

The Denial of Continuity: October 7 and the Shoah

The month following the massacre have revealed the failure of previous Western Holocaust education, which has never wanted to know anything about the after-effects of Nazi ideology in the Muslim world.

By Matthias Küntzel

Jews playing dead amidst piles of corpses, mothers covering their babies' mouths to avoid being discovered, captives being forced to hand over their neighbors to murderers, people raped, tortured and burned alive: The horrors of October 7 are unquestionably reminiscent of Nazism. And there are indeed strands of continuity that link the anti-Jewish terror of the SS Einsatzgruppen with that of Hamas.

One of these strands has to do with attitudes to the Holocaust. While the majority of humanity views the murder of 6 million Jews as a gigantic crime, among the Islamists we find people who openly describe the murders as a brilliant achievement by the Nazis that should be repeated or completed. A prominent example is the preacher Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who died in 2022. In his lifetime he became the most important and most popular leader of the Muslim Brotherhood organization, whose Palestinian offshoot is Hamas. These are the words he shouted out to the millions of viewers of the TV channel *Al-Jazeera* in early 2009:

"Throughout history, Allah has imposed upon the [Jews] people who would punish them for their corruption. The last punishment was carried out by Hitler. [...] He managed to put them in their place. This was divine punishment for them. Allah willing, the next time will be at the hand of the believers."¹

Here, Qaradawi claims that the Jews were responsible for the Holocaust, which was a "divine punishment" for their "corruption" carried out by Hitler, acting as the instrument of Allah. But it had not been enough. Qaradawi considers a further round of punishment to be necessary, inflicted this time by the Muslims. Qaradawi thus proclaims a new Holocaust and Israel's end to be a religious mission commanded by Allah. The Hamas terrorists think in the same terms.

Another strand of continuity has to do with the specific ideological history of Hamas. Its umbrella organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, started receiving Nazi funds from Berlin as early as the 1930s. Nazi agents provided assist-

ance to its leaders and organized joint training evenings on "the Jewish question". Decades later, this seed bore fruit. In the Hamas Charter of 1988, which is still in force, "the Jews" are declared to be the enemy of the world and the cause of both World Wars, while the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" are cited as evidence of Jewish behavior. Article 7 declares: "The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight the Jews (killing the Jews)."

Finds made by Israeli soldiers in the Gaza Strip, such as the book by Hamas co-founder Mahmoud al-Zahar entitled *The End of the Jews*, which glorifies the Holocaust and calls for it to be completed,² and Arabic editions of *Mein Kampf*, a book that was recently number 6 on the Palestinian bestseller list, fit in with this program.³ On 7 October, those incited in this way took action. They wanted the "End of the Jews" and would have continued to run amok without the intervention of Israeli forces.

The fact that this renewed mass murder of Jews could not be prevented is evidence of a failure on the part of the Israelis and the Western world, and, indeed, of the international community as a whole. After all, Hamas' genocidal program had been known in the Arab world since 1988 and in German-speaking countries since 2002. Tragically, it was not taken seriously. And what happened afterwards? How did the world public and the West react to October 7 in view of the experience of the Holocaust and 40 years of "Holocaust education"?

To this day, the majority of the non-Jewish world refuses to support and show solidarity with the Jews affected by the terror. As in 1938, it is once again abandoning the Jews. In July 1938, 31 of the 32 states that took part in the Evian Conference refused to accept Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany and Nazi-occupied Austria. Only the Dominican Republic was prepared to do so. 85 years later, there is once again little sign of empathy with Jews, who are confronted with a massive increase in antisemitic hostility worldwide.

There is no serious international debate on the question of what actually caused the outbreak on October 7 and how the hatred of women and Jews displayed there can be explained and prevented in the future. Holocaust researchers have written a lot about eliminatory antisemitism. After October 7, however, this knowledge has not been applied and Hamas' charter has hardly been mentioned in the subsequent debates. As a result, what Jews around the world perceived as an existential caesura has been treated at universities and by government agencies in the Western world as an episode: people have carried on as if nothing had happened.

At the same time, the initial expressions of solidarity with Israel quickly turned into campaigns of accusation. Almost everywhere, Israel - and therefore the Jews - were blamed for the Hamas terror and the massacre interpreted as a

response to 56 years of "occupation". Unfortunately, prominent Holocaust researchers - professors who should know better - have also articulated such exculpatory strategies, which strengthen antisemitism worldwide. Among them is Omer Bartov, Professor of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, USA.

Israel's guilt?

Asked about the causes of the massacre on October 7, Bartov, in an interview with the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper, blamed it solely on Israel's policies and the "oppression of millions of Palestinians". This had led to "violence, anger and a thirst for revenge" on the part of those affected. The Hamas attack must therefore be seen "as an attempt to draw attention to the plight of the Palestinians."⁴ At first glance, this interpretation seems plausible, but it misses the point.

