

Antisemitism: Before and After October 7

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IN THE YEARS FOLLOWING SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, THE QUESTION of where one was when one learned of the al-Qaeda terror attacks became a way of talking about something that was difficult to put into words because of the many facets of its horror. Beyond the images of the collapsing Twin Towers, the “Falling Man” became a symbol of the abysmal terror associated with that day—the photograph of a man who, desperate to escape the approaching flames, jumped to his death from the upper part of the World Trade Center.

The attacks in southern Israel on October 7, 2023 are another such event. Its extremity makes it almost impossible to talk about what happened without getting lost in trivializing and inadequate phrases about the suffering inflicted on Israeli society that day. Images like that of 22-year-old Shani Louk remain etched in memory: her lifeless body lying in the back of a pickup truck, head to the ground, legs twisted, surrounded by Hamas men displaying her like a trophy in the Gaza Strip, in front of an audience that cheered and applauded the gruesome parade.

More than a year after the horrors of October 7, it is still impossible to comprehend the full extent of what happened on that day. As Cary Nelson wrote in his essay for this series, we will never be able to grasp its full

scope. In many ways, my own perception since then could be described as a feeling of “the day after”: Trying to get over the initial shock and process the unbelievable, the unbearable, getting at least some idea of the magnitude of all the terrible things that occurred.

On the real “day after,” October 8, there was at least some hope that this time there would be no arguments, no “but’s,” no doubts about how to judge the terror unleashed against Israel. That there would be a broad consensus on how to perceive and judge the bestiality of the acts committed by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and all the individuals who accompanied them out of Gaza and into Israel.

The rude awakening came quickly. While some were still searching for words to capture the worst genocidal rampage against Jews since the Holocaust, others were already busy trying to relativize the horror as much as possible where it could not be made to disappear completely. The most shocking aspect: it was precisely the sexual violence perpetrated on that day that was to be denied, relativized, and minimized by people who like to present themselves as “pro-Palestinian.” One would have thought that at least this aspect would have scandalized and enraged people who consider themselves emancipatory, feminist, leftist, or progressive in any way. They should have been horrified to realize that many of the men who were able to commit these heinous crimes subsequently returned to the very society whose interests their advocates claim to defend.

Instead, countless publications emerged that put in question the reports of massive acts of sexual abuse, torture, mutilation, and murder that were committed during that day. Almost instantly, talk about the so-called “‘mass-rape’ hoax” went viral on social media. An open letter accused the Israeli and U.S. governments and others of “Weaponizing the Issue of Rape.” The letter states that history is “replete with examples of rape charges being wielded by stakeholders in armed conflict to render the ‘enemy’ more monstrous—and thus as deserving of ever-more depraved forms of militarized violence.” The signatories suggest that Israel is doing just that.¹ Even *The Times* in Great Britain, once

1. Open letter to the Israeli and U.S. governments and others weaponizing the issue of rape. <https://stopmanipulatingsexualassault.org/>

considered one of the most prestigious media outlets when it comes to journalistic standards, published an article entitled “Israel says Hamas weaponised rape. Does the evidence add up?,” implying to its readers that the opposite is true.²

SEXUAL GRATIFICATION LINKED TO ANTISEMITISM?

In what follows, I will not deal with the various forms of denial that have been observed since October 7. Rather, my focus will be on the acts of sexual violence that were committed, including those marked by a fury of sadistic torture and mutilation. What do these heinous acts reveal about the mindset of the perpetrators and about the society from which they come? Do the assailants experience some form of sexual pleasure? And in what specific sense is all of this sexual savagery fuelled by anti-semitism? In the course of this article—and regardless of whether there were specific written orders from Hamas superiors—it will become clear that the rape and sexual abuse committed on that day clearly fit into the broader strategy of the Islamist organisation to achieve its goals.

