



## PERSPECTIVES

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### Germany's First Anti-Semitism Commissioner

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** In April, diplomat Felix Klein became Germany's first Anti-Semitism Commissioner. The need for such an appointment is an indirect admission of the severity of expressions of Jew-hatred in Germany more than seventy years after the Holocaust. In interviews and statements, Klein has addressed a wide array of the components of anti-Semitism in Germany. For the first time, there is now a German official with the responsibility of exposing Jew hatred in the country in all its varieties.

The German federal government has appointed diplomat Felix Klein to the newly created position of Germany's Anti-Semitism Commissioner. The need for such an appointment is an indirect admission of the severity of expressions of Jew-hatred in Germany more than seventy years after the Holocaust.

Klein was the Special Representative of the country's Foreign Office for Relations with Jewish Organizations and Anti-Semitism Issues for the last four years. He took up his new position on May 1, 2018 and is already frequently and publicly addressing many aspects of German anti-Semitism.

It has been difficult to obtain a reliable picture of German anti-Semitism over the years, but what is certain is that it remains substantial. In 2017, police registered four incidents of classic anti-Semitism per day. Berlin in particular seems to have become a hotbed for Jew-hatred, with the Rias monitoring organization registering close to 1,000 anti-Semitic incidents there in 2017. These include complaints about incidents that cannot lead to prosecution, but exclude cases of the newest form of anti-Semitism: anti-Israelism.

With respect to anti-Israelism, a 2014 Bielefeld University study found that 40% of Germans think Israel conducts a war of extermination against the Palestinians. A 2015 study from the Bertelsmann Foundation reported that 41% think that "Israel is acting

toward the Palestinians like Nazis acted towards the Jews." Apparently these Germans project the unprecedented crimes of their grandfathers' generation onto Israel.

Although Klein has not yet touched on all aspects of anti-Semitism, he has addressed many of its components. In an interview this month with the daily *De Welt*, he mentioned that anti-Semitism is manifesting itself even in German regions in which no Jews live and in schools that contain no Jewish pupils.

Klein mentioned three key incidents in the history of anti-Semitism in postwar western Germany. The first was the legal conviction by ex-Nazi judges in 1951 of Holocaust survivor Philip Auerbach, who had been responsible for arranging financial restitution to Nazi victims. Auerbach committed suicide two days after being falsely convicted of having committed fraud and was posthumously cleared of all charges four years later. The second incident concerned Rainer Werner Fassbinder's theater piece, "*Trash, the City and Death*," which was to have premiered in 1975 in Frankfurt but was canceled amid accusations that it promoted anti-Semitic stereotypes. (It premiered in Frankfurt nine years later.) Finally, the debate about circumcision in 2012 prompted by a Cologne court's prohibition of the procedure led to a voluminous outpouring of anti-Semitism in Germany.

Klein has also indicated that he intends to tackle the political distortion of German-reported statistics of anti-Semitic acts. Crimes against Jews by unknown perpetrators are registered as having been committed by extreme right-wingers, while attacks on Jews by Muslims are far more numerous than what is recorded. Klein points out that the necessary change can only be achieved by convincing the interior ministers of the federal states to modify the way statistics are established, adding that it should also be verified and ensured that all imams take a stand against anti-Semitism.

Anti-Jewish incidents in schools are a particularly severe problem in Germany. These incidents victimize vulnerable young people who cannot escape the hatred and violence of their classmates. The perpetrators are often, but not always, Muslims. Klein said that knowledge about Judaism and Jewish life has to be disseminated in schools properly, and not only in relation to the Holocaust. He stated that heads of schools and teachers need to take more decisive action concerning anti-Semitic incidents. Teachers should receive regular training in how to combat anti-Semitism and racism within the school environment.

Klein has also addressed another important problem: the German justice system. As *Die Welt* noted in its interview with him, a Syrian refugee who had beaten up a man wearing a kippa was sentenced to only four weeks in jail.

Klein has obtained a promise that he will be given a staff of eleven. This contrasts with the approach of the EU, which, despite having a population six times larger than Germany, provides only a single assistant to its Coordinator on Combating Anti-

Semitism. Klein has said that one member of his staff will deal with internet anti-Semitism while others will work on internal security relations.

Klein made a major impact when he severely criticized an anti-Semitic caricature of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that was published in the large national daily *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, stating that "The caricature created associations with the intolerable drawings of nationalist socialist propaganda." Klein accused the paper of having crossed a red line. This important paper – which has a long record of anti-Semitic attacks on Israel – apologized and fired the cartoonist.

Klein has also commented on individual incidents, including a recent attack by a Palestinian against a visiting Israeli professor. He has also condemned the boycott of Israeli goods. He has come out against anti-Semitism originating from both right and left as well as Muslim anti-Semitism. In addition, he has pointed out that German churches bear a special responsibility in view of their history. He specifically mentioned the lasting influence of the extremely anti-Semitic Protestant reformer Martin Luther and the churches' behavior in Germany during Nazi rule.

Germany is a country in flux, partly due to its grossly mistaken welcome policy that brought in an influx of about 1.5 million people – mainly from Muslim countries – over a three-year period. Many of these immigrants have anti-Semitic prejudices. The fact that there is now a government official whose job is to expose the many facets of German anti-Semitism is likely to create enough bad publicity for the country that the authorities will try to solve at least part of the problem.

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