

Jews in Contemporary Europe: Antisemitism and Jewish Identity

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Introduction

In the past two decades there have been two historic watersheds for European Jews: one largely positive, the second far less so. The first kindled hopes that they would develop into a “Third Pillar” of World Jewry; but the second has re-emphasized their vulnerability.

The collapse of the Soviet empire between 1989 and 1991 expanded Jewish rights in Eastern Europe and also enabled them to emigrate. Throughout Europe in the 1990s there was a greater recognition of the Holocaust and on restitution and compensation to its victims. The expansion of the European Union placed European Jews (except those in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus) in an entity committed to recognizing the Shoah and defending human rights. And the 1993 Oslo accords suspended decades of criticism of Israeli policies and offered the prospect of Jewish-Muslim cooperation.

The period after 2000 has created a dramatic setback. The breakdown of Oslo, the outbreak of the Second Intifada, and Israel’s wars in Lebanon and Gaza revived anti-Israel sentiment and set off waves of anti-Jewish violence, intensified by the economic downturn of 2007-8, the rise of radical nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe, and the growing Muslim presence.

The Jews in Europe Today

Europe's Jews are distinctive not only because of their religious, ethnic, and linguistic diversity but also because of their small numbers. Between 1.5 and 2 million are spread over a continent now numbering some 729 million people and representing a precipitous drop from the 9.5 million in 1938 and the 3.5 million in 1950. The largest communities are in France, the UK, Russia, Germany, and Ukraine, but there are Jews in *every* European state, including Macedonia, Slovenia, Andorra, and Albania. Still a highly urbanized population, almost a third of European Jewry resides in Paris, London, and Moscow. These numbers include the significant influx from North Africa and Latin America and the more than 200,000 Jews who migrated westward from the former Soviet Union. Except in Western Europe, Jewish educational and communal institutions are far less well funded and robust than their US and Israeli counterparts; and those in the East are subsidized by foreign benefactors.

There are three distinct generations: the elders, born between 1920 and 1945 in large and prominent Jewish communities who are survivors of communism and fascism in Europe or emigration from former colonies and have linked their Jewishness with justice and human rights; the middle generation, born after World War II and the Holocaust, who have lived on the fault lines of the Cold War and the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the youngest generation who, since 1989, have inhabited an environment marked by a mixture of acceptance and hostility. All three generations share common memories and fears: of discrimination, exclusion, and violence.

The historian Diana Pinto has extolled the widespread phenomenon of "Jewish space," of extraordinary Jewish visibility in Europe's cultural institutions, tourist sites, and academic venues. Others, however, are critical of the high visibility, commercialization, and even vulgarization of Jewish traditions, which, they believe, contribute little to European Jews' safety and civic equality. Günter Grass's recent harsh criticism of Israel underlined the gap between the consciousness of Jews and non-Jews.

Antisemitism

Since 2000 the grim counterpart to the expansion of Jewish space and Europe's preoccupation with the Shoah has been the expansion of Antisemitism. Throughout Europe, Christian churches and media still repeat anti-Jewish slurs, and politicians continue use anti-Jewish rhetoric. In Western Europe, Jews have been victims of physical violence, and in Central and Eastern Europe they are targeted by right-wing politicians as either communists or plutocrats.

."Holocaust fatigue" is now widespread. In the Spring of 2012, on the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, 70% of the Polish people stated that the Jews sought to take advantage of their ancestors' suffering in the Holocaust.

European Antisemitism is fueled by anti-Israel sentiments. Europe since 2000 has again become a surrogate battlefield of the Middle East conflict, and European Jews are highly exposed targets, viewed as accomplices to Israel's alleged crimes. Some recent polls have reported that a majority of Europeans consider Israel a greater threat to world peace than any other country.

The expansion of Muslim Space has contributed to European Antisemitism. There are now some seventeen million Muslims in the countries that comprise the European Union, ranging from recent arrivals to the descendants of migrants a half century ago, and who, over the past ten years, have grown more visible, more politically active, and more numerous. Much of this population not only holds anti-Zionist and pro-Palestinian sentiments kindled by Arab satellite television and Web sites, by sermons in the mosques, and by the local and international Arab press, but also negative feelings towards their Jewish neighbors who appear to exceed them in wealth and political influence. Among the youth, high rates of unemployment, social marginalization, and incendiary messages from abroad, have added to this explosive mixture.

Jewish responses have varied, depending on age, gender, status, means, and country of residence. Some, especially in the older generation, have simply retreated from the public sphere, while others have decided to emigrate. Some hide outward signs of their Jewishness, others display them proudly.

Over the past decade there has been a certain amount of Jewish mobilization, including declarations of solidarity with Israel, public demonstrations, lobbying of their governments, and expanded protests against anti-Israel and Antisemitic media images. The new European Jewish Parliament is an attempt to establish a unified political voice. There has also been a rise of Jewish petitions to the European Court of Human Rights. The vulnerability of European Jewry has become a major concern for the governments of Israel and the United States.

Conclusions

European Jewry is generally viewed in extremes. Outsiders regard them as an endangered people, the inhabitants of a failed civilization, lacking strong leadership, vision, and unity, guided by the chimera of pluralism but doomed to extinction.

European Jews do not deny the dangers, but some emphasize the positive developments within their communities and countries. Although the older generation has

begun to despair over the Jewish future, younger Jews tend to stress the “normality” of their existence, even in places where they are few and dispersed and where their daily thoughts and memories remain separate from their neighbors.