In his article “Longing for Auschwitz,” first published in *Tablet* magazine, Alvin Rosenfeld rightly pointed out that while all the words used after 7 October fall painfully short of capturing the annihilatory fury unleashed on that day, one term in particular was immediately and enduringly evoked: “pogrom.”³ Jewish communities in Europe had experienced waves of violence directed against them from the Middle Ages well into modern times. From the anti-Jewish massacres that accompanied the First Crusade in 1096, to the pogroms during the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348–1351, to the countless acts of violence that followed accusations of blood libel or host desecration, Jews became

2. Catherine Philp and Gabrielle Weiniger, “Israel says Hamas weaponised rape. Does the evidence add up?” In: *The Times*, June 07 2024. <https://www.thetimes.com/magazines/the-times-magazine/article/israel-hamas-rape-investigation-evidence-october-7-6kzphszj>

3. Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “Longing for Auschwitz.” In: *Tablet*, March 04 2024. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/history/articles/longing-for-auschwitz>

“paradigmatic victims of violence.”⁴ Pogroms were even more frequent and systematic in the years between the French Revolution and the Second World War, as David Engel has noted.⁵ Just as Jew-hatred morphed from Christian anti-Judaism into modern antisemitism, so anti-Jewish practice changed its form.⁶ Historians such as Polly Zavadvker discuss the military nature of pogroms in World War I Russia and the role of raping Jewish women.⁷ “Research has for a long time underestimated two things,” as Werner Bergmann points out in his history of pogroms in modern times: “the importance of anti-Jewish violence for the rise of modern antisemitism, and the place that this violence—as opposed to antisemitic ideology—occupies in the prehistory, but also in the course of the Holocaust.”⁸

The cultural, religious, and socio-economic context in which pogroms took place changed considerably over the centuries. But there is a psychological, motivational aspect that has remained: What unites the pogroms of the Middle Ages with those of the modern era is the promise of relaxation of what Sigmund Freud labelled the “renunciation of instinct.” According to him, all ethics,⁹ civilization as a whole is built upon “the non-satisfaction [...] of powerful instincts. This ‘cultural frustration’ dominates the large field of social relationships between human beings. As we already know, it is the cause of the hostility against which

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4. Werner Bergmann, *Tumulte—Excesse—Pogrome. Kollektive Gewalt gegen Juden in Europa 1789–1900*. Göttingen 2020, 11.
 5. David Engel, “What’s in a pogrom? European Jews in the Age of Violence.” In: Jonathan Dekel-Chen et al. (eds), *Anti-Jewish Violence. Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*. Bloomington 2011, 19–37, 26.
 6. Thorsten Fuchshuber, “From Wilhelm Marr to Mavi Marmara. Antisemitism and Anti-Zionism as Forms of Anti-Jewish Action.” In: Alvin H. Rosenfeld (ed.), *Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism: The Dynamics of Delegitimization*. Indiana 2019, 30–52.
 7. Polly Zavadvker, “Pogroms in World War I Russia.” In: Eugene M. Avrutin, Elissa Bemporad (eds.), *Pogroms: A Documentary History*. New York 2021, 108–132.
 8. Bergmann, *Tumulte*, 30.
 9. “Ehtics, however, means restriction of instinctual gratification.” Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*. London 1939, 187. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/v3w64yxt/items?query=spurn>

all civilizations have to struggle.”¹⁰ In this sense, pogroms made it possible to channel this hostility to civilization and its demands, to act it out in ritualized forms. This was all the more so as civilization has historically manifested itself in forms of domination under which most people suffered. Pogroms served as an outlet.

POGROMS AND THE RELAXATION OF THE KILLING TABOO

Historically, pogroms were indeed an opportunity that allowed for a relaxation of drive repression. The collective and public nature of the pogrom provided a justification for the violent acts committed, presenting them not as the satisfaction of individual drives but as a ‘task’ of social importance and civilizational necessity. This social context offered relief from individual feelings of guilt, both with regard to the aggressive and sexual impulses involved.

Although pogroms had a spontaneous element, they were always linked to (Christian) authority, too. In times of crisis and widespread dissatisfaction with their rule, those in power knew how to exploit anti-Jewish sentiment in society. “When the pressure from below became too great, the taboo on killing was relaxed,” as the sociologist Detlev Claussen explains; in this sense, pogroms have to be analysed as a permitted and “ceremonial violation of a prohibition.”¹¹ Where the rulers didn’t openly encourage anti-Jewish violence, they often let it be

10. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930). In: James Strachey et al (eds.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XXI (1927–1931): *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*. London 1961, 57–146, 97. Freud further explains that all forms of social organization are “accompanied by a renunciation of instinctual gratification” and the “recognition of mutual obligations”—“in short the beginnings of morality and law.” *Ibid.*, 132.

