

For Europe's Jews, a World of Fear

The Oct. 7 Hamas assault on Israel and a surge in acts of antisemitism have awakened a repressed horror in Jewish populations across the continent.



By Roger Cohen

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Perhaps not since the Holocaust, which saw the annihilation of about two-thirds of Europe's Jewish community, have the Jews of Europe lived in an atmosphere of fear so acute that it feels like a fundamental shift in the terms of their existence.

Across a Europe of daubed Stars of David on apartment buildings, bomb threats to Jewish stores and demonstrations calling for Israel's eradication, Jews speak of alarm as pro-Palestinian sentiment surges.

"There is a feeling of helplessness that has never been experienced before," said Joel Rubinfeld of the Belgian League Against Anti-Semitism.

The Oct. 7 Hamas assault on Israel, often described as the largest single-day slaughter of Jews since Hitler's program of extermination, has awakened a repressed horror in Jewish populations, now compounded by dismay at the way the world's sympathy has rapidly shifted to the Palestinians in Gaza being killed under Israeli bombardment.

"What strikes me is there is a wave of antisemitism in the world when 1,300 Jews were massacred a few days ago," said Samuel Lejoyeux, the president of the Union of Jewish Students of France, which includes 15,000 members.

This feels, to many European Jews, like the same blindness or insouciance that allowed millions of their forebears to be sent to Nazi camps to be gassed. It is precisely to that time that images of slain Jewish babies and grandmothers in the Jewish homeland have transported them.

This month, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Germany's president, said at a rally held at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin that it was "intolerable that Jewish people are today once again living in fear — in our country, of all places." In the week after the Hamas attack, the German federal agency that monitors antisemitism documented 202 episodes, a rise of 240 percent compared with the same period last year.

“Wir Haben Angst,” or “We Are Scared,” was the headline across this week’s cover of Der Spiegel, the leading German newsmagazine, over photographs of four German Jews, one of them a 90-year-old Holocaust survivor, Ivar Buterfas-Frankenthal, who said, “We Jews are once again easy targets.”



Germany’s president, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, at a rally in solidarity with Israel in Berlin on Oct. 22, said that it was “intolerable that Jewish people are today once again living in fear — in our country, of all places.” Clemens Bilan/EPA, via Shutterstock

Angst is, indeed, palpable across the continent. From Britain to Italy, tensions have risen sharply. In the period between the Hamas attack and Oct. 27, Britain’s Community Security Trust, a charity, said that it had recorded 805 antisemitic acts, the highest number in a three-week period since it began reporting episodes of this kind in 1984.

London’s Metropolitan Police Service said it had scaled up its visible presence after the conflict began, noting in a statement that it had seen a “significant increase in hate crime, particularly antisemitism,” since the war between Israel and Hamas, the armed group that controls Gaza, began. Thousands of officers are undertaking extra patrols across the city.

At a recent rally in Milan, protesters held aloft a poster with an image of Anne Frank wearing a keffiyeh, ostensibly to draw a connection between the fate of the young Jewish girl who died at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany during World War II and the Palestinians’ situation in Gaza.

The spillover into Europe of upsurges in Israeli-Palestinian violence is not new.

Tensions between the large Muslim populations in France and Germany, themselves often subject to hatred and violence, and the two countries' Jewish communities have tended to rise in tandem with regular Israeli incursions into Gaza since 2009.

But the extent of antisemitic acts, and of Jewish fear, feels different this time as the scale of the horror unfurling in the Holy Land has sent everyone, on either side of the conflict, over the edge.

“France is seeing a wave of antisemitism not equaled since 1945,” said Bernard-Henri Lévy, a French author and movie director.

In France, home to the largest Jewish community in Europe, antisemitic attacks have surged since the Oct. 7 attack, with 819 acts registered and 414 arrests made, according to Gérald Darmanin, France's interior minister.

