

Charlemagne

## A rise in antisemitism puts Europe's liberal values to the test

The return of Europe's oldest scourge



Illustration: Peter Schrank

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In 1945, as Europe smouldered and the moral reckoning of the Holocaust lay ahead, Karl Popper pondered the paradox of tolerance. An open society needs tolerance to thrive, the Austrian-born philosopher posited. But extending that intellectual courtesy to the prejudiced would result in the undermining of the very tolerance that made their intolerance possible in the first place. Popper concluded it was on balance better to nip the bigots in the bud early on and save everyone the kind of trouble his home continent (and Popper personally, given his Jewish heritage) had just been through. The history of post-war Europe, at first in the west and then in the former communist bloc, is one of politics striving to balance the right of allowing everyone to say what they please while preserving the liberal society Popper sought to bring to life.

A form of intolerance that should have seen its last in 1945 has made a discomfiting return. Antisemitism, never quite expunged from the continent but once banished beyond the political pale, is so rife in Europe now that 96% of Jews say they have experienced it in the past year. More than half say they fear for their safety; the same number have either emigrated or considered doing so in recent years. Physical attacks, while rare, are rife enough that three-quarters of Jews occasionally avoid wearing religious symbols in public. Even more worrying these statistics, compiled by the European Union for a report released in July, were based on data gathered before the terrorist attacks by Hamas in October 2023, and the brutal Israeli response. Every indicator has become worse since then. A dispiriting flow of antisemitic incidents reached an apogee in the wake of a football match involving a team from Tel Aviv playing in Amsterdam on November 7th, after which Israeli visitors—some of them behaving even more boorishly than is customary for football fans, including tearing down Palestinian flags and worse—were chased in the streets by mobs in what the city's mayor described as a “pogrom”. Rabbi Menachem Margolin, chairman of the European Jewish Association, warned of Europe “going down the darkest path again”.

The continent suffers from three sorts of antisemitism. The first is the kind of bigotry, soft or hard, that people in Popper's era might have recognised. It is the prejudice that puts the greedy Jew (preferably with a hooked nose) at the centre of all manner of conspiracy theories, from hoarding gold to controlling the media/banks/politics. An offshoot of ancestral intolerance, it became the preserve of the extreme right: think of Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the French party now known as the National Rally, describing the Nazi gas chambers as “a detail” of history. The resurgence of this type of prejudice has been fuelled by the advent of the internet, whose dark corners are the spiritual home of crackpots.

The second antisemitism is one that can be thought of as an unwelcome import through waves of migration. New arrivals to Europe in the past six decades or so often came from Muslim-majority countries. Some lacked the liberal cultural mores which most Europeans (debatably) believe themselves to exemplify, and justifiably felt no guilt for the Holocaust nor what preceded it. A sympathy for the Palestinian cause hardened attitudes to Jews in ways that sometimes resembled Mr Le Pen's tirades. Even as the migrants became the parents of European-born children, the bigotry all too often endured. In France, the EU country with both most Jews and Muslims, 55% of the latter think the former are too powerful in politics (a claim that can easily be dismissed as fanciful). Across Europe, perceptions of prejudice against Jews have risen most in places that have taken in lots of migrants in recent years, such as Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden.

Add to this a third antisemitism linked to some Europeans' anger at the Israeli government of the day, which shoots up in the wake of strife in the Middle East (ie, all too regularly). Protesting against the actions of Israel in Gaza is legitimate, everyone agrees, but also acts as a pretext for those who hold less acceptable views about Jews. Drawing the line between what is fair criticism and what is covert bigotry can be hard: Germany recently passed a resolution combating antisemitism that critics—including Jewish ones—say stymies legitimate discussion of any Israeli misdeeds.

### **Whose antisemitism is it anyway?**

This confluence of hatred can lead hostility towards Jews to pop up in unexpected places. In France it is now the radical-left Unsubmissive France party that many think fits the antisemitic bill, given its full-throated backing of Palestinians has veered into bigotry (one party grandee called Hamas a "resistance movement"). Over half of French Jews say they might leave if its leader, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, came to power. That is nearly twice the number who might go if Marine Le Pen, daughter of Jean-Marie and now party figurehead, were to lead France. Like other hard-right leaders, such as Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Viktor Orban in Hungary, she now ardently supports Jews and Israel: being on their side is a way of stigmatising the bigger Muslim minority. This hard-right embrace of Jews can lead to odd moments, such as Mr Orban cheering Israel while presenting George Soros, a liberal Jewish philanthropist, as an all-controlling bogeyman (hint, hint).

Bigotry against Jews holds a special place in Europe, given its history. But one lesson of Amsterdam is that antisemitism can itself be used to bludgeon another minority. Within days of the scenes there, its mayor, Femke Halsema, expressed anxiety that the violence, and the use of the word pogrom, were being weaponised by the hard right. The actions of a few Muslims, though vile, had been seized upon by the likes of Mr Wilders to stigmatise millions; a minister of Moroccan descent resigned, threatening a fragile coalition. Fighting prejudice is a moral duty, as Popper concluded. Doing it with more prejudice is no answer. ■