11. Detlev Claussen, *Aspekte der Alltagsreligion. Ideologiekritik unter veränderten gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen*. Hannoversche Schriften 3. Frankfurt am Main 2000, 123.

known—or at least suggested—that they would do nothing about it. The individuals who participated in the pogroms received a double satisfaction: they were able to act out their aggressive (and often sexual) antisemitic fantasies, while at the same time they were able to take pride in the fact that they were acting in accordance with the authority which, under “normal” circumstances, would have prohibited and prosecuted these actions as criminal and against the law. “The satisfying aspect of antisemitism lies in its successful combination of rebellion against domination and identification with domination,” as Claussen sums it up.¹² Or, in other words, the individuals who participated in pogroms could claim to “defend” civilization while at the same time they acted out their hostility against it.

Rather than disappearing with the development of modern sovereignty and capitalism, these antisemitic ‘killing feasts’ not only persisted, but became more frequent and systematic. This has much to do with the fact that “European states managed to impose on their subjects a notion of law as a systematic, universal principle of government,”¹³ which in turn was fundamental to the universalisation of commodity exchange. The economic process of commodity exchange “demands that social individuals renounce or at least postpone the fulfilment of their instincts, which they must not shorten by circumventing the killing taboo.”¹⁴

Commodity exchange, a society based on the rule of law, require a renunciation of drive, as do the ethical principles of which Freud spoke: Direct appropriation by force and violence is no longer accepted. As Freud puts it: “If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man’s sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be happy in that civilization. In fact, primitive man

12. Ibid., 47.

13. Engel, “What’s in a pogrom,” 26.

14. Claussen, *Aspekte der Alltagsreligion*, 99.

was better off in knowing no restrictions of instinct.”¹⁵ This shows how forceful Freud considered these instincts to be.

Pogroms were solemn exceptions to the rule (of law); they allowed the internalised, suppressed violence to be released: “renunciation of violence is easier to bear if the score can be settled periodically in blood.”¹⁶ The murder of Jews was always accompanied by an emotional outburst and excitement, which is already expressed in the terrible phrase “pogrom mood”; the pogrom is the genuine expression of an antisemitic festive culture. Traces of this festive character of the killing of Jews have been preserved in various forms in different European countries until today. In the Spanish province of León, for example, the saying “vamos a matar judíos”—“let’s go kill Jews”—is still used to this day when people say that they are going to have a sangria and enjoy themselves.

Werner Bergmann has attempted a “sociology of the pogrom” and addresses its ritual character. According to him, pogroms are forms of ritual behavior concerned with the “purity of the community.” Pogroms are “rituals of violence,” “in which the otherwise valid rules and hierarchies are temporarily suspended or even turned upside down”; the otherwise valid social order is “liquified for a moment.”¹⁷

POGROMS AND THE ROLE OF RAPE

Irina Astashkevich therefore refers to the pogrom as a “carnival of violence.”¹⁸ In her book *Gendered Violence—Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921*, published in 2018, she examines in particular the central role that sexual violence against women assumed during the anti-Jewish pogroms in Ukraine in the years of the civil war between 1917 and 1921. While rape “had been a feature of anti-Jewish violence throughout

15. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, 115.

16. Claussen, *Aspekte der Alltagsreligion*, 123.

17. Bergmann, *Tumulte*, 94.

18. Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence. Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921*. Boston 2018, 18.



Manuil Shekhtman, *Jewish Pogrom*, 1926. Oil on canvas, National Art Museum of Ukraine. Credit: Wikimedia Commons. {{PD-US-expired}}.

Jewish history,” as the historian writes, mass rape became an important part especially during the pogroms of 1919 and “affected, according to very conservative estimates, no less than half of Jewish women in the places where pogroms occurred.”¹⁹ As her colleague Thomas Chopard adds, pogrom rapes were no longer confined to individual sexuality, they were “neither concealed nor expressive of mere personal drive. On the contrary, they constituted a clearly manifested, integral element of anti-Jewish violence, perpetrated with the knowledge or even under the supervision of field officers.”²⁰

In other words: During these pogroms, mass rape became systematic. Furthermore, Astashkevich emphasizes the public nature of these rapes. For those who carried out the pogroms, it was important to act collectively and in front of witnesses. This was for at least two reasons: First, the purpose was to eradicate the emotional and intimate elements of sexuality involved in the crimes—but not sexuality itself—in order to absolve the perpetrators from responsibility and feelings of guilt. Like the entire anti-Jewish pogrom, mass rape was staged as an act of public punishment and often marked the climax of the pogrom. Second, the intention was to maximise the humiliation inflicted on the victims and involve as many people as possible who were watching, both as victims and perpetrators.

