

Bar-Ilan University

The Israel and Golda Koschitzky Department of Jewish History and Contemporary Jewry

Braun Lectures in the History of the Jews in Germany

Booklet number 20, 2018

The Challenge of Ambivalence: Antisemitism in Germany Today

By

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Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan

Printed in Israel 2018

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The lecture was presented in March 2017 at Bar Ilan University.

In the view of Alexander Gauland, leader of the right-wing populist party, AfD, German Jews have “nothing to fear”.¹ Historically, this sort of statement has signaled quite the opposite, namely, that the Jews indeed have a great deal to fear. Gauland offered his assessment shortly after having been elected to the German Bundestag. Recently, he and fellow politician Björn Höcke have drawn public attention with remarks that approach or cross the line of political acceptability, shifting public discourse to and beyond the right. Among the 94 newly elected members of parliament, one might identify out-and-out racists, antisemites, Nazis and conspiracy theorists.² Nonetheless, as the aforementioned quote indicates, the leading party functionaries have carefully avoided any links to open antisemitism. While this has apparently sufficed to attract a certain Jewish constituency, Josef Schuster, president of the Council of Jews in Germany, takes a different view of the matter. Prior to the election, members of the Central Council issued repeated warnings about the AfD, and in an election-day interview, Schuster informed a leading Berlin newspaper: “It is a party that mobilizes against minorities. Right now, [it mobilizes] mainly against Muslims. But I am convinced: if the Muslim topic loses its public appeal, and if it happens to become politically and socially opportune, then it could very well hit other minorities. And this could mean the Jews as well.”³

Yet, Schuster’s appraisal is only one of many possible perspectives. In gauging the current situation for Jews in Germany, several questions arise: To what extent is antisemitism rooted in German society as a whole? How widespread are anti-Jewish phenomena? And finally, is this a topic of public debate? In this article, I aim to examine antisemitism in contemporary Germany from several different angles: historical, sociological, legal and political. We will see that the case study

¹ *Tachles, Das Jüdische Wochenmagazin*, September 26, 2017.

² See, „Sturm auf die Grenzen,“ *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 19, 2017; Marcus Funck, „Wie antisemitisch ist dieser Politiker?“, *Die ZEIT*, September 6, 2016.

³ „Es könnte sehr wohl auch Juden treffen“, *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 24, 2017.

of Germany intersects strikingly with the broader literature on the topic. British social scientists Jonathan Boyd and Daniel Staetsky, for instance, have written that “in spite of the huge amounts of research that has been conducted on antisemitism and the issues around it, we remain some way from being able to empirically and unequivocally determine the nature of the problem, its scale, or its direction of travel in ways that cut through all of the hyperbole, bias and conjecture that litter public discourse”.⁴

Let us begin the current inquiry with two examples from Berlin, both dating from the summer of 2015. In late July of that year, the 14th European Maccabi tournament, the ‘Jewish Olympics’, were held in Germany for the first time. The organizers, the European Maccabi Confederation and Maccabi Deutschland, presented Berlin as not only a safe city for Jews, but the safest European capital. The recent relocation to Berlin of 20,000 or so Israelis was often adduced to support this claim.⁵ The Maccabi games indeed took place in Berlin without any recorded incident. Yet, only a short time later, during a football match of the Berlin-based club TUS Maccabi -- the sole Jewish sports club in Berlin -- competing against Meteor 06, antisemitic insults were hurled on the field and scuffles broke out, ending in a tussle that forced the referee to cancel the game. The case came before the Football Sports Court, which in late September sentenced a member of the Meteor club to suspension for two years and slapped Meteor 06 with a fine and loss of three points in the standings.⁶

⁴ Jonathan Boyd and Daniel L. Staetsky, *Could it happen here? What existing data tell us about contemporary antisemitism in the UK*, London 2015, p. 2.

⁵ See „European Maccabi Games. Berlin wird ganz meschugge,“ *Der Tagesspiegel*, July 20, 2015.

⁶ See: Bodo Straub and Frank Bachner, „Spielabbruch in Kreisliga C in Berlin. Fair-Play-Aktion wohl Auslöser für Massenschlägerei,“ *Der Tagesspiegel*, August 31, 2015, URL: <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/polizei-justiz/spielabbruch-in-kreisliga-c-in-berlin-fair-play-aktion-wohl-ausloeser-fuer-massenschlaegerei/12255214.html> (retrieved on November 16, 2017); Frank Bachner, „Makkabi gegen Meteor 06 in Berlin. Lange Sperre nach antisemitischen Angriffen,“ *Der Tagesspiegel*, September 21, 2015, URL: <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/sport/makkabi-gegen-meteor-06-in-berlin-lange-sperre-nach-antisemitischen-angriffen/12344108.html> (seen on November 16, 2017).

