

We, provenance researchers from various disciplines, view with the utmost concern the rise of right-wing extremism and populism and the associated, threatening deterioration of the social and political climate. In 2024, the situation in Germany has worsened dramatically. We fear severe consequences of this political situation also for the field of provenance research.

The Socio-Political Dimension of Provenance Research

Provenance research addresses translocations of cultural property primarily in four contexts of injustice:

- Cultural property confiscated as a result of Nazi persecution,
- Cultural property displaced during the Second World War,
- Cultural property seized in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR,
- Cultural objects and human remains originating from colonial contexts.

Provenance research poses questions such as:

- Who owned the objects before they entered collections?
- When and under what potentially violent conditions did ownership change?
- What foundations for restitution arise from these findings?
- How can the remains of ancestors be repatriated to their descendants, thereby restoring their dignity and right to rest in peace?

Through collaborative work, documentation, transparency, and communication, provenance research fosters deeper understanding, critical awareness, and reflective engagement with the history of wars, violence (and regimes of violence), and crimes. It makes an important contribution to education about complex historical interrelations and to debates on how to deal with the past and its continuities in our present.

Blanket Attacks by the AfD on Provenance Research

The AfD, as a radical-nationalist party, fundamentally rejects provenance research as a responsible and reflective engagement with the crimes of the past. Rooted in revisionist historical narratives such as the so-called “collective guilt,” representatives of the AfD discredit provenance research and fundamentally question its social, political, and scholarly necessity.(1)

In particular, the AfD defames postcolonial provenance research as an alleged “gateway” for Critical Race Theory, which—drawing on U.S. alt-right rhetoric—they distort into a supposed “racism against whites.”(2) These approaches are labeled “antisemitic,” and the AfD consequently demands the complete withdrawal of funding.(3) This constitutes a diversionary and exculpatory strategy designed to obscure the party’s own profound antisemitism, which also manifests in the rejection of restitution efforts to descendants of Jewish victims of persecution.(4)

The precarious working conditions in provenance research are deliberately instrumentalized by AfD representatives in order to portray the field as an unmanageable task, thereby calling into question the scholarly quality of its results. At the same time, the AfD stirs irrational fears of a supposed “sellout”(5) of museums. In public hearings, parliamentary inquiries, and party programs, the AfD poisons the discourse with discriminatory language, racist narratives, and open provocation. In 2022, for example, the party demanded the establishment of a “commission on dealing with colonial

cultural property” to be named after Gustav Nachtigal, a colonial agent who played a key role in establishing German colonial rule in present-day Togo, Cameroon, and Namibia.(6)

We clearly recognize these blanket attacks on provenance research—sometimes indirect, sometimes alarmingly explicit—as part of a broader new right cultural policy: one that is marked by a selective and glorified reference to certain aspects of German history—such as commemorations focused solely on the suffering of the German population—and that ultimately aims to radically reinterpret, downplay, or deny colonial violence and Nazi persecution. Beyond the parliamentary sphere, AfD cadres even advocate open colonial apologetics, linking these to the party’s positions on migration, development, and foreign policy.

Immediate Threats to Provenance Research

Statements, motions, and inquiries by the AfD make it abundantly clear that they intend to drastically reduce or entirely eliminate funding for provenance research. Already now, their representatives at the federal, state, district, and municipal levels attack institutions, projects, publications, and exhibitions relating to provenance research.

The AfD’s insistence on drawing a “final line”(7) under engagement with Nazi crimes serves as fertile ground for other right-wing extremist actors, as evidenced by politically motivated attacks on memorial sites and museums as well as assaults on museum staff.(8) Cultural actors are deliberately intimidated to drive them into self-censorship or out of their institutions altogether. Many provenance researchers are bound by their institutions’ obligation to neutrality. This often leads to the avoidance of taking a stand against ideologically motivated attacks and the threats described above. Yet academic freedom and democracy depend on being actively lived and defended!

All of this undermines the freedom of research, teaching, and scholarship enshrined in Article 5(3) of the German Basic Law, harms museum work and cultural debate, and weakens our vibrant, pluralistic democracy. It stands in stark contradiction to our commitment to responsible, reflective, and methodologically sound research.

