he memorial is a gravesite for those whose ashes are still in Auschwitz. This is a holy place not only for Sinti and Roma, but for all people.”²¹ The memorial

¹⁹ The Roma and Sinti Holocaust was recognized by Germany in 1982, almost 40 years after the end of World War II and the Holocaust; see: “What Is the Roma Genocide?” *Open Society Foundations*, May 2009, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

²⁰ “Press Release: The Memorial Remains! By Any Means Necessary,” *Bundes Roma Verband*, July 7, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

²¹ Luisa von Richthofen and Grzegorz Szymanowski, “Sinti and Roma Fear for Their Holocaust Memorial in Berlin,” *Deutsche Welle: DW.com*, July 31, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

is a central part of the community where the Sinti and Roma remember their loved ones, where the German public reflects on the past, and where both communities can unite and grow. As Germany's national Romani organization points out: "That is why the majority also has a responsibility to fight for the memorial."²²

Following the news that their memorial might be endangered due to railway plans, many German Sinti and Roma felt threatened and targeted by the country's elected officials, bureaucrats, and business interests. In a speech on August 2, 2020, Zilli Schmidt, a 96-year-old Sinti survivor of the extermination camp at Auschwitz, stated, "I am afraid that everything I experienced will repeat itself."²³ Many others viewed the disregard for the significance of their memorial as a form of attack. According to Mario Franz, the chairman of the Lower Saxony Association of German Sinti, "[t]he plan to damage or destroy the memorial will re-open the half-healed wounds left by the persecution and murder of hundreds of thousands of Sinti and Roma and feels like a slap in the face to all the survivors."²⁴

Left-wing Germans are standing with their fellow German Sinti and Roma neighbors in protest. In fact, many Germans see that it is their responsibility to protect the memorial and the individuals it represents. In her 2020 speech, Zilli Schmidt expressed that she was proud to see "that many young people are doing everything they can to promote democracy and human rights."²⁵ This drive by the public to stop the railway construction at the memorial has caught the attention of the government. Protesters have stated that "[i]t should be clear that this monument is sacrosanct. There is a political responsibility to protect it."²⁶ There have been protests and rallies at the memorial site with Sinti and Roma, as well as their German neighbors, holding signs, standing in unity, and demonstrating that the memorial is inviolable and deserves to be respected.²⁷ As a result, at least for the time being, railway construction at the memorial has been suspended.²⁸

²² "Press Release: The Memorial Remains! By Any Means Necessary," *Bundes Roma Verband*.

²³ Zilli Schmidt, "Commemoration Speech on the Occasion of 2 August 2020, Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti and Roma," *European Holocaust Memorial Day for Sinti und Roma*, August 2, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

²⁴ Begoña Barrera, "A Crucial Public Space Is under Threat: Save the Berlin Memorial," *BestRom.org*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

²⁵ Schmidt, "Commemoration Speech."

²⁶ Von Richthofen and Szymanowski, "Sinti and Roma."

²⁷ "Germany: Sinti and Roma Protesters Rally against Removal of Berlin Genocide Memorial," *RuptlyTV.com*, June 13, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

²⁸ William Bila, "Berlin's Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism Must Not Be Relocated, German Railroad Cannot Be Allowed to Disrupt It," *Romea.cz*, July 30, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.



Figure 2: Memorial to the Sinti and Roma, Berlin, Pond. Photo by Gregory Leighton (2022); used by permission.

III. Belin's Memorial Landscape and Soundscape

In addition to their remarkable lack of historical sensitivity, the plans of the Deutsche Bahn to construct a rail line underneath Berlin's Memorial to the Sinti and Roma are also an assault on Berlin's memorial landscape and soundscape. Berlin has become a center of remembrance—particularly for the victims of the Holocaust—that comprises a “collection of statues, plaques, and conceptual memorial projects.”²⁹ These memorials are seamlessly integrated into the surrounding urban terrain, and many Berliners feel “attached to the urban landscape”³⁰ and the history that these memorials represent.

