

Germany on Edge

Susan Neiman

In recent weeks, Germany's reflexive defenses of Israel and suppression of its critics have assumed a fevered pitch.

November 3, 2023



Moritz Frankenberg/Picture Alliance/Getty Images

Police officers at the edge of a Palestine solidarity protest at Brunswick Palace, Braunschweig, Germany, October 14, 2023

Memories get blurrier all the time. Still, it's odd that in the aftermath of Hamas's massacre, Germany has forgotten the aftermath of September 11, for it was a pivotal moment in its postwar history. Since 1945 West Germany had supported every major American foreign policy decision, including stationing nuclear missiles on German soil, and reunited Germany followed suit. Thus in 2002, many were ambivalent about condemning the war in Iraq, and much German ink was spilled demanding understanding for America's post-September 11 trauma. At the time, the Social Democratic/Green coalition government recognized that trauma is no basis for reasonable political decisions and refused to support the invasion of Iraq.

American politics had its own pivotal moment on October 18, when Joe Biden told Israelis that he understood their fury, felt their pain, but hoped they would not make the same mistake America made after al-

Qaeda massacred three thousand civilians that sunny September morning. It may be the first time that a sitting US president criticized recent American policy while standing on foreign soil. Biden's speech was noted in the German press, but I have hardly seen anyone here follow up on his thoughts. It was possible, after all, to be horrified by the carnage at the World Trade Center and still be opposed to the war in Iraq; millions of us were, at the time. Germany is Israel's second-most important ally, so it might play a useful part by reminding the country's leaders that continuing massive attacks on Gaza will have devastating repercussions.

It could even be done without reference to human rights or Palestinian lives. Simple consequentialist arguments work just as well. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq not only spent trillions of dollars killing countless civilians and soldiers; they created crises in the Middle East whose consequences are still with us. In most parts of the world, the wars cemented a distrust of American motives and methods that may never disappear, making phrases like "moral clarity" impossible to use without arousing derision.

There's no question that Israel's precarious standing on the world stage will suffer with every escalation of the war on Gaza. Hamas can only benefit from more pictures of dead children whose parents wrote their names on their legs in the hope that the bodies could at least be identified after the next bomb flattened their homes. Even those whose only concern is for Jewish life must know that a widened war will not make Israel safer for long. Along with 1,400 Jewish lives, the security policies that undergirded Israeli defense were shattered on October 7. You can read that every day in *Haaretz* and in many an American source. Say something similar in Germany, you'd better be prepared to be called an antisemite—and hope your job is secure.

Germany's insistence on atoning for the Nazis by calling Israel its *Staatsraison*—its national interest—has in recent weeks assumed a fevered pitch. Right-wing politicians have called for making unconditional support for Israel a condition of living in Germany. Not surprisingly, the appeal is meant to apply to immigrants from Muslim countries. The citizenship of the *Reichsbürger*, a group of white, right-wing, antisemitic Germans who were arrested in December 2022 while planning a coup against the government, is secure in the state they refuse to recognize.

Those who prefer moral to instrumental reasoning have a case for a ceasefire they might have learned in kindergarten: two wrongs don't make a right. Only those who believe that evils have an essence can condemn one war crime without condemning another. Dividing evils into greater and lesser, and trying to weigh them, is not only hopeless but probably obscene. Evils should not be quantified, but they can be distinguished. After corresponding with one of the pilots involved in the bombing of Hiroshima, the German Jewish philosopher Günther

Anders made an important distinction. Anyone capable of leading a child to a gas chamber, or burning her alive, has an abyss where there ought to be a soul. Most of us couldn't do it. But it's easier to drop a bomb on a child you cannot see. Precisely for that reason, this kind of evil, argued Anders, is more dangerous. But what on earth prevents us from denouncing both?

*

As Joe Biden was speaking in Tel Aviv, the annual book fair was opening in Frankfurt. The words "Frankfurt Book Fair" evoke pavilions and sweets and colors, especially when you learn that it's been a major literary event since Johannes Gutenberg developed moveable type not far up the Rhine. In fact, the fair resembles an overcrowded airport, if airports had thousands of booths in which speakers peddling their thoughts strain to be heard over one another. Since the restaurant lines are too long to navigate between meetings, those tending the booths try to keep up their spirits with bags of chips and bottles of water. But it's the world's largest gathering of readers, so every author or publisher with a new book to promote, every agent or film producer with a deal to make, every media outlet asserting its presence has to be there. At the best of times, it's a place that overwhelms.

