
Freedom for the One Who Thinks Differently

*An Open Letter from a group of Jewish artists,
writers, and scholars in Germany*

We, the undersigned Jewish writers, academics, journalists, artists, and cultural workers living in Germany, are writing to condemn a disturbing crackdown on civic life in the wake of this month's horrifying violence in Israel and Palestine.

There is no defense for the deliberate targeting of civilian life. We condemn without reservation the terrorist attacks on civilians by Hamas. Many of us have family and friends in Israel who have been directly affected by this violence. We condemn with equal force the killing of civilians in Gaza.

In recent weeks, regional and city governments across Germany have banned public gatherings with presumed Palestinian sympathies. Canceled demonstrations include those named "No Conflagration in the Middle East," "Youth Against Racism," and "Solidarity with the Civilian Population of Gaza." The ban extends to gatherings planned by Jews and Israelis, including one called "Jewish Berliners against Violence in the Middle East." In an especially absurd case, a Jewish Israeli woman was detained for standing alone in a public square while holding a sign denouncing the ongoing war waged by her own country.

The police have offered no credible defense of these decisions. Virtually all of the cancellations, including those banning gatherings organized by Jewish groups, have been justified by the police in part due to the "imminent risk" of "seditious, anti-Semitic exclamations." These claims, we believe, serve to suppress legitimate nonviolent political expression that may include criticisms of Israel.

Attempts to defy these arbitrary restrictions are met with indiscriminate brutality. Authorities have targeted immigrant and minority populations across Germany, harassing, arresting, and beating civilians, often on the flimsiest of pretexts.

In Berlin, the district of Neukölln, home to large Turkish and Arab communities, is now a neighborhood under police occupation. Armored vans and squads of armed riot police patrol the streets searching for any spontaneous showing of Palestinian support or sym-

bolos of Palestinian identity. Pedestrians are shoved and pepper-sprayed at random on the sidewalk. Children are ruthlessly tackled and arrested. Those detained and arrested include well-known Syrian and Palestinian activists. Schools have banned Palestinian flags and keffiyeh, and although these objects are legally permitted in public, to possess one invites police violence and arrest.

Earlier this year, Berlin police officers admitted in court that in suppressing protests they have targeted civilians who "stood out" for wearing the colors of the Palestinian flag or scarves associated with Palestinian solidarity. A preponderance of filmed evidence suggests that this remains the case, and that racial bias plays a significant role in the targeting of suspects.

These infringements of civil rights are taking place almost entirely without comment from Germany's cultural elites. Major cultural institutions have silenced themselves in lockstep, canceling productions that deal with the conflict and de-platforming figures who might be critical of Israel's actions—or who are simply Palestinian themselves. Such voluntary self-censorship has produced a climate of fear, anger, and silence. All this is done under the banner of protecting Jews and supporting the state of Israel.

As Jews, we reject this pretext for racist violence and express full solidarity with our Arab, Muslim, and particularly our Palestinian neighbors. We refuse to live in prejudicial fear. What frightens us is the prevailing atmosphere of racism and xenophobia in Germany, hand in hand with a constraining and paternalistic philo-Semitism. We reject in particular the conflation of anti-Semitism and any criticism of the state of Israel.

At the same time that most forms of nonviolent resistance on behalf of Gaza are suppressed, acts of violence and intimidation are also taking place: a Molotov cocktail thrown at a synagogue; Stars of David drawn on the doors of Jewish homes. The motivations for these indefensible anti-Semitic crimes, and their perpetrators, remain unknown.

It is clear, however, that Germany's refusal to recognize a right to grieve the loss of lives in Gaza does not make Jews safe. Jews were already a vulnerable minority population; some Israelis report they are afraid to speak Hebrew on the street. Bans on demonstrations and their violent enforcement only provoke and escalate violence. We also contend that the perceived threat of such assemblies grossly inverts the actual threat to

Jewish life in Germany, where, according to the federal police, the “vast majority” of anti-Semitic crimes—around 84%—are committed by the German far right. If this is an attempt to atone for German history, its effect is to risk repeating it.

Dissent is a requirement of any free and democratic society. Freedom, wrote Rosa Luxemburg, “is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently.” As our Arab and Muslim neighbors are beaten and silenced, we fear the atmosphere in Germany has become more dangerous—for Jews and Muslims alike—than at any time in the nation’s recent history. We condemn these acts committed in our names.

We further call on Germany to adhere to its own commitments to free expression and the right to assembly as enshrined in its Basic Law, which begins:

Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority.

This Open Letter is signed by 122 Jewish artists, writers, teachers, scholars, professors, film makers, photojournalists, sociologists, musicians, composers, curators, scientists, philosophers, and others living in Germany.

First Leaflet of the White Rose

Munich, 1942

Beginning June 27, 1942, a group known as White Rose, led by five students and a professor at the University of Munich, conducted an anonymous leaflet and graffiti campaign calling for active, but non-violent opposition to the Nazi government. On Feb. 18, 1943, their activities ended when the Gestapo arrested its core members, as well as other members and supporters. Many were imprisoned and executed. In total, White Rose authored six leaflets, 15,000 copies of which were distributed, mostly in southern Germany.

The following is the full text of its first leaflet. Its content remains incredibly relevant for today:

Nothing is more dishonorable for a civilized people



Jürgen Wittenstein

Sophie Scholl, a leader of the White Rose, with two other members, her brother Hans (left) and Christoph Probst. She was beheaded for treason, Feb. 22, 1943, seven months after this photo was taken, when she was 21.

than to let itself be “governed” without resistance by an irresponsible clique of rulers devoted to dark instincts. Is it not true that every honest German today is ashamed of his government? And who among us can sense the dimensions of the dishonor that will lie upon us and our children once the veil has fallen from our eyes and the most horrid and extravagant crimes come to light? If German people are already so corrupted and spiritually crushed that they do not raise a hand, frivolously trusting in a questionable faith in the lawful order of history; if they surrender man’s highest principle, that which raises him above all other of God’s creatures, his free will; if they abandon the determination to take decisive action and to turn the wheel of history, and thus subject it to their own rational decision; if they are so devoid of all individuality, have already gone so far along the road to turning into a spiritless and cowardly mass—then they clearly deserve their downfall.

Goethe speaks of the Germans as a tragic people, similar to the Jews or the Greeks, but today it would appear rather as a shallow, spineless herd of followers, robbed of their core with the marrow sucked out of them, who are now just waiting to be hounded to their destruction. So it seems—but it is not so. Through gradual, treacherous, systematic violation, every single person has rather been put into a prison of the mind, which he only realizes after finding himself already in chains. Only a few have recognized the impending doom and their heroic warnings have been rewarded with death. The fate of these persons will be spoken of later.

If everyone waits for his neighbor to take the first