According to Astashkevich, it is precisely the fact of turning mass rape into a public spectacle that qualifies the intentions behind it as genocidal. The goal was not only for the perpetrators to demonstrate their power and superiority and publicly destroy the dignity of those they raped, but also to humiliate the entire Jewish community, to inflict a traumatic experience that would be transmitted from generation to generation. Genocidal mass rape “thus aims to promote the social death

19. Ibid., 40.

20. Thomas Chopard, “Sexual Violence during Pogroms: The Civil War in Ukraine as a Laboratory for Anti-Jewish Violence (1917–22).” In: *Ukraina Moderna*, 2020, 29, 190–220, 201, 202.

of the community,” as long as the ultimate goal, its physical extermination, cannot yet be achieved.²¹

In summary, the pogroms were planned and executed with military precision. Public rape, torture, and killing in a riotous atmosphere and systematically organised violence are therefore by no means contradictory here but rather, stand in a relationship of means and ends, with the latter described as genocidal. Historically, a certain spontaneity was indeed a part of the pogrom, but the claim of spontaneity was also always part of the prevailing propaganda. It allowed denial of the responsibility of the ruling power for the atrocities committed. Most importantly, although the pogroms Astashkevich addresses appear to have a limited character as transgressive rituals, they are genocidal in nature. Pogroms always contain the threat, or rather the promise, that the “real work,” its completion, is yet to come.

HAMAS FOLLOWED THE POGROM SCRIPT

Given all this, it is indeed no surprise, that, as Alvin Rosenfeld writes, “for those familiar with Jewish history,” the mass violence of October 7 strongly resembled the pogroms of the early 20th century. Indeed, these are two distinct events in different societies at different times. But Hamas and its allies are also familiar with Jewish history—especially when it comes to the history of the persecution of Jews. According to the *The New York Times*, Yahya Sinwar, the architect of October 7, even prided himself as a “specialist in the Jewish people’s history.”²²

The perpetrators of the earlier massacres closely followed what Irina Astashkevich calls a “pogrom script,” a script that they ultimately transformed into a “vehicle of genocide.”²³ Looking at the pattern of the

21. Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence*, 41.

22. Jo Becker, Adam Sella, “The Hamas Chief and the Israeli Who Saved His Life.” In: *The New York Times*, 26 May 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/26/world/middleeast/hamas-sinwar-israel-doctor-prison-swap.html>

23. Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence*, 20.

actions of October 7, even without written orders from the Hamas leadership, there is reason to believe that the Islamist terrorist organisation followed this script as well: Not only did they commit their crimes publicly and collectively; they did everything they could to record and disseminate the images in order to amplify the horror they created that day.

Moreover, they raped collectively²⁴: they staged their acts as “rape without guilt,” committed not out of individual lust but as legitimate and necessary “punishment.” Antisemites always justify their killings as “self-defense,” and so did Hamas. For example in the words of Ghazi Hamad, a member of its political bureau, in an interview with the Lebanese television program “LBC TV” on October 24, 2023: “We are the victims of the occupation[;] therefore, nobody should blame us for the things we do . . . everything we do is justified.” When asked if ending the “occupation of Palestine” means the “annihilation of Israel,” he answers positively, promising that the whole work is yet to be done: “The Al-Aqsa Flood is just the first time, and there will be a second, a third, a fourth. . . .”²⁵

Hamas’ attacks were designed to exercise and publicly demonstrate absolute, unlimited power over the individual people they tortured and murdered. The aim was to show the Israeli people that Israeli sovereignty cannot be protected or preserved, that the promise of protection made by the Israeli state and its army to its people has been disgraced for all time. Their goals were to traumatise the entire Israeli population, to

24. See for example: Carmit Klar-Chalamish, “Silent Cry—Sexual Violence Crimes on October 7—Special Report by the Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel,” here: chapter “Multiple abusers/gang rape.” Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel, 21 February 2024, 22. <https://hrvoices.org/document/first-report-by-the-association-of-rape-crisis-centers-in-israel-arcci-regarding-the-hamas-attack-on-october-7/>

25. “Hamas Official Ghazi Hamad: ‘We Will Repeat The October 7 Attack, Time And Again, Until Israel Is Annihilated; We Are Victims—Everything We Do Is Justified.’” Memri Special Dispatch No. 10923, 01 November 2023. <https://www.memri.org/reports/hamas-official-ghazi-hamad-we-will-repeat-october-7-attack-time-and-again-until-israel>

inflict a blow from which it would never recover. It appears that they succeeded in accomplishing the first of these goals. As for the second, only time will tell.