We would also like to recall: provenance research carries a political mandate! On the basis of the Washington Principles adopted in 1998, the Federal Government, the Länder, and the leading municipal associations clearly committed themselves in 1999, through the Joint Declaration, to restituting cultural property confiscated as a result of Nazi persecution or to finding other “just and fair solutions.” The moral and political binding force of this self-commitment must not be called into question by the political shift to the right!

Our Demands: Politics Must Act!

We need a consolidated position, protected by all democratic parties, to counter the AfD’s attacks on our work and on the entire cultural and scholarly sector. To strengthen and sustainably stabilize provenance research, sufficient funding for research projects and permanent positions are necessary. Medium- and long-term research depends on planning security: this means its financing and autonomy must not be jeopardized by changes in the political climate.

We demand explicit and effective protection against politically motivated attacks.

Our Position

Provenance research makes historical and ongoing injustice visible. It is a form of commemoration and an active contribution to pluralistic memory culture. It embodies the complexity of our society. Provenance research also honours the achievements of descendants, civil society and scholarly actors, legal experts, archivists, and all those who have worked and continue to work to trace, document, and address the translocation of art and cultural property.

It is essential for our society's culture of remembrance that provenance research continues to help uncover the often-forgotten stories of people, their lives, their suffering, and their struggles. It opens debates that reflect and broaden the complexity of our coexistence. This work is far from complete, and our multifaceted present continues to add new perspectives that enrich it.

We speak as researchers from diverse disciplines who stand united and in solidarity against the threat of populism and right-wing extremism.

We call for the defense of an open society and pluralistic memory culture and demand the preservation of cultural diversity and scholarly knowledge against the societal relapse into nationalist, right-authoritarian structures.

With urgent regards

The authors: Fenya Almstadt, Emilia Krellmann, Leonie Maurer, Julia Reich, Ricarda Rivoir, Anna-Jo Weier and **over 220 additional initial signatories, January 2025**

Notes

- (1) See Reschke, Robin: Welches Verhältnis hat die AfD zur Provenienzforschung? Eine Analyse am Beispiel einer Großen Anfrage der AfD-Fraktion im Deutschen Bundestag, in [Retour](#), 2020.
- (2) Cf. [Programm](#) der AfD zur Bundestagswahl 2021, p. 161. An interdisciplinary theoretical approach that emerged in American jurisprudence in the 1970s, which assumes that racism is a historically developed and structurally anchored part of the social order.
- (3) See [Antrag der AfD](#): Antisemitismus an der Wurzel bekämpfen - Die Bundesmittel für das Sonderprogramm Globaler Süden zur Aufarbeitung der postkolonialistischen Ideologie einsetzen, Drucksache 20/12091, 20. Wahlperiode 02.07.2024, and [Antrag der AfD](#): Deutsche Identität verteidigen - Kulturpolitik grundsätzlich neu ausrichten, Drucksache 20/5226, 20. Wahlperiode 17.01.2023.
- (4) See Deutscher Bundestag, Parlamentsnachrichten, Kultur und Medien Ausschuss, [hib](#) 1183/2019.
- (5) Marc Jongen (AfD) in [Deutscher Bundestag Stenografischer Bericht 83. Sitzung](#) Berlin, Donnerstag, den 21. Februar 2019, p. 9777f.
- (6) Cf. [Antrag der AfD](#): Einrichtung einer unabhängigen Beratenden Gustav-Nachtigal-Kommission für Kulturgut aus kolonialem Kontext, Drucksache 20/3696 20. Wahlperiode 28.09.2022.
- (7) In a representative survey conducted in 2020, almost three quarters of AfD supporters were in favour of "drawing a final line" under the issue, vgl. [infratest dimap](#): 75. Jahrestag der Befreiung von Auschwitz, Erhebungszeitraum 14.-16.01.2020.
- (8) The [Netzwerk Haltung](#) association advises and supports museums and their employees who are exposed to politically motivated attacks and records politically motivated influences.