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Title: The Palestine Solidarity Movement in West Germany and the Politics of Suffering

During the late 1960s, a solidarity movement with Palestinians emerged in the Federal Republic of Germany. This development was anything but self-evident. For more than a decade, the country’s left had been a staunch supporter of the state of Israel. In tandem with the rise of pro-Palestinian activism, anti-Zionism now began to spread especially among a new, radical left. How can we explain this fundamental rupture in leftist politics in West Germany?

Historians have provided various answers to this question, focusing on the legacies of “Third Worldism” or continuities in German anti-Semitism. In my talk, I will approach the rise of the Palestine Solidarity Movement through the lens of the history of emotions. The pro-Palestinian publications that multiplied after the Six-Day War of 1967 put Palestinian suffering at the center of many of their depictions of the conflict in the Middle East. In fact, Palestinians themselves had stressed the import of emotions in their struggle, since the early 1960s.

Against this backdrop, I will analyze pro-Palestinian periodicals in Arabic and German from the 1960s and early 1970s with a focus on suffering and the question of empathy. My analysis will pay special attention to the twofold emotional shift that took place: While empathy with Palestinians was fostered, various activists began to voice a violent anti-Zionism that could target Israeli citizens as well as non-Israeli Jews. While empathy was established on the one side, contemporaries actively sought to decrease it on the other.