Firstly, it mischaracterizes Hamas' actions and thus its motives: October 7 was not a spontaneous act of revenge and anger, but a strategic strike that had been meticulously prepared for months. Moreover, Hamas leaders openly admit that their actions are in no way intended to alleviate the "plight of the Palestinians". On the contrary, they benefit from the catastrophe in the Gaza Strip because they can exploit it to pillory Israel all the more effectively in pursuit of their real goal, the extermination of Israel and the Jews.

Secondly, the massacre was not a response to provocations by Israel. In the months and years before, the country had made efforts to stabilize the situation in the Gaza Strip and raise the standard of living. This is why Israeli governments have for years allowed money from Qatar to reach Hamas, and why tens of thousands of Gaza residents were allowed to work in Israel. However, the hope of stability proved to be an illusion; the cruel reward followed on October 7.

Thirdly, Hamas' religiously based hatred of Jews cannot be a reaction to Israel's policies because it was originally formulated and developed by its predecessor groups in the 1930s. This hatred, promoted by National Socialism, preceded the founding of Israel and was always more the cause of violence than a reaction to it. This hatred is directed against all Jews, no matter how committed they may be to making peace with Palestinians, as was the case with many of those slaughtered on October 7, and it is directed against everything Israel does.

Fourthly, researchers agree that antisemitism is a phantasm that has nothing to do with real Jews or criticism of their activities. Bartov ignores this fact

when he states in the aforementioned interview that Israel caused the Hamas terror of October 7. He forgets that antisemitism contradicts our everyday logic of cause and effect. Just as there was no rational cause for the murder of the six million, there was also no rational cause for the pogroms that followed the ritual murder accusations or for the massacre of October 7: sheer hatred and the most vicious of ideologies were and are at work here.

4

Holocaust a taboo subject?

In the above-mentioned interview published by the *Frankfurter Rundschau* newspaper just over a week after the massacre, Omer Bartov criticized all attempts to link Hamas' terror with the Holocaust as "misleading" and "ideologically driven". Just over a month later, together with Christopher R. Browning, Michael Rothberg and A. Dirk Moses as well as twelve other colleagues, he published an "Open Letter on the Misuse of Holocaust Memory". In it, the signatories, including Stephanie Schüler-Springorum, Director of the Berlin Center for Research on Antisemitism, not only oppose the misuse of remembrance, which exists and should be criticized. They also reject any reference to the Holocaust in our efforts to understand the causes of the massacre.

True, their open letter does mention the fact that October 7 reminded many Jews of the Holocaust and also of earlier pogroms. At the same time, however, it vehemently rejects this association: "Appealing to the memory of the Holocaust *obscures* our understanding of the antisemitism Jews face today and *dangerously* misrepresents the causes of the violence in Israel-Palestine."⁵

This core statement of the Open Letter is remarkable in several respects. On the one hand, it implies that the antisemitism to which Jews are exposed "today" has little or nothing in common with the hatred of Jews that culminated in the Holocaust. As we have already seen, this is wrong. The ideological, historical and semantic relationships that link the antisemitism of Hamas with that of the Nazis and the academic literature that at proves this connection can only be overlooked by people determined to overlook them.

Those who ignore this, moreover, not only blame Israel alone for the hatred of Jews in the Arab world, but also trivialize this hatred by assuming that it has a rational motive.

An example of this trivialization was provided by the American political scientist Marc Lynch. In a book review in the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*, Lynch praises Qaradawi as "an icon to mainstream nonviolent Islamists".

However, he also admits that Qaradawi is "certainly hostile toward Israel". Here, Lynch was also presumably referring to the speech quoted above, in which Qaradawi had described the Holocaust as "divine punishment" and declared: "Allah willing, the next time will be at the hand of the believers." In Lynch's eyes, this threat was not antisemitic, but merely an expression of criticism of Israel.

However, the author of the reviewed book, Paul Berman, did not agree with this. Lynch "hides behind euphemisms - in this case his phrase 'hostile toward Israel,' when what he really means is 'Hitlerian,'" Berman wrote in the follow-up issue of *Foreign Affairs*. Lynch, however, did not agree that he could have meant "Hitlerian". Instead, in a reply, he reiterated his erroneous claim that Qaradawi was merely voicing "extremely hostile views of Israel" in his statements.⁶

Contrary to all the evidence, Lynch, like many of his colleagues, defends the dogma of discontinuity - i.e. the thesis that there is no connection between Hitler's hatred of Jews and Islamist hatred of Israel. Misjudgements of this kind have contributed and continue to contribute to the downplaying of the radical hatred of Jews by the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas and thus helped make the catastrophe of October 7 possible.

The Open Letter by Bartov and others goes on to say that invoking the memory of the Holocaust "*dangerously* misrepresents the causes of violence in Israel-Palestine". So is there a "danger" when I relate my knowledge of the Holocaust to October 7? And what danger is it?