In the past decade, such clashes in Germany have taken a highly political turn. Some have argued that the debate on antisemitism can be encapsulated in one question: Can a person wearing a *yarmulke* walk safely through Neukölln, one of the poorest Berlin districts, where a large percentage of the residents are Muslims. In this line of thinking, the controversy is all about Muslim antisemitism --- and thus a debate where the history of the so-called guest workers in the Federal Republic and their “deficient” degree of integration merges with the history of German and European racism, along with the fallout of the conflict in the Middle East, with jihadist terror and now with the discussion on refugee immigration.⁷ With respect to antisemitism in Germany, ambivalence is ubiquitous - even in the supposedly objective realm of facts and figures. Let us take, for instance, police statistics on antisemitic crimes. The German Penal Code has no criminal category for the offence of ‘antisemitism’.⁸ In order for an offense to be deemed an ‘antisemitic crime’, two distinct features must be present. First, an antisemitically motivated act must be at the same time a criminal act, and second, the act must be judged by the apprehending officer to have been motivated by antisemitism. The highly subjective nature of these features is responsible for the contradictory numbers that appear in the statistics of different entities.

⁷ .See Günther Jikeli, *European Muslim Antisemitism. Why young urban males say they don't like Jews*, Bloomington 2015; Amadeu Antonio Stiftung Berlin (Ed.), “*Die Juden sind schuld*” – *Antisemitismus in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft am Beispiel muslimisch sozialisierter Milieus*, Berlin 2009; Eberhard Seidel, Claudia Dantschke and Ali Yildirim, *Politik im Name Allahs. Der Islamismus – eine Herausforderung für Europa*, Brüssel 2001; Anke Schu, *Antisemitismus und Biographie – Fallstudien männlicher, muslimisch-migrantischer Jugendlicher in Deutschland als Basis kritischer Jugendarbeit*, Weinheim and Basel 2016; James Renton and Ben Gidley (Ed.), *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe. A shared Story?*, London 2017.

⁸ For this and the following, see Michael Kohlstruck and Peter Ullrich, Landeskommission Berlin gegen Gewalt (Ed.), *Antisemitismus als Problem und Symbol. Phänomene und Interventionen in Berlin*, 2., korrigierte Auflage, Berlin 2014, p. 30-34.

Continuing our brief review of the process, the aforementioned crimes are then classified by the police in two categories: crimes of violence, and so-called ‘discursive crimes’. The latter denote criminal offences of communication, which include individual insult and group-related incitement, hate speech, and what German law terms ‘propaganda’. Moreover, in a given incident, only the most serious offence is officially documented. Thus, if an argument were to involve personal insult, material damage and bodily injury, only bodily injury would be documented. This procedure automatically functions to reduce the statistics.



Rally against anti-Semitism organized by the Central Council of Jews in Germany at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate, 14 September 2014 (Michael Thaidigsmann)

In the German police figures, all these offences are designated as ‘politically motivated crimes’ (PMC) and are further distinguished as (1) rightwing extremism, (2) leftwing extremism, or (3) crimes perpetrated by foreigners (the so-called *Ausländerkriminalität*). The latter rubric includes both offences by non-German citizens and those perpetrated by Germans from a foreign, i.e. migration background. This categorization is doubly problematic: from a legal point of view, because it identifies perpetrators not by passport but by “blood”; and in political terms, because it implies that some people are motivated solely by their being “foreign”. Thus, if such individuals are charged with a criminal act, this logic seems to indicate that it can be traced to their non-German background. However, the public display of a swastika is automatically classified as rightwing extremism, regardless of who painted it. Such classification implies that a German immigrant is not likely to make use of this provocative symbol.