SEXUAL PLEASURE AND/OR CRUELTY?

It is obvious that sexual violence and rape on October 7 were not “accidental” in any way, but played an important role in Hamas’ strategy, as they did in the historical pogroms. This still leaves open the question of what *motivated* the perpetrators of that day: how were they *able* to commit such crimes? In an interview with the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, the social psychologist Rolf Pohl pointed out that the sexual violence committed on that day would not have been possible solely “out of pure disgust for the enemy,” “there must be something like lust, which is linked to fear and hatred.” However difficult it may be to accept the idea of attributing anything like “lust” to the atrocities committed on October 7, it is impossible to completely deny the pleasure the perpetrators seem to have experienced.²⁶

In the historical pogroms discussed by Astashkevich, violent mass rape and torture of Jews became a source of satisfaction and entertainment²⁷; and these feelings of pleasure were accompanied by visceral cruelty. For example, in Elisavetgrad in 1919, according to the author, “more and more sadistic rituals were added to the mass rape, as the pogrom violence gained momentum and the energy of the assailants drove the level of violence to previously unwitnessed extremes”: “All over town Jewish women were brutally gang raped, their breasts cut off, and their

26. Interview by Susan Vahabzadeh, “Das ist die moderne Variante der Zurschaustellung von Kriegstrophäen.” In: *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 02 2023. <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/frauenhass-hamas-israel-vergewaltigungen-interview-sozialpsychologe-pohl-1.6297576>

27. Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence*, 75.

abdomens ripped open.”²⁸ Astashkevich underlines that the perpetrators experienced all of this with the greatest pleasure and a constant hunger for more. However, she argues that this unrestrained cruelty “had nothing to do with sexual intercourse as such, but everything with the public celebration of power that is free of restrictions.”²⁹

Klaus Theweleit took a similar stance in his study of violence against women by the “Freikorps” after the First World War, first published in 1977/1978. He argues that in the cases he studied, the act of killing took the place of the sexual act. In an epilogue to a new edition of the book (2019), he once more explains why he sees only non-sexual pleasure that accompanies rape or wartime rape: “Sexual behaviour respects the other person’s body; violence does not. Nor does violence involving the use of the genitals. It therefore does not deserve to be associated with the fact and concept of ‘sexuality.’” Violent behaviour does not become a sexual act just because a penis may be involved, as Theweleit underlines: “This penis is used to exercise violence; it thus leaves the realm of the sexual.”³⁰ In the same vein, he rejects the term “sexualised violence”: “There is no such thing as sexualised violence. Rather, there are bodies that can only live out in the form of acts of violence what is present in happier bodies as ‘sexuality.’ Sexual acts as violence. Their pleasure in it is the pleasure of that violence. There is nothing sexually pleasurable about it.”³¹

While it is understandable and seems like a sane reaction to deny any link between sexual pleasure and violence, it remains an open question if Theweleit’s assumptions are ultimately correct. Unlike Astashkevich and Theweleit, Pohl argues that sexuality cannot be reduced to a mere means of exercising power and violence: “Otherwise, without lust and hatred of women, it would be enough to torture and shoot the victims.”

28. Ibid., 62, 63.

29. Ibid., 75.

30. Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*. Berlin 2019, 1238. The quote is taken from an epilogue written by the author for a new edition of his book in 2019.

