



Angela Merkel's Legacy and the Jews

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Angela Merkel's tenure as Chancellor of Germany is drawing to a close. While she has always shown great empathy for Germany's Jews, her 2015 decision to open the country's gates to migrants led to the influx of approximately a million and a half people (so far), mainly from Muslim countries, which has in turn strengthened Germany's longstanding anti-Semitism. Helmut Kohl, who was CDU chancellor from 1982-98, enabled the strengthening of the German Jewish community through major immigration from Russia. Merkel's legacy, by contrast, may well be a substantial diminishment of the German Jewish community through emigration.

As of a few weeks ago, German Chancellor Angela Merkel is no longer chair of the Christian Democrat Party (CDU), and she will not stand for the chancellorship – a position she has held since 2005 – after the next elections. As her tenure at Germany's helm is drawing to a close, the media have started to analyze her performance and speculate about her legacy.

This is thus a good moment to begin to look at Merkel's legacy with regard to Germany's Jews. Previous CDU leader Helmut Kohl, who served as chancellor from 1982-98, enabled an estimated 170,000 Russian Jews to immigrate to Germany. As a result of that policy, Germany once again has a significant Jewish community. The country's organized Jewish community currently has close to 100,000 members (which is, however, barely more than 0.1% of Germany's population).

In terms of rhetoric, Merkel has been consistently supportive of Germany's Jews. In November 2018 she spoke at the major Berlin Rykestrasse synagogue on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of Kristallnacht, saying, "Jewish life is blossoming again in Germany. An unexpected gift to us after the Shoah... but we are also witnessing a worrying anti-Semitism that threatens Jewish life in our country." She added,

significantly, that violence against Jews committed by far-right militants or Muslims was on the rise in Germany.

A year ago, Merkel would not have mentioned Muslims as among those guilty of anti-Semitic acts, though they have in fact been responsible for a substantial proportion of them for years. That changed in December 2017, when Muslims burned a homemade Israeli flag in Berlin. The video went around the world and created associations with the far more serious book burnings that took place under Hitler's government.

Several politicians then started acknowledging Muslim anti-Semitism, and after some time, Merkel had to do the same. Still, German statistics on anti-Semitic incidents remain heavily manipulated. Anti-Semitic acts committed by unidentified individuals are routinely, and often incorrectly, attributed to the extreme right.

At the end of 2018, a study was published by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) entitled *Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism*. The study provided data on how self-defining Jews in 12 EU countries see and experience Jew-hatred. The report provides important relative data, even if in absolute terms it is not statistically significant. Though somewhat behind France on this issue, Germany was one of five countries where the great majority of interviewees saw anti-Semitism as a big problem.

Compared to a previous FRA study from 2012, a far larger share of Jews now see anti-Semitism as a problem, with all interviewees saying it has increased over the past five years. Germany is also among the countries in Europe where expressions of hostility toward Jews in the street and in other public spaces is considered a very big or fairly big problem.

The majority of German respondents said they regularly hear the statement "Israelis behave like Nazis toward the Palestinians." A significant number have also heard negative statements about Jews at political or social events. Germany is also among the countries with the highest level of Jews familiar with anti-Semitic incidents either as witnesses or through their circle of family members and close friends.

The majority of German Jews say they worry about verbal insults and possible harassment in the future, or alternatively that a family member or close friend might be subject to insults or harassment. Many German Jews avoid certain places in their local area or neighborhood, at least occasionally, because they do not feel safe there as Jews. In Hungary, Belgium, France, and Germany, a large minority of respondents indicate that they have considered emigrating in the past five years because they do not feel safe at home as Jews.

In December, the Berlin Jewish community's Anti-Semitism Commissioner, [Sigmount Königsberg](#), said the subject of emigration comes up more and more in Jewish

community decisions. He added that every corner of Berlin has become potentially dangerous for Jews.

From a managerial and political point of view, Merkel governed Germany well until 2015. The country withstood the major challenges of the worldwide 2008 economic crisis without huge problems. Under her chancellorship, Germany's dominance of the EU increased. She successfully pushed her candidate, former Luxemburg PM Jean-Claude Juncker, through as president of the EU Commission.

Yet her legacy may well be heavily influenced by a single fateful decision: to open Germany's borders to migrants in September 2015. Since then, about a million and a half migrants have entered the country. Many came from Muslim countries, in particular Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Merkel misjudged both the extent of the problems that so many non-Europeans would bring with them and the absorption capacity of the German population.

The official accounting is that there are three to four anti-Semitic incidents per day in Germany. There are probably more, however, because many victims do not report them. German Jews increasingly feel the brunt of two threatening phenomena: the large proportion of anti-Semites among Muslim migrants and their descendants, and the revitalization of the anti-Semitic extreme right. Even if the situation does not get worse, it is already bad and unlikely to improve.

The Hanns-Seidel Foundation studied attitudes of migrants in the German federal state of Bavaria. It found that more than half of those from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan believe that Jews have "too much influence" in the world.

A study by historian Gunther Jikeli about Syrian and Iraqi migrants in Germany, commissioned by the American Jewish Committee, was summarized thus by the organization's Berlin Director Deidre Berger: "Until now, reports that many new arrivals in Germany espouse anti-Semitism have been largely anecdotal. But this new scientific analysis shows that the problem is widespread in the refugee communities from Syria and Iraq. Anti-Semitic attitudes, stereotypes, and conspiracy theories are common, as well as a categorical rejection by many of the State of Israel."

Germany's newly appointed Anti-Semitism Commissioner, Felix Klein, has said he is not surprised that many German Jews are debating whether to leave. This leads to a troubling question: Whereas Chancellor Kohl enabled the building up of a greatly increased Jewish community through immigration, will Chancellor Merkel's legacy be a substantially diminishing Jewish community through emigration?

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