Despite the abiding ambivalence, a glance at the statistics tells us that the number of anti-Semitic-related crimes has been on the decline more or less continuously from 2002 to 2015, and dropped from a peak of 1,809 in 2006 to 1,366 in 2015. The vast majority of these acts, namely 95%, are committed by perpetrators classified as rightwing extremists. In 2015, these included thirty acts of violence involving bodily injury and 1,002 so-called propaganda crimes. This shifted radically in 2014, the year of the last Gaza War, when the total number of such crimes soared from 1,275 to 1,596. At the same time, 176 of such crimes were committed by ‘foreigners’, which constitutes eleven percent of the total (as compared with just 31 cases in the previous year and 178 cases in the following year). Here again, we are talking mainly about incitement/hate speech and material damage, while twelve antisemitic crimes of violence by ‘foreigners’ were recorded in 2014, dropping to 4 in 2015.⁹

⁹ Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, Bundesministerium des Innern (Ed.), *Antisemitismus in Deutschland – aktuelle Entwicklungen*, Berlin 2017, p. 39.

The disconnect between the aforementioned figures and the media presentation of violence in the summer of 2014 can be partially accounted for by another police category, namely, that of “trouble spots / civil war”, where an additional 214 criminal offences regarded as antisemitic are listed¹⁰. The year 2014 notwithstanding, the overwhelming majority of criminal offences recorded as ‘antisemitic’ in Germany have been committed by rightwing extremists (609 out of 644, or 95% in 2016, among them 15 acts of violence, i.e. slightly more than 2%, all of them committed by rightwingers in 2016).¹¹ Prior to this, however, neo-Nazis tended to commit “propaganda offences” or crimes of hate speech; for their part, offenders labelled as “foreigners” committed slightly more crimes involving violence (4-6%), thus attracting greater media coverage.¹²

Crucial for the topic at hand is the fact that police figures tend to be conservative, thus shedding only limited light on the actual presence of antisemitism in contemporary German society. Importantly, we do not know how many incidents go unreported due to fear and political concerns. Until recently, among minorities, homosexuals were in the greatest danger of being insulted or assaulted in the streets of Berlin, and a rather high percentage of the perpetrators seems to have a migration background. Yet, according to gay community spokespeople, gay victims may not make out police reports of assault because they are reluctant to foster xenophobia.¹³

Data gleaned from various civil society organizations that record antisemitic and racist incidents adds important features to our inquiry. Two main agencies operate

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹ *Tagesspiegel*, February 13, 2017.

¹² Bundesministerium des Innern (Ed.), *Antisemitismus in Deutschland. Erscheinungsformen, Bedingungen, Präventionsansätze. Bericht des unabhängigen Expertenkreises Antisemitismus*, Berlin 2011, p. 41.

¹³ See Kohlstruck and Ullrich, p. 30-34 and RIAS (Recherche- und Informationsstelle Antisemitismus), *Antisemitische Vorfälle in Berlin*, Bericht 2016, , URL: <https://www.report-antisemitism.de/media/bericht-vorfaelle-2016.pdf> (retrieved on November 9, 2017).

at present in Berlin: since 2005, accessible via the internet, the chronicle prepared by the consultation office called ReachOut (<http://www.reachoutberlin.de>), and, since 2015, the Recherche- und Informationsstelle Antisemitismus (RIAS) (<https://www.report-antisemitism.de>), financed by the City of Berlin, which focusses specifically on antisemitic incidents.¹⁴

ReachOut stands out among such organizations in that it both deals with crimes of propaganda and provides assistance to victims of racist, rightwing and antisemitic assaults. Here, it is important to note the linguistic distinctions made by the agency: racist crimes are those committed against “foreigners”, that is, people from a “migration background”, which recently has connoted those visibly identifiable as Muslim. Rightwing assaults are incidents involving a glorification of the Nazi past and/or directed against leftwingers, while antisemitic assaults are defined by the Jewishness of their victims. The terms “assault” and “attack” include violence against both objects and individuals. For Reachout, violence encompasses both verbal and physical attacks – which constitutes the main difference between this vocabulary and that of the police, which does differentiate between speech and deed. Reachout, RIAS and other organizations helpfully take individual victim testimonies, which adds an important dimension to police reports. Thus, the ReachOut chronicle (and the reports of other NGOs) accomplish something that no mere statistical survey can achieve; in the words of Michael Kohlstruck and Peter Ullrich: “In combination with background reports, they provide us with an impression of the concrete reality of the attacks, in particular what they can mean for the victims. In the process, a level is made publicly accessible that cannot be grasped and encompassed by mere abstract statistics.”¹⁵

¹⁴ See: „Mehr antisemitische Angriffe in Berlin,“ *Der Tagesspiegel*, March 9, 2016.