Parisians in the 14th Arrondissement, a southern neighborhood of the city, woke up on Tuesday morning to find 65 Stars of David sprayed on residential buildings. “These acts create a lot of fear and dread in the community,” said Carine Petit, the local mayor. “It has awakened terrible things from our history.”



The facade of a building was painted with Stars of David during overnight Tuesday in the Alesia district of Paris. Geoffroy Van Der Hasselt/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

In particular, it has awakened memories of Jews in France forced to wear yellow stars during World War II under the collaborationist Vichy Government that sent some 76,000 French and foreign Jews to their deaths in Nazi camps.

Yaël Braun-Pivet, the Jewish president of the French National Assembly, the country's

larger and more powerful lower house of Parliament, says she has received so many personal threats since Oct. 7 that she cannot leave her home without police protection.

“Of course I feel in danger,” Ms. Braun-Pivet told France Inter radio last week, adding that her Jewish ancestry has become a national obsession despite the fact she does not identify personally with her heritage or faith.

“All of a sudden, people see only this,” she said.

Several factors appear to have contributed to the sharp rise in antisemitism coming from both the left and right of the European political spectrum.

With feelings running so high since the Oct. 7 attack that spurred a massive Israeli military response to oust Hamas from Gaza, the fine line between anti-Zionism — opposition to the State of Israel — and antisemitism — hatred of Jews — has appeared more blurry than ever.

The scale of the Israeli reprisal, which the Hamas-run Health Ministry says has killed more than 8,000 Palestinians, has stirred fury. Images of dead Palestinian women and children race across social media and feed an anger that has long been festering, particularly among the millions of Muslims living in Europe, over Israeli control of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and in Gaza.

The Palestinian cause has also changed in nature, especially for young progressives of the left in Europe and the United States, becoming part of what is often called an “anticolonial” struggle. In this intersectional worldview, the fight against Israel — and often its very existence — becomes part of a global battle of the oppressed for justice and equality. In this good-and-evil matrix, Jews are deemed not to fare well.

The fact that Jews have been indigenous to the Holy Land for millennia and that more than half of Israel’s population are Mizrahi Jews of Middle Eastern and North African descent who have often fled Arab persecution is generally passed over in this prism focused on white imperialism.

If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has always appeared intractable, it now appears particularly explosive. The unthinkable has come to pass. For European Jews, it seems that something fundamental has shifted since the Hamas attack, as it also has for Jews in the United States.



Candles were placed over a sign reading, “Against Antisemitism” during a vigil outside a Jewish community center on Oct. 20 in Berlin. Sean Gallup/Getty Images

“This is what happened to parents and grandparents in Europe, but we thought the era of massive calamity had passed,” said Jeremy Ben-Ami, the president of J Street, a liberal American Jewish organization dedicated to a peaceful resolution of the conflict. “Now the world looks different.”

It is so different that Marina Chernivsky, who runs the OFEK Counseling Center for Antisemitic Violence and Discrimination in Berlin, said that in the six years since she founded the organization, she had never had to deal with so many traumatized people. Since the Hamas attack, her team of seven counselors has received more than 270 requests for counseling, a 13-fold increase over previous months.

“Jews in Germany are faced with real threats in their daily lives,” she said. “Life here seems to go on, but our world is on its head.”

At the opening of a synagogue in Dessau on Oct. 22, Olaf Scholz, the German chancellor, said he was “outraged” at the spread of antisemitic hatred and that it was shameful that police officers were once again needed to protect synagogues and other Jewish institutions.

“We must now show what ‘Never Again’ really means,” he said.

That he felt obliged to make this statement was a measure of all that has changed in Germany and beyond.

Reporting was contributed by Catherine Porter, Juliette Guéron-Gabrielle, Christopher F. Schuetze, Megan

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A correction was made on Nov. 1, 2023: An earlier version of this article misidentified where Anne Frank died. It was at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany, not at Auschwitz.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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