



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# The Hazards of Holocaust Remembrance in Europe

by Rafael Castro

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,437, February 5, 2020

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The received wisdom that greater Holocaust awareness automatically translates into policies and attitudes favorable to European Jews and the Jewish state is dubious at best. As assimilation and antisemitism hollow out Jewish communities on the Continent, Holocaust remembrance in Europe may well cease to help Jews altogether.

It is ironic that French president Emmanuel Macron and the UK's Prince Charles took advantage of their participation in an unprecedented gathering of world leaders in Israel to commemorate the memory of the six million Jews murdered during WWII to visit Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas—an inveterate antisemite and certified Holocaust denier who rejects the Jewish right to statehood. No less ironic was Prince Charles's announcement on the eve of the visit of his keenness to visit Iran, whose extremist Islamist regime has repeatedly pledged to wipe the Jewish state from the face of the earth.

However mindboggling, this behavior is emblematic of the transformed perception of the Holocaust in the minds of many Europeans—from a unique act of industrial extermination caused by the "longest hatred" (as antisemitism is commonly known) that underscores the Jewish right to secure and equal existence into a motivation for solidarity with persecuted and discriminated groups in general and "oppressed Palestinians" and "ghettoized European Muslims" in particular. Hence Prince Charles's expressed "heartbrokenness" during his meeting with Abbas at Palestinians' "suffering," which ignores both the Palestinian Authority's own heavy responsibility for that suffering and its role in the cleansing of Bethlehem's Christian population.

For keen observers of both the Palestinians' century-long rejection of the idea of Jewish statehood and the existential challenges facing Israel, comparisons between Nazi-occupied Europe and the situation in Gaza and the West Bank are extremely offensive. The ease with which intellectuals and journalists now compare the situation of people seeking asylum or living under supposed occupation to that of Jews persecuted by Nazism underscores the dangers of the Holocaust becoming a historical icon.

During 2015, at the height of the "Refugees Welcome" euphoria engulfing parts of Europe, demonstrators in Berlin carried posters demanding the admission of "six million refugees" into Germany. In those heady days, any German politician, journalist, or intellectual who expressed concern over this migration wave was denounced as a racist who spat on the memory of the Holocaust.

Five years later, the euphoria has all but vanished. Antisemitic episodes and sexual assaults have spiked in both Germany and Sweden, which absorbed the largest absolute numbers of immigrants. And while most immigrants seem to be law-abiding and willing to integrate into democratic societies, it is undeniable that the antisemitism and misogyny of a significant number of them has added danger to the lives of Jews and women in European cities.

European Jewish organizations have hesitated to voice concern about the sizable share of migrants harboring antisemitic views for fear of seconding the rhetoric of populist right-wing parties. In this context, the memory of the Holocaust is routinely used as a bludgeon to quash discussion of sociocultural problems present in some immigrant communities. Experts who try to raise awareness about issues such as violence, homophobia, sexism, and antisemitism in these milieus are accused of spreading "Islamophobia" — a new concept twinned with antisemitism to stymie open and candid discussion of the social and political problems attending Islam's growing presence and influence in the West. In a surreal twist of fate, European Jews are thus paying the price for sensitivities stirred by the Holocaust.

Far from being a silver bullet protecting Jews from prejudice and baseless hatred, Holocaust remembrance has become a negative factor in Jewish life in Europe and in European attitudes toward Israel. Consider German FM Heiko Maas, who claims to have entered politics because of the shame and sense of responsibility he felt after Auschwitz. Those feelings have not deterred him from becoming one of the world's leading advocates of appeasing Iran or from repeatedly siding with Israel's enemies at the UN General Assembly. In the latest turn of events, the German foreign ministry was overtly critical of President Trump's peace plan, which, while endorsing the two-state solution, puts an unprecedented emphasis on Israel's historic rights and security needs.

True friendship and sympathy cannot be grounded in shame and unatonable guilt. Quite the contrary, in fact. A convenient way to shed a heavy moral burden is to attribute analogous sins to the victim. In Western Europe, the pervasiveness of the libels that Zionists behave like Nazis, that Gaza is a new Warsaw Ghetto, and that Israel is involved in ethnic cleansing and genocide can only be explained by the emotional and psychological solace these delusions provide. They allow Europeans to believe Jewish actions relieve them of their own guilt.

Holocaust remembrance fuels resentment that is sublimated into anti-Israel animosity. It is revealing how Western European states that have admitted culpability for their forefathers' complicity and inaction during the Holocaust tend to be more aggressive in their criticism of Israel than Central and Eastern European countries where this soul-searching has yet to take place.

The hazards of Holocaust remembrance in Europe are considerable. The received wisdom that greater Holocaust awareness automatically translates into policies and attitudes favorable to European Jews and the Jewish state is dubious at best. The unfavorable dynamics will grow more visible in the coming decades. As Holocaust survivors living in Israel are no longer able to testify about the importance of Zionism for the Jewish People, the association between Holocaust remembrance and support for the Jewish State will fade even further. As assimilation and antisemitism hollow out Jewish communities on the Continent, Holocaust remembrance in Europe may well cease to help Jews altogether.

*Rafael Castro is a Yale- and Hebrew University-educated political analyst based in Berlin. He can be reached at [rafaelcastro78@gmail.com](mailto:rafaelcastro78@gmail.com).*