¹⁵ Kohlstruck and Ullrich, p. 36 (translation Schüler-Springorum).

While RIAS collects data only on antisemitic incidents, the ReachOut chronicle offers an overall picture of hate-inspired violence. Notably, on the whole, incidents of antisemitism play a subordinate role in comparison to general racist and homophobic incidents: in 2014, for example, ReachOut registered 179 attacks, involving 266 persons injured or threatened. The classification of these cases is interesting: according to ReachOut, xenophobia and racism motivated most of the attacks (100 cases, nearly 56%). Neo-Nazi attacks on leftwingers comprised 20% of the cases, homophobia-related ones 16%, and another at least 10% of these violent attacks and threats in 2014 was directed against refugees and their supporters. At the same time, this victim assistance agency identified antisemitism as the motive for 10% of cases in 2014, which was a clear upswing from the 4% of 2013 (and probably ought to be seen as well in the context of the Gaza War). While this overall relation is corroborated by the official numbers on hate crime and violence provided by the German *Verfassungsschutz*,¹⁶ it is important to note that racist attacks on people perceived as “foreigners”, namely against refugees and their homes, skyrocketed in 2015 and 2016, after the immigration wave following the temporary border opening in September 2015. During the past few years, not a day has passed without the report of at least one such attack, so that for the year 2016 police statistics and NGO’s coincided with numbers of unprecedented violence, counting 3533 attacks on refugees and their homes, leaving 560 of them injured, including 43 children.¹⁷

Thus, while the figures from the police and civil society organizations correlate, particularly with regard to the surge of antisemitic incidents in the context of the 2014 Gaza War and of anti-refugee violence after September 2015, one ought to bear in mind that they only reflect public behavior. They do not assess, for

¹⁶ Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, p. 45.

¹⁷ See: „Mehr als 3500 Angriffe auf Flüchtlinge,“ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 26, 2017, URL: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/fremdenhass-mehr-als-angriffe-auf-fluechtlinge-im-jahr-1.3395560> (retrieved on November 22, 2017).

example, what people are thinking. To address that issue, since 1946, questionnaires have been administered on a regular basis in Germany to gauge the attitude of the population toward the Jews.¹⁸

Historians view this sort of antisemitism assessment with hesitance. On the one hand, we wonder to what extent such ‘suggestive’ questions contribute to reproducing a certain antisemitic stance in societies. Moreover, as Werner Bergmann has demonstrated, social taboos and the social desirability of specific attitudes have played a leading role in constituting modern Germany. In order to build up a democratic society from the ruins of Fascist Germany, certain National Socialist attitudes, such as antisemitism, were made publicly taboo, while the great majority of Nazis and other antisemites simply went on with their lives. In other words, antisemitism was transformed from state ideology into private attitude, where it remained, and Germans learned not to give voice to it in public.¹⁹ Of course, sociologists are aware of this process, and they have tried to construct instruments that elicit hidden prejudice.

Thus, as with police statistics and figures culled from civil society organizations, surveys at best provide approximations, show tendencies. Given this caveat, the questionnaires sketch the following picture for 2016: Around 5 to 6 per cent of Germans have a manifestly antisemitic worldview, while another 10 to 20 per cent agree with single antisemitic statements. In a comparative perspective, this positions Germany in the middle range of European countries, with Great Britain at an all-time low, and Greece, Spain, Rumania, Hungary and Poland rather high.²⁰

¹⁸ Werner Bergmann and Rainer Erb, *Antisemitismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Ergebnisse der empirischen Forschung von 1946-1989*, Opladen 1991, p. 43-96.

¹⁹ Werner Bergmann and Rainer Erb, „Kommunikationslatenz, Moral und öffentliche Meinung. Theoretische Überlegungen zum Antisemitismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,“ in: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 38 (1986), p. 223-246.

²⁰ Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, p. 85f.