Holocaust memorials are often silent spaces, but some also feature culturally significant music to commemorate the victims, to facilitate meditation, and to elicit an attitude of respect. The silence—or the music inside these memorial spaces—blends with Berlin's bustling urban soundscape. Although the city around these memorials, including the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma, continues to move to a cacophony of noises and other audible stimulants, the memorials are like islands of reflection in a sea of mundane sounds. That is why each memorial in Berlin is meant to be integrated into the city's buzzing life. According to Phil Alexander, Berlin is “a city where hotly contested memorial is often structured into the daily ever-present.”³¹ The city's memorial landscape allows both soundscapes to live in harmony, and the city's liveliness blends effortlessly with the calmness of the various memorial settings.

The public appreciates and connects with these memorials, including the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma, as they “are generally smaller and more humble structures, built to provide a space for expressions of collective memory.”³² The Memorial to the Sinti and Roma attracts the public and tourists “due to its prime location”³³ and impactful design. Dani Karavan made the memorial dynamic and thought-provoking: “The monument itself consists of a circular pool with a triangular stone in the middle, upon which a single fresh flower is placed every day.”³⁴ The circular pool is filled with a thin layer of water, creating a reflective layer. Karavan added this element so that it would make visitors realize that, just like the victims of Porajmos, we are all human beings. When people visit the memorial they “enter through a rusty steel portal” as they approach the stone slab,

²⁹ Jennifer A. Jordan, “Memorial Projects as Sites of Social Integration in post-1989 Berlin?” *German Politics and Society* 24, no. 4 (2006): 77-94, here 77.

³⁰ Jordan, “Memorial Projects,” 78.

³¹ Alexander, “Sounding the Holocaust,” 779.

³² Leila Peacock, “Futures Past: Monumental Memorials of Modern Berlin,” *The White Review*, January 2011, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

³³ Yermi Brenner, “Roma and Sinti: Germans for Centuries, but Still Considered Outsiders,” *The Local Germany*, February 26, 2018, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

³⁴ “Monuments,” *Roma and the Holocaust*, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

and they hear “dissonant music evoking the tragedy of the Gypsy genocide.”³⁵ Thus, the ambiance and atmosphere of the memorial and its surrounding landscape are priceless and valuable to the public.

The synergy between the public and Berlin’s memorials renders any endangerment of this way of life a serious concern, and the construction plans for the S 21 municipal railway are considered a real threat to the city’s memorial landscape and soundscape. According to one of the local and regional news stations, *Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg*, “[t]he monument is of course massively affected by the construction site of the railway,”³⁶ and there is fear that, “[o]ver two thirds of this area [will be] [...] lost as a result of the construction site.”³⁷ Thus, the protests of the public against the plans of the Deutsche Bahn, in addition to the protests of the Sinti and Roma, should not come as a surprise.

IV. *Protesting against the Railway – and against “Alternative für Deutschland” (AfD)*

Many Left-wing Germans are joining these protests because they simultaneously serve as a way to denounce a far-Right political party known as the AfD (i.e., “Alternative für Deutschland” or “Alternative for Germany”). The crimes committed by Germany during the Third Reich and World War II continue to haunt the country. While there were some denazification programs in all four of the Allied occupation zones in the immediate aftermath of the war, these efforts were largely bureaucratic and did not really facilitate the public acknowledgment of guilt, the restitution of damages where possible, and the reconciliation with survivors and their relatives. It was not until the late 1960s that Germany began to engage systematically in “Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung” (i.e., “reappraisal of the past”). There was a belated realization that the wrongdoings committed by previous generations were not to be repeated and that movements and organizations reflecting Nazi ideology were not to be countenanced.