31. Ibid., 1239.

He further doubts that, without lust involved, the perpetrators would get an erection. According to him, such an assumption would only reinforce “the classic delusion of manhood” that men can always get an erection, even on command. He argues to the contrary, suggesting that “sexual physiological processes must also be involved.”³²

INDULGING THE FROWNED-UPON DRIVE

Historian Dagmar Herzog, who has done a lot of research into German sexual history before, during, and after National Socialism, also sees things differently. She questions Theweleit’s thesis that fascism and National Socialism were primarily about the fear of the feminine and the fear of physical pleasure. Instead, she argues that, contrary to his own conclusion, the facts he had presented in his book *Male Fantasies* suggest that sexual pleasure and cruelty are by no means incompatible.³³

Similarly, it is relevant to ask not only how antisemitism, misogyny, and hatred of Israel were intertwined on October 7, but also to what extent sexual pleasure played a role in all of this. This leads to psychoanalytical reflections on antisemitism. Many of these studies can be summarised to the effect that the decisive psychological motivation for antisemitism is the defense against feelings of guilt.³⁴ Thus, October 7 would have been accompanied by the unbridled acting out of sexual and aggressive drives, with the public nature and staging of the acts as an act of punishment and resistance, ensuring that the perpetrators did not feel guilty—just as Astashkevich suggests for the historical pogroms.

32. Interview by Susan Vahabzadeh, “Das ist die moderne Variante der Zurschaustellung von Kriegstrophäen.”

33. Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism. Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany*. Princeton 2005, 246.

34. See Hermann Beland, Psychoanalytische Antisemitismustheorien im Vergleich. In: Werner Bergmann, Mona Körte (eds.), *Antisemitismusforschung in den Wissenschaften*. Berlin 2004, 187–218, and Wolfgang Hegener, Antisemitismus—Judentum—Psychoanalyse. Einleitung. In: Wolfgang Hegener. (ed.), *Das unmögliche Erbe. Antisemitismus—Judentum—Psychoanalyse*. Gießen 2006, 7–28.

The psychoanalyst Rudolph M. Loewenstein explained in 1952 that Jews in the psyches of antisemites act not only as representatives of their own repressed drives and desires, as in the case of racism, but also as representatives of the feared, forbidding father. The Jews thus become “the unconscious symbol of the Oedipus complex.”³⁵ The image of the punishing father is split: everything that is frightening about him, that causes feelings of guilt, anger, and hatred, is projected onto the Jews. In this way, the relationship with the father (Sigmund Freud had the father in mind, based on patriarchal family structures) can be kept pure, and the anger and hatred actually felt towards them can be directed at the Jews.

Inner conflicts concerning sexual and aggressive desires, taboos, and prohibitions that threaten psychological stability are thus externalised. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote in “Elements of Anti-Semitism” that the antisemite may “indulge the frowned-upon drive,” but only if the unquestionable aim of the libidinous (sexual) act is to simultaneously eradicate the very drive identified with the Jews.³⁶ This idea may already give some explanation of why rape, mutilation, and murder went hand in hand on October 7. What the two social critics formulated polemically corresponds closely to antisemitic ideas of purity, such as those expressed by Sayyid Qutb, one of the main ideologues of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, on whose Palestinian offshoot Hamas is based: “The Jews liberate sensual desires from their restrictions and destroy the moral foundation on which pure faith is based. They do this in order to drag the faith into the filth that they spread in abundance in this world.”³⁷

35. Rudolph M. Loewenstein, *Psychoanalyse des Antisemitismus*. Frankfurt am Main 1968, 35.

36. Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, “Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment,” in: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford 2002, 115.

37. Sayyid Qutb, “Unser Kampf mit den Juden.” In: *Jungle World*, November 27 2002. <https://jungle.world/artikel/2002/48/unser-kampf-mit-den-juden>

ANTISEMITISM AND NARCISSISTIC FANTASIES

This notion hints at the fundamental function of the antisemitic delusion in the antisemite's psychological makeup: On the one hand, it grants the illusion of being able to control frowned-upon instincts by controlling those onto whom one has projected these instincts; the anger and hatred that come with the suppression of these instincts are directed against the Jews. On the other hand, the fantasised purity of the relationship with the parents also represents the fulfilment of a narcissistic wish: 'fantasies of merging' with the parental figures seem to come true in an imaginary world that now seems free of conflict.³⁸ This sense of what happened also sheds light on reports that some of the Hamas terrorists actually called their own parents to tell them proudly about the deeds they had just committed. Instead of fearing the punitive reaction of their parents, they celebrated an incestuous murder festival with them.