Two points are worth considering here. The surveys show a steady decline of “classic” antisemitism over the past 15 years in Germany. The same can be said for what is sometimes referred to as “secondary antisemitism”, that is, antisemitic resentment connected to Holocaust commemoration or to the Middle East conflict - where the numbers are also declining, albeit from a higher level. Thus, according to a recent Experts’ Commission report, in 2016 about 6% of the population agreed to classical antisemitic stereotypes, while 26% supported statements that expressed discontent with Holocaust commemoration and around 40% criticized Israel’s policies towards the Palestinians in terms that can suggest an antisemitic intention.²¹ It is important to note, though, that antisemitic interpretations of reality tend to increase in the surveys when they are nurtured by related themes in the media – such as the public scandal over the last poem written by the German Nobel-Prize winner Günther Grass²² - and most notably by events in the Middle East, like the Gaza flotilla and the Gaza War of 2014. This, however, is a phenomenon found across European countries.²³

The central role that the internet plays in the spreading and scandalizing of certain events seems self-evident. In reality, however, the process is difficult to document. In this vein, a personal incident comes to mind. In the context of an academic workshop, Jewish students shared with me the experience of the ‘summer of 2014’ as traumatic with respect to the upsurge in antisemitism. Yet, to a student, only digital incidents were brought to bear on the discussion: internet-posted videos of excesses, antisemitic incitement in blogs, online commentaries and Facebook accounts. As scholars, it seems that we are called upon to rethink

²¹ Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, p. 59-65.

²² See; Heinrich Detering/ Per Øhrgaard (Ed.), *Was gesagt wurde. Eine Dokumentation über Günter Grass’ „Was gesagt werden muss“ und die deutsche Debatte*, Göttingen 2013; Lars Langenau, Micha Brumlik zu Günter Grass: „Grass ist kein Antisemit, bedient sich aber antisemitischer Deutungsmuster“, in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 10, 2012.

²³ See: Daniel L. Staetsky, *Antisemitism in contemporary Great Britain. A study of attitudes towards Jews and Israel*, London 2017. David Feldman, *Immigration and Antisemitism in Western Europe Today*, London 2017.

our definitions of ‘experience’, and indeed ‘reality’ – with regard to antisemitism, but more broadly as well.

In Germany, the legal battle on internet hate speech has already been joined. In the summer of 2017, then-Federal Minister of Justice Heiko Maas proposed a law that would force social media providers like Facebook, Twitter and Google to delete hate messages from their sites – a proposal that was met with fierce resistance from all sectors of society.²⁴

Clearly, at stake here is that broad middle ground between racist incitement and freedom of speech, an ongoing debate not only in Germany. The difficulty that judges encounter when it comes to antisemitism can be illustrated by some rather ambivalent, if not contradictory, recent court rulings, all of them in the context of street violence during or following the anti-Israel demonstrations of 2014.

In November 2014, the chief public prosecutor in Koblenz confirmed the decision by the public prosecutor’s office in Mainz, stating that slogans chanted during a demonstration in the summer of 2014 such as “Death, death to Israel”, cannot be considered “incitement”, because “criticism“ of a *foreign country* was not incitement in the sense of German *Volksverhetzung*. (inciting hatred in one’s own people).²⁵ By contrast, the Regional Court in Essen came to a different conclusion

²⁴ See Deutscher Bundestag, Wissenschaftliche Dienste, Ausarbeitung WD 10 - 3000 - 026/17. Entwurf eines Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetzes. Vereinbarkeit mit der Meinungsfreiheit, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/blob/517610/71bea2c472dda728e8d5ba504b30bfd2/wd-10-026-17-pdf-data.pdf> (seen on November 09, 2017); Alexander Peukert, „Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz – Kurzer Prozess mit der Meinungsfreiheit,“ *Cicero. Magazin für politische Kultur*, March 27, 2017; Deutscher Bundestag, Unterabteilung Europa, Fachbereich Europa, Ausarbeitung PE 6 – 3000 – 32/17, Der Entwurf des Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetzes. Vereinbarkeit mit dem Herkunftslandprinzip, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/blob/510384/c5bdf3939cf1a4529d2f7abf11065ee5/pe-6-032-17-pdf-data.pdf> (retrieved on November 9, 2017); Nikolas Guggenberger, „Das Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz in der Anwendung,“ *Neue Juristische Wochenschrift* 36/2017, p. 2577-2582.