Still, the radical Right eventually found its way into Germany’s elected institutions. Germany is a federal parliamentary republic. The Bundestag (i.e., the federal parliament) wields the legislative power; its legislating majority is led by the party with the most elected officials (which normally also furnishes the chancellor); and if no party has an absolute majority, several parties form a legislating coalition (as well as the cabinet of ministers who, together with the chancellor, constitute the federal government). In recent years, the AfD, a radical Right-wing populist party, has slowly risen in strength during elections for the Bundestag. In the 2017 elections for the 19th Bundestag (2017-2021), the AfD

³⁵ Rick Steves, “Berlin: A City of Memories—and Memorials—from a Horrible War,” *Rick Steves’ Europe*, July 30, 2013, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

³⁶ “Sinti und Roma bangen um Berliner Gedenkort am Reichstag,” *Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg*: [rbb24.de](#), June 2020, originally available under “<https://www.rbb24.de/politik/beitrag/2020/06/streit-sinti-roma-mahnmal-deutsche-bahn-ausbau-s-bahn.html>,” no longer available online as of June 18, 2022.

³⁷ “Sinti und Roma bangen,” *Rundfunk Berlin-Brandenburg*: [rbb24.de](#).

“became the third strongest party in Germany.”³⁸ Of the 19th Bundestag’s 709 seats, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) won 245 seats and formed a coalition with the second-strongest party, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), which had come in second with 152 seats; meanwhile, the AfD won 87 seats,³⁹ leaving the remaining 225 seats to the Liberals (80), the Left (69), the Greens (67), and those with no party affiliation (9). As a result of the latest German elections (2021), the AfD has lost some of its seats.⁴⁰

While not represented in the federal government as of 2021, the AfD has a voice in the Bundestag and routinely makes it heard during debates. According to chapter 14 of the party’s “Manifesto for Germany: The Political Programme for the Alternative for Germany,” it is one of AfD’s core principles to maintain strong infrastructure, housing, and transportation.⁴¹ In Germany’s 19th Bundestag, the AfD’s support for railway construction and maintenance coincided with Chancellor Merkel’s and the CDU/CSU’s wishes to support the Deutsche Bahn.⁴² What neither of them seem to have considered in the process (and the AfD would not have considered it anyway) was the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma.

The controversy surrounding the AfD stems from the party’s viewpoints and ideology. Many AfD leaders have made harsh and dismissive statements pertaining to Germany’s past and the Holocaust. For example, Björn Höcke, the AfD’s state leader in Thuringia, has stated that “Germans are the only people in the world who plant a monument of shame in the heart of the capital.”⁴³ This blunt statement targets the Holocaust memorials in Berlin. Höcke does not appear to care about the victims of the Holocaust; rather, he cares about his ideas concerning the honor and the image of Germany. Höcke and other AfD leaders consider the Holocaust a small impurity in the great history of Germany. The AfD argues that Holocaust memorials and an emphasis on remembering its victims prevent Germany from becoming great again. One of the AfD’s founders, Alexander Gauland, has called the Holocaust “a speck of bird shit in more than 1,000 years of

³⁸ Lars Rensmann, “Radical Right-Wing Populists in Parliament: Examining the Alternative for Germany in European Context,” *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 3 (2018): 41-73, here 41.

³⁹ “Sitzverteilung im Deutschen Bundestag nach der Bundestagswahl 2017,” *Statista*, August 2021, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁴⁰ “Sitzverteilung im Deutschen Bundestag nach der Bundestagswahl 2021,” *Statista*, September 2021, [online](#), accessed July 6, 2022.

⁴¹ “Manifesto for Germany: The Political Programme of the Alternative for Germany,” 2016, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁴² “Germany to Sell up to 49 Percent of Deutsche Bahn,” *Deutsche Welle: DW.com*, July 24, 2007, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022. See also Yasmeen Serhan, “A Far-Right Warning from Germany,” *The Atlantic*, February 19, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁴³ Lizzie Dearden, “German Politician Calls for Country to Be More ‘Positive’ about Nazi Past,” *The Independent*, January 19, 2017, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

successful German history.”⁴⁴ Most AfD supporters would probably not describe themselves as Holocaust deniers (which is illegal in Germany); however, they are certainly ignorers, minimizers, relativists, and defamers of the Holocaust, which may well be more subversive than outright Holocaust denial.