This year, Jewish authors were asked if we wanted to be provided with personal security in addition to the armed guards roving the aisles. Along with tickets, bags were checked at the entrance, though one guard confided they weren't looking for bombs but "political symbols. Yesterday someone tried to smuggle in Palestinian flags." The latter are legal, but that doesn't matter. This year's book fair struck sparks before it opened.

The first was the announcement that a prize ceremony for the Palestinian author Adania Shibli would be canceled, *ahem*, postponed. Her novel *Minor Detail*, nominated for several major international awards, reflects on the gang-rape and murder of a Bedouin girl by Israeli soldiers in 1949. The story is true, and some of the soldiers were jailed for the crime, but the book fair's organizers decided it was inappropriate to award the prize at this time. Eva Menasse, spokesperson for PEN-Berlin, protested the decision: "No book is different, or better, or worse, or more dangerous because the news has changed. Either a book deserves a prize or it doesn't.... Denying the prize to Shibli is a political and literary mistake." Menasse is a distinguished Austrian writer whose Jewish father's life was saved when he was sent to England on a *Kindertransport*. Protesting the decision to withhold the prize, the Syrian authors invited by PEN-Berlin to read their work at Frankfurt decided to boycott the fair entirely. As an alternative, Menasse organized a reading of Shibli's book there. The authors who participated were Jewish. They

understood that the decision to withhold the prize was above all a political mistake that only fuels Muslim, and particularly Palestinian, views that their voices cannot be heard in Germany.

Each year the fair features writers from one guest country. As it was Slovenia's turn, the world's most famous Slovenian author gave the opening speech. Slavoj Žižek criticized the decision to cancel Shibli's prize ceremony, and while condemning Hamas's atrocities in no uncertain terms he insisted on analyzing the context in which they took place. His arguments were tamer than many I have read in *Haaretz* or *The New York Times* these past weeks, but he was shouted down by the local antisemitism commissioner for false equivalences he did not make. Žižek's claims, though less cogent, were not very different from those made by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*: if we're ever going to undo evil, we need to understand it first. But then few people at the time were persuaded by Arendt; it's always easier to denounce than to understand.

The annual ceremony for the Peace Prize, Germany's most coveted literary award, always concludes the Frankfurt Book Fair. This year it was given to Salman Rushdie for his courageous insistence on freedom of speech.

*

German denunciations of Hamas, and statements of unyielding solidarity with Israel, have become so automatic that one appeared in the cash machine of my local bank: "We are horrified by the brutal attack on Israel. Our sympathies are with the people of Israel, the victims, their families and friends." The notice displayed once when I tapped the screen, once again when I chose a language, a third time when I typed in my PIN, and finally when the money popped out of the slot. Whether from a machine or a politician, such statements do not make me feel safer. On the contrary, the repetition of vapid formulas increases my growing fears of backlash. Germany's reflexive defenses of Israel while refraining from criticism of its government or its occupation of Palestine can only lead to resentment. Most politicians will acknowledge the problem in private but feel compelled to repeat empty phrases in public—even if they know that right-wing parties are using the massacre in Israel to stir anti-immigration sentiment in Germany.

Muslims are not the only Germans whose resentment is growing. An October 27 poll showed that despite politicians' assertions, German support for Israel has waned. Two weeks after the Hamas massacre, my bank changed its message: "We feel solidarity with the victims of war and violence in Ukraine, the Middle East, and other places in the world." If you're seeking anodyne statements, it's a reasonable one, and the bank, after all, is located in a Muslim-majority neighborhood. Violent demonstrations occurred there after a missile struck the al-

Ahli Arab hospital in Gaza on October 17. Thereafter any demonstration that could be construed as pro-Palestinian, including one organized by Jews, was banned in Berlin. Candles set on sidewalks by those who were mourning relatives killed in Gaza were stomped out by police.

Three days later, a general strike was called on Sonnenallee, where most shops are owned by Arabs, who closed their businesses for a day to challenge the ban on protests. Concluding that forbidding demonstrations would only lead to more riots, the police decided to permit some demonstrations supporting Palestine, which have since been peaceful. Still, Berlin streets exude an air of dread. People in the subway are edgy, often truculent. Two masked men threw Molotov cocktails at a synagogue in the center of the city. They missed their target, and no one was hurt, but many Jews in the country are afraid. Some argue about whether Holocaust comparisons or the word “pogrom” are appropriate, but for many Jews, the events of October 7 evoke age-old fears.