The following is an excerpt from a telephone conversation, published by the *Jerusalem Post*, that one of the October 7 killers had with his parents during his bloody deeds:

"TERRORIST: Hello dad. Dad I am inside Mefalsim. Open your Whats-App right now, and see all the killed. Look at how many I killed with my own hands, your son killed Jews.

FATHER: Allahu Akhbar, Allahu Akhbar. May God protect you.

TERRORIST: This is inside Mefalsim, father. I am talking to you from the phone of a Jew, I killed her and her husband, I killed ten with my own hands.

FATHER: Allahu Akhbar.

38. This seems to be even more so in what the psychoanalyst Mahrokh Charlier labels as "oriental societies": According to her, the Oedipal conflict takes on a different configuration in these societies and the incest taboo is not so much internalized as enforced by the father and the strength of tradition, not least due to the culture of gender segregation. See Mahrokh Charlier, "Eine orientalische Version des Ödipuskomplexes." In: Mahrokh Charlier, *Ost-westliche Grenzgänge. Psychoanalytische Erkundungen kultureller und psychischer Differenzen zwischen "Orient" und "Okzident."* Gießen 2017, 79–101, 83.

TERRORIST: Open your phone and see how many I killed, father. Open your phone, I am calling you on WhatsApp.

FATHER: Crying (unintelligible).

TERRORIST: I am in Mefalsim, father. I killed ten. Ten! Ten with my own bare hands. Their blood is on my hands, let me talk to Mom.

MOTHER: Oh, my son, may God protect you.

TERRORIST: I killed ten all by myself, mother.

FATHER: May God bring you home safely.

TERRORIST: Father, go back to WhatsApp! I want to call you live from Mefalsim.

MOTHER: I wish I was there with you.”³⁹

According to psychoanalyst Werner Bohleber, such ideal-narcissistic fantasies of purity are psycho-dynamically linked to violence and take on apocalyptic proportions. Hatred of everything that “disturbs the desire for unity becomes the companion of this kind of narcissistic self-expansion.”⁴⁰ Bohleber interprets antisemitism as a collectively shared fantasy system, as a “fantasy of an ideal status of the ego, in which a symbiotic relationship with the mother of the early days is illusionarily restored” and the ego is essentially abandoned again: “As the members regressively merge into the group, it becomes an illusory substitute for the first lost object, the mother of the early days.”⁴¹

In his work with radicalized Islamist youths, Bohleber’s French colleague, Fethi Benslama, has made observations that confirm this collectively shared narcissism. According to him, for radical Islamists, the Muslim community also represents an illusory substitute for the original unity with the mother. This feeds the fantasy of “coming from the same body,” which is presented as sacred and desexualized. The constant fear of the destruction of this community gives rise to “phantasms of the invasion of enemies into the collective maternal body . . . in order

39. “‘Your son killed 10 Jews,’ Hamas terrorist tells Gazan parents.” In: *Jerusalem Post*, October 24 2023. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-769989>

40. Werner Bohleber, *Was Psychoanalyse heute leistet*. Stuttgart 2012, 176.

41. *Ibid.*, 204.

to corrupt it and leave a genealogical stain in it in a sexual way,” a stain that is passed down through the generations. “These phantasms of dispossession are among the most violent,” Benslama continues, and “in cases of hostility often lead to cruelty against women.”⁴²

DESTRUCTION OF TABOOED DESIRES

With regard to the atrocities against women, Benslama refers to one of his older texts from 1995, in which he talks about the mass rapes of Bosnian women during the Yugoslavian civil war.⁴³ Benslama points to the fact that the Serbian militias proceeded to sexually assault their victims systematically, unlike rapes observed in other wars. Moreover, their aim was to impregnate the women. He states that it was difficult to understand why the perpetrators impregnated their enemy “if they wanted to exterminate [them]”; and he came to the conclusion that the goal was to implant oneself “as an unassimilable alien in the body of the other”⁴⁴—just as the Serbians had previously fantasized their enemy as a “foreign” part of themselves, a part that had to be destroyed. According to this fantasy, the raped women are supposed to give birth to “strangers” within their own community, thus destroying the enemy’s genealogy.