²⁵ See: „Judenfeindliche Parolen bleiben straflos,“ *Jüdische Allgemeine*, November 14, 2014, URL: <http://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/article/view/id/20746> (retrieved on November 22, 2017); Michael Bermeitinger, „Gaza-Demo: Mainzer Staatsanwaltschaft stellt Ermittlungen

in a ruling in January 2015. The chant “Death to the Zionists, hatred of the Zionists”, at a demonstration against the Gaza War, was deemed by this court to indeed constitute incitement. The ruling states:

“The term ‘Zionist’ also represents a code word for Jews in the discourse of antisemitism. That the accused meant Jews and not Zionists in the strict sense is evident from the accompanying circumstances of the controversial statement. Because the accused participated in a demonstration that was initially peaceful in connection with the current conflict in the Middle East, in which there were antisemitic excesses as the demonstration unfolded (...) These accompanying circumstances have no discernible connection with a Zionist movement and Zionist aims. Rather, the accused made use of an antisemitic code name for the Jewish population in order to underscore his condemnation of the actions of the Israeli army”.²⁶

Two weeks later, in a court decision on an arson attack on a synagogue, the opposite argument was articulated. Here, the judge noted that the special ruthless lack of consideration vis-à-vis the Jewish community and the special symbolic power of the arson attack were serious matters, especially since synagogues had been set ablaze before in the same community. Nonetheless, in his view, there was no basis for concluding that this was an antisemitic act. This reasoning was considered to be profoundly disturbing by many observers. What motivation should anyone have who acts out his hatred for *Israel* by targeting a *Jewish* institution? And what act then, if any, is to be deemed anti-Semitic?²⁷

wegen Volksverhetzung ein,” *Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 29, 2014, URL: http://www.allgemeine-zeitung.de/lokales/mainz/nachrichten-mainz/gaza-demo-mainzer-staatsanwaltschaft-stellt-ermittlungen-wegen-volksverhetzung-ein_14514139.htm (seen on November 22, 2017); „Keine Volksverhetzung. Anti-Israel-Demonstration nicht strafbar,” *MIGAZIN*, November 17, 2014, URL: <http://www.migazin.de/2014/11/17/anti-israel-demonstration-nicht-strafbar/> (retrieved on November 22, 2017).

²⁶ AG Essen, Urteil vom 30. Januar 2015, Az. 57 Cs-29 Js 579/14-631/14, p. 4.

²⁷ See for example “Wie kann ein Anschlag auf eine Synagoge nicht antisemitisch sein?,” *Der Tagesspiegel*, March 27, 2017.

Thus we see the confusion concerning our topic in the broader German society. At this point, I wish to draw the attention to a debate that in my view constitutes the most dramatic incident of antisemitism in Germany in recent years. I am referring to the debate in German civil society on circumcision, following a judgment handed down in May 2012 by the Cologne District Court, which deemed the circumcision of a 4-year-old Muslim boy by a physician to be an example of physical injury and determined that the right of the child to physical integrity is a greater right than freedom of religion and parental rights. In the wake of the decision, a public debate erupted, oscillating between the predicted “end of the Jewish community in Germany”, on the one hand, and the fantasy of baby torture on the other – as described, for example, in a letter signed by 700 medical doctors who insisted that there is abundant “scientific proof” of the extreme harm that circumcision causes to the infant boy.²⁸

Between these two poles were discussions on the value and place of religion in modern societies, alongside the importance of legally protected rights and the fundamental values of a pluralistic society. From its darker underside, a stream of anti-Jewish (and also anti-Muslim) negative sentiment erupted, an emotionally laden resentment that I would hardly have considered possible in this form, as the discussants were physicians, professors and legal experts. The message of this outbreak was: “Modernize yourself!” While this is commonplace in European talk on Islam, it was striking to hear this kind of argument used against Judaism, or to put it differently: to suddenly hear a religiously based resentment in the context

²⁸ „Offener Brief zur Beschneidung: „Religionsfreiheit kann kein Freibrief für Gewalt sein“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 21, 2012, URL: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/offener-brief-zur-beschneidung-religionsfreiheit-kann-kein-freibrief-fuer-gewalt-sein-11827590.html> (retrieved on November 16, 2017); for the debate see: Johannes Heil and Stephan J. Kramer (eds.), *Beschneidung: Das Zeichen des Bundes in der Kritik. Zur Debatte um das Kölner Urteil*, Berlin 2012; Yigal Blumenberg and Wolfgang Hegener (eds.), *Die „unheimliche“ Beschneidung. Aufklärung und die Wiederkehr des Verdrängten*, Frankfurt am Main 2013; Alfred Bodenheimer, *Haut ab! Die Juden in der Beschneidungsdebatte*, Göttingen 2012; Schirin Amir-Moazami, „Investigating the Secular Body: The case of male Circumcision,“ *ReOrient* 1/2 (2016), p. 25-48.