So it’s not surprising that public events—seventeen of them, as of this writing—with Palestinian writers, journalists, and artists have been canceled. *Die Zeit*’s attempts to interview Palestinians living in Germany were met with apologies: where every word is weighed like a diamond, they preferred not to speak. An established white German who experienced heavy criticism after criticizing Israeli violence asked me not to write about it.

More surprising, perhaps, has been the silencing of critical Jewish voices. A new production of the Israeli director Yael Ronen’s play *The Situation*, which depicts Israelis and Palestinians in Berlin and was deemed “play of the year” by the prestigious theater magazine *Theater heute* when it opened in 2015, is now on hold. A tour guide who used the word “apartheid” at Berlin’s Jewish Museum was fired. Deborah Feldman, whose bestselling book *Unorthodox* was the basis for a hit Netflix series, had several invitations to present her new book, *Jew Fetish*, canceled. Written and published in German, it examines the distortions of Jewish identity that take place in a country whose determination to rid itself of inherited guilt leads it to view Jews as eternal victims. Chabad is suing Feldman to take the book off the shelves; the German Jewish community’s official newspaper called it “toxic from the first page to the last.”

Even Jews who don’t live in Germany have been affected. Saskia Esken, co-chair of the ruling Social Democratic Party, scrapped a meeting with Bernie Sanders after he called Israeli attacks on civilians in Gaza violations of international law. They are. But for Esken this was a “relativization” which did not “show that he was clearly on the side of Israel.”



Yet I've been debating with Jewish friends in Berlin who are as firmly universalist as I am over whether the German response to the war is preferable to the American one. "Plague or cholera?" I replied to the dilemma. "In tribal times I look for safety over solidarity," answered one. "I have immunity to cholera, not plague. If we manage to get out of tribalism I can have principles." I am still not sure if I agree. Is Germany's twisted tribalism better than America's? Left-leaning Jewish professors and social justice activists are agonized over broken friendships with colleagues who cheered Hamas in the US. How would Jews in Berlin feel among Americans who call themselves progressive but seem to have lost their compass? Here the postcolonial debates raging on American campuses are, thankfully, muted. Germans who consider themselves progressive are likely to locate Israel in the Global North and Palestine in the Global South, underlining the folly of bad-faith geography. Still, decades of German historical reckoning have restrained those who consider themselves progressive from confusing emancipation with slaughter—or at least from saying it out loud.

I'm appalled but not entirely surprised that many who call themselves leftists are doing so in America. I've argued that what's called the "woke left" may be fueled by traditional leftist emotions like the desire to stand up for the oppressed and address historical crimes. But those emotions, which I share, have been undermined by a reactionary ideology which abandons those principles foundational for every liberal or left-wing standpoint: a commitment to universalism over tribalism, a firm distinction between justice and power, and a belief in the possibility of progress.¹ For both the left and the right, the clash between emotions and ideas has created enormous confusion about what "left" means today. The most tragic detail surrounding the Hamas atrocities was that so many of those they murdered or kidnapped were men and women whose lives were dedicated to universalism, justice, and progress. Evil is not just the opposite of good but inimical to it; true evil aims at destroying moral distinctions entirely. In attacking Israelis who spent years helping their Gazan neighbors get medical care, Hamas showed its colors.

A few days after the massacre I received a text from an Israeli colleague: "Hamas not only slaughtered people, they slaughtered reason." My reply: "The Nazis didn't manage to slaughter reason, and we can't let Hamas do it either." As the Israeli-German writer Tomer Dotan-Dreyfus pointed out, we didn't flatten all of Germany after they killed six million Jews. In response, my colleague forwarded videos of terrorists screaming "Allahu Akbar" over dead Israeli bodies. I know that reason often fails us when we need it most. So it wasn't the videos that left my hope tottering. That came when the US, Israel, and a handful of dependent countries voted against a non-binding UN resolution calling for "protection of civilians and upholding legal and

humanitarian obligations.” Plenty of countries regularly violate those obligations. But have we reached a point where we cannot even pay them lip service? Germany, for its part, abstained.

Susan Neiman

Susan Neiman is the Director of the Einstein Forum in Germany. Her latest book is *Left Is Not Woke*. Her first work of fiction, *Nine Stories: A Berlin Novel*, will be published next year. (October 2023)

- FN: See my recent book *Left Is Not Woke* (Polity, 2023), [reviewed in these pages](#) by Fintan O’Toole, November 2, 2023.