Presumably the reason they find invoking the memory of the Holocaust not just wrong, but "dangerously wrong", is because doing so undermines the dichotomy of Zionist perfidy on the one hand and Palestinian innocence on the other. Of course, there are many reasons why one might wish to criticize Benjamin Netanyahu's policies and approach to the current military conflict. However, such criticism becomes unfair if it systematically ignores all the forces that want Israel's destruction.

But this is just what the Open Letter does. While the Hamas massacre is repeatedly trivialized as a "current crisis", the signatories make the accusation of "widespread killing" solely against Israel, whose 75-year history they hold responsible for the "spiral of violence". "There is no military solution in Israel-Palestine," they wrote a few weeks after October 7, without saying how Hamas' killing spree could have been ended non-militarily

On December 8, 2023, Jeffrey Herf and Norman J.W. Goda published a counter-statement signed by 31 other academics, rejecting the accusation of Holocaust abuse. In it, they describe the events of 9 October as "the most im-

portant mass murder of Jews since the Holocaust" and emphasize that "in terms of ideas, there is a Nazi connection to Hamas".

They address "the distinctive form of Islamist Jew-hatred that emerged in the 1930s with the Muslim Brotherhood" and emphasize that "this mix of Islamist and European Jew-hatred, while not shared by the entire Arab/Muslim world, has maintained a shadow over the Middle East as regards the existence of a Jewish state."

They criticize the anti-Zionist thrust of the Bartov paper and conclude by calling for an "unflinching gaze at the connections between past and present in the Hamas dictatorship and its actions".⁷ In a short response, the former group rejected the counter-statement and reiterated its position.⁸

Failure of Holocaust education

When Bartov and his co-signatories so vehemently reject all associations with the Shoah, they are fleeing from reality: after October 7, Holocaust history must no longer be separated from the present.

The months following the massacre have revealed the failure of previous Western Holocaust education, which has never wanted to know anything about the after-effects of Nazi ideology in the Muslim world. In November 2023, Dani Dayan, CEO of Yad Vashem, acknowledged this: "We at Yad Vashem are experts on Nazi ideology, not on the barbaric ideology of Hamas. We have not researched it."⁹

This ignorance must come to an end. If the new challenge is to be met, every future Shoah commemoration must be an anti-antisemitism commemoration that no longer taboos the genocidal hatred of Jews that lives on after Auschwitz and in the Middle East. At the same time, the fight against antisemitism should always be waged with the aim of arousing a Holocaust awareness that addresses not only the uniqueness of the crime, but also the uniqueness of the hatred that made it possible. The real protagonists of this hatred are in Tehran today. For them, the October 7 massacre was just a foretaste of what they have in mind.

¹ MEMRI, #2005, January 28, 2009 Qaradawi is not an isolated case, as the study by Meir Litvak and Esther Webman, *From Empathy to Denial. Arab Responses to the Holocaust*, London 2009, vividly demonstrates.

² President Isaac Herzog at Munich Security Conference presents antisemitic texts found in Gaza, February 17, 2024.

³ 'No need to apologize: Hamas are indeed the "New Nazis"', *Jewish News Syndicate*, 06.03.2024

⁴ Ulrich Seidler, Genocide researcher on Hamas attack: 'Netanyahu has sown the wind', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, October 16, 2023.

⁵ Open Letter on the Misuse of Holocaust Memory, *The New York Review of Books*, November 20, 2023. Emphasis: MK. In addition to the five named above, the letter was also signed by Karyn Ball, Jane Caplan, Alon Confino, Debórah Dwork, David Feldman, Amos Goldberg, Atina Grossmann, John-Paul Himka, Marianne Hirsch, Raz Segal and Barry Trachtenberg.

⁶ Marc Lynch, 'Veiled Truths: The Rise of Political Islam and the West', *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2010 and Paul Berman, 'Islamism, Unveiled and Marc Lynch', 'Lynch Replies', *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2010.

⁷ Jeffrey Herf, Norman J.W.Goda, and 31 other scholars, 'An Open Letter on Hamas, Antisemitism, and Holocaust Memory', *The New York Review of Books*, December 8, 2023. The 31 are Joseph Bendersky, Russell A. Berman, Paul Berman, Richard Breitman, Magnus Bretchken, Martin Cüppers, Havi Dreifuss, Ingo Elbe, Tuva Friling, Sander Gilman, Stephan Grigat, Susannah Heschel, David Hirsh, Günther Jikeli, Martin Kramer, Matthias Küntzel, Meir Litvak, Dan Michman, Joanna B. Michlic, Benny Morris, Cary Nelson, Bill Niven, Alvin Rosenfeld, Gavriel Rosenfeld, Roni Stauber, Norman A. Stillman, Karin Stögner, Iza-bella Tabarovsky, James Wald, Thomas Weber and Elhanan Yakira.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Detlef David Kauschke, 'Never again is now', *Jüdische Allgemeine*, November 9, 2023.

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