an anti-Jewish mobilization. German-Iranian intellectual Navid Kermani aptly referred to this discourse as *Vulgär-Rationalismus*, a vulgar rationalism which he defined as „a fundamentalism that fixes its perspective to the visible world and accepts no reality beyond their own, limited horizon.”²⁹ While Kermani is arguing from a philosophical point of view, the recent debate on circumcision laid the ground for an important question concerning our understanding of antisemitism: Is this sudden fixation on a religious praxis that has long gone uncontested proof of the *longue durée* of Christian anti-Judaism? Or is it rather a case of *Umwegkommunikation*, that is, “detour communication”, or rather, the detour of the detour: Since we cannot speak negatively about Jews, we speak negatively about Israel, and since this, too, is prohibited, we speak negatively about their outmoded religious practices?

Whatever the case, the debate was ended by intervention from above. In July 2012, the German Parliament appointed a special commission which, in consultation with the Extra-Parliamentary Committee on Ethics, in October 2012 submitted a law draft stipulating that circumcision under medical supervision was not a crime. Shortly thereafter, the draft was passed by the Parliament. By German standards, this was extraordinary fast work. It points to one thing in particular: the importance of a “clear and unambiguous statement” by the government elite in the struggle against antisemitism.³⁰ Here, and also in regard to the importance of the right of the State of Israel to exist, Germany is still a special case in Europe.

²⁹ Navid Kermani, „Debatte über Beschneidungen: Triumph des Vulgärrationalismus,“ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 2, 2012, URL: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/debatte-ueber-beschneidungen-triumph-des-vulgaerrationalismus-1.1397713> (retrieved on November 22, 2017).

³⁰ See: Andras Kovacs, „Antisemitic Prejudices and Dynamics of Antisemitism in Post-Communist Hungary,“ *Antisemitism in Europe Today. The Phenomena, the Conflicts*, Proceedings of an International Conference by the Jewish Museum and the Center for Research on Antisemitism, Berlin 2014 (<http://www.jmberlin.de/antisemitism-today/kovacs.pdf>)

However, the circumcision debate has spotlighted what opinion surveys have come to call the “fragile middle ground” or the “middle ground in upheaval”; namely, the erosion of democratic and pluralistic values at the very center of society.³¹ Thus, even if antisemitism scores low on these surveys in comparison with the public discussions of the topic, other groups attract the bulk of animosity. In 2016, these were in particular Sinti and Roma (31% rejection as neighbors) and asylum seekers/refugees (29 %), followed by Muslims (21%) and Eastern Europeans (14%). Jews, with a 5 % rejection as neighbors, fared quite well in this survey.

History, however, has taught us that such attitudes are nothing if not fluid. We know that anti-Muslim sentiment sky-rockets after terrorist attacks, and we know about the aforementioned rise of racist attacks on refugees in Germany. While the main perpetrators are still hard-core neo-Nazis, there seems to be a new trend of attracting more people, both male and female, from the aforementioned “fragile middle ground”. Another, rather new feature of this violence are attacks on institutions, volunteers and politicians who give support to refugees, which in February 2016 led the head of the police in Leipzig to issue a warning against what he called “a pogrom atmosphere” in his city.³² Some months later, during the election campaign for the mayor of Cologne, the leading candidate was seriously wounded in an attack motivated by anti-refugee hatred. Threats against politicians have become an acceptable aspect of anti-refugee demonstrations, with gallows for Angela Merkel and Sigmar Gabriel and the ritually chanted threat to the former of being jailed for her “treason to the German people”. This new kind of violence, of course accompanied by a hitherto unknown level of hate speech in

³¹ See: Andreas Zick and Anna Klein, *Fragile Mitte – Feindselige Zustände. Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2014*, Bonn 2014 and Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess and Elmar Brähler, *Die Mitte im Umbruch. Rechtsextreme Einstellungen in Deutschland 2012*, Bonn 2012.