Gauland posits that there is a “German culture of guilt.”⁴⁵ This has prompted the AfD to question, for example, the accuracy of Holocaust scholarship and the need for Holocaust memorials in general. Thus, the AfD has publicly attacked the groups previously targeted by the Third Reich as a campaign method. According to the Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, “[s]ince the beginning of 2013, Sinti and Roma have been subjected to smear campaigns [...] throughout Germany, members of our minority were threatened, excluded, and defamed by posters and flyers.”⁴⁶ As the AfD has chosen to ignore the crimes of Germany’s past, wounds are being reopened and exposed.

In response to the AfD’s posturing, Left-wing Germans have increasingly taken to stressing the importance of Holocaust memorials. For example, in November 2017, ten months after Björn Höcke’s “monument-of-shame” speech, a Berlin-based art collective, the Center for Political Beauty, placed “24 concrete slabs in the sleepy village of Bornhagen, Germany.”⁴⁷ The art piece is a replica of Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and it was installed specifically in the Thuringian village of Bornhagen to draw the attention of Björn Höcke who was holding the lease to the neighboring plot.

In 2019, the Center for Political Beauty also emphasized the importance of memorials and protested against the AfD by installing a piece in front of Germany’s parliament building, which contained “a soil sample with the human remains of Holocaust victims.”⁴⁸ The group stated that they wished to send a warning to the Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel: “Don’t work with the far-Right.”⁴⁹ The German public understands the danger that the AfD presents and asks those in charge to stop standing by. According to Bernard Rorke, an advocate for Roma issues, “[t]he message to mainstream political parties for 2020 is simple: eyes wide shut is no longer an option; failure to act against far-Right nativism, and

⁴⁴ Catherine Hickley, “Germany’s Holocaust Memorial Sites Fight against Surge in Far-Right Threats,” *The Art Newspaper*, July 13, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁴⁵ Hickley, “Germany’s Holocaust Memorial Sites.”

⁴⁶ Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, *Antigypsyism in Public Discourses and Election Campaigns* (Heidelberg: Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, 2017), [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁴⁷ Adam Taylor, “Activists Build a Mini-Holocaust Memorial Outside German Far-Right Politician’s House,” *The Washington Post*, November 22, 2017.

⁴⁸ Rebecca Staudenmaier, “Holocaust Memorial with ‘Victim Ashes’ Erected in Berlin,” *Deutsche Welle: DW.com*, December 2, 2019, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁴⁹ Staudenmaier, “Holocaust Memorial.”

the racism that comes with it, amounts to complicity.”⁵⁰ Thus, even a temporary removal or closure of the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma is being rejected, and the protest on behalf of memorials and victim communities is, at the same time, a condemnation of the principles, beliefs, and ideology of the AfD.

Conclusion

In the words of German author and activist Thomas Gatter, the potential removal of Berlin’s Memorial to the Sinti and Roma “concerns all those who care about the German culture of remembrance and the fight against forgetting as well as against the resurgent Right-wing radicalism.”⁵¹ While the construction of one railway may seem unimportant to some, it is paramount to remember that this railway would compromise Berlin’s Memorial to the Sinti and Roma – a monument put in place to honor oft-marginalized victims of the Holocaust. The memorial serves as a space of recollection and growth for the Sinti and Roma communities and the German public, and it is an integral part of Berlin’s memorial landscape and soundscape. A railway would destroy this thriving environment. In fact, removing or even temporarily closing the memorial would lend credence to the ideas of those who oppose remembering and reflecting upon the darker parts of Germany’s history, including the AfD and other far-Right groups. This is why the AfD’s public attacks on groups that were victims of the Holocaust, such as the Sinti and Roma, have resulted in protests and anger from Left-wing Germans, and the latter are being joined by many members of the general public who stand up for their city, for all its people, and for a holistic approach to their country’s past.

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⁵⁰ Bernard Rorke, “Eyes Wide Shut: Collective Punishment of Roma in 21st-Century Europe,” *openDemocracy*, January 24, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.

⁵¹ Thomas Gatter, “Berlin Monument to the Sinti and Roma of Europe Murdered by the Nazis Is Endangered,” *Thomas Gatter: A Green Jewish Blog*, May 27, 2020, [online](#), accessed June 18, 2022.