While we can clearly see a fantasy of purity at work in this case as well, it is obvious that October 7 was different: Unlike the Serbian rapists, the Hamas assailants did not want to impregnate their female victims but to abuse, torture, and kill them. Like the Serbian rapists, they wanted to inflict a destructive defilement on their enemy; they wanted to leave the same “genealogical stain” in Israel that is at the heart of their own fear-laden antisemitic fantasies of purity: they wanted to put into practice what they presumed the Jews intended, and thus inflict a wound on Israeli society that it will suffer from for generations.

42. Fethi Benslama, *Der Übermuslim. Was junge Menschen zur Radikalisierung treibt*. Berlin 2017, 128.

43. Fethi Benslama: « La dépropiation. » In: *Lignes* 1995/1, Nr. 24, 34–61.

44. *Ibid.*, 41.

But at the same time an equally destructive purification was sought. This is why the antisemitic violence committed on October 7 seems to be even more closely linked to sexual motives; it can be understood as a war against the “doctrine of animalistic sexuality,” which Muslim Brotherhood mastermind Qutb agitated against in his pamphlet *Our Struggle with the Jews*. The Supernova festival in particular, where several hundred people were murdered, was the perfect place to project onto the Jews what one wishes for oneself but is not allowed to do. For the perpetrators, this was an ideal opportunity to aggressively live out sexual desires while at the same time making them vanish with the objects they were projected upon; and the festival terrain became an antisemitic-misogynistic battleground against a supposedly Jewish-animalistic sexuality.

In his article “Egoism and the Movement for Freedom,” philosopher Max Horkheimer wrote that it was a “deep erotic resentment” that demanded the death of the representatives of tabooed desires: “They are to be extinguished, if possible in agony, because the meaning of one’s own existence is called into question every moment by theirs.”⁴⁵ That is why even the *manner* in which the women were raped and mutilated on October 7 seems to correspond closely to the perpetrators’ respective antisemitic fantasies, fears, and feelings of hatred. The acts of violence committed during or after the rapes could then also be understood as a demonstration that sexual pleasure, or rather what is considered to be sexual pleasure in a catastrophically deformed way, must be negated at the very moment in which it is experienced. As much as the atrocities perpetrated were about victory over the Jews and their state, the goal was also that by killing the Jewish women, the desires they represented would be erased from the world. That is why their bodies and especially their genitals were destroyed.

45. Max Horkheimer, “Egoismus und Freiheitsbewegung” (1936). In: Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. 4. Alfred Schmidt und Gunzelin Schmid-Noerr (eds.). Frankfurt am Main 1988, 9–88, 77.

RESUME

Do such atrocities still have anything to do with sexual pleasure, a form of pleasure as Rolf Pohl suggests, that is granted precisely by antisemitism? Klaus Theweleit writes that, among the acts of violence he studied, “rape hardly played a role; the acts of murder, on the other hand, were experienced as excessively pleasurable. The ‘pleasure’ in all these cases lies in the enjoyment of the act of killing itself.”⁴⁶ This was at least partially different on October 7. While it was cruelly obvious that the perpetrators took pleasure in murdering and torturing, a specific antisemitic perception of Jewish sexuality and especially Jewish female sexuality and the tabooed desires projected with this perception manifested itself in the rapes committed on that day. It does not seem appropriate, then, to completely abstract from the aspect of sexual desire. And yet we return to the question on how such cruelty could be possible at all.

Perhaps a reference to Theodor W. Adorno will help. He wondered to what extent it is still possible to speak of an individual drive economy with a corresponding pleasure mechanism under conditions of rule by rockets⁴⁷ or mobs—such as Hamas or the Islamic State today—that directly seize the individual and control almost every aspect of its life. He suspected that in this case “the satisfaction of drives is constituted by the collective subject in a strange and distorted way.”⁴⁸ What all the manifestations of pleasure and lust under such conditions have in common, Adorno argued, is that “happiness is no longer to be found in them.”⁴⁹

So perhaps it is precisely this distorted, barbaric form of sexual pleasure, of lust, that has been granted and unleashed by the order of the

46. Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, 1238.

47. That’s how Adorno and Horkheimer called the immediate, though often precarious, rule of political gangs beyond mediating agencies such as the law.

48. Theodor W. Adorno, “Notizen zur neuen Anthropologie.” In: Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel*. Band 2, 1938–1944. Frankfurt am Main 2004, 454.

49. *Ibid.*, 458–459.

Islamist rackets on that day, driven by the antisemitic-projective hatred of