³² „Rechte Gewalt: ‚Es herrscht Pogromstimmung‘“, *Zeit Online*, February 1, 2016, URL: <http://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2016-02/luechtlingsunterkuenfte-anschlaege-sachsen-polizeipraesident> (retrieved on November 22, 2017).

the internet, has led police and internal secret service in Germany to finally name it for what it is: rightwing terrorism. And even though the Jewish communities are somewhat inconspicuous in that debate, or better: not on the immediate radar, this should not be a reason to feel at ease – rather to the contrary, because, as we know and as Josef Schuster has reiterated, exclusionist fantasies are integral to ideologies that call upon the “the purity of the nation”, “the people”, and so on. While this is part and parcel of nationalist rhetoric in general, in Germany, the extreme right refers almost automatically to the National Socialist past. Examples are manifold, the most eloquent emerging from one of the leading figures of the AfD’s radical faction, Björn Höcke, who at a public event in Magdeburg in 2015 boasted of a thousand-year-old “sacred” Germany, which has a right to a thousand years of future. In January 2017, Höcke, a history teacher, attacked the German commemoration of Holocaust victims, calling for an end to this alleged brainwashing of supposedly natural national feelings and pride - a few days later attempting to visit Buchenwald to express his "grief for the murdered German and European Jews".³³ The usual protests erupted, and Höcke was denied access to the memorial site. Yet, it is precisely part of the propaganda tactics of this party to push the limits of public discourse one step at a time, and in this effort it can be said to have achieved a clear measure of success thus far.

³³ ntv, Freitag, 16. Oktober 2015, Der Tag: Höcke: Deutschland soll tausendjährige Zukunft haben, URL: http://www.n-tv.de/der_tag/Hoecke-Deutschland-soll-tausendjaehrige-Zukunft-haben-article16153711.html (seen on November 16, 2017); „Höcke-Rede im Wortlaut: ‚Gemütszustand eines total besiegten Volkes‘“, *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 19, 2017, URL: <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/hoecke-rede-im-wortlaut-gemuetszustand-eines-total-besiegten-volkes/19273518-all.html> (retrieved on November 16, 2017); Björn Höcke, „Antwortschreiben von Björn Höcke an die Gedenkstätte Buchenwald,“ January 26, 2017, URL: <http://afd-thl.de/2017/01/26/antwortschreiben-von-bjoern-hoecke-an-die-gedenkstaette-buchenwald/> (retrieved on November 16, 2017).



German Chancellor Angela Merkel delivers her speech at a rally against anti-Semitism near the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, September 14, 2014 (AP/Markus Schreiber)

Nonetheless, the overall picture reflects the deep ambiguity alluded to in the title of this article. The 2012 assault on a rabbi in Berlin, his daughter by his side, seriously damaged the sense of security among Jews in Berlin. Yet there were immediate local (and city-wide) statements of solidarity, similar to those voiced following the demonstrations against Islam, which in turn triggered large counter-demonstrations and parades. And, alongside the substantial rise in attacks on refugees, we hear a new German discourse about a culture of welcome and the engagement of tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands of men and women who distributed toys, bottled water and sandwiches to harried refugees arriving at German train stations in the summer of 2015. In the absence of these volunteers, it ought to be noted, the entire German system of integration is likely to have collapsed under the strain of more than one million refugees arriving to a country

that is encumbered by a labyrinthine administrative system and an enduring East-West divide.

The situation in present-day Germany points to the importance of elite behavior. At least on a theoretical level, the security of Israel remains part of Germany's *Staatsräson*, just as Angela Merkel's comment remains valid that there can be no numerical limit to those seeking political asylum according to German law – or, in her own words: “If now we have to apologize for giving shelter to those who really need it, then this is not my country anymore.” At the same time, and returning full circle, rather contentious political negotiations are in the wings, with populist attitudes from within the political establishment and a new radicalism from without. In the provincial elections in March 2017, rightwing populists in three German states won over 20% of the votes – an all-time high in the history of post-war Germany. This was followed by the abovementioned results in the general elections, where the AfD, we may recall, became the strongest party in the state of Saxony.

We might say, then, that the current situation in Germany, with all its ambiguities, is not (yet) especially worrying as far as antisemitism is concerned. Nonetheless, the reality prompts a broader discussion about the direction of politics in Germany, and this is particularly true in the context of the general political situation in Europe. Basic principles, such as democracy, human rights and human dignity, would be excellent starting points for a discourse on the topic.

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המחלקה לתולדות ישראל ויהדות זמננו ע"ש ישראל וגולדה קושיצקי

הקתדרה ע"ש בראון לתולדות היהודים בגרמניה

חוברת מס' 20, תשע"ח

אתגר האמביוולנטיות: אנטישמיות בגרמניה היום

מאת

שטפני שילר-שפרינגרום

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חברי המערכת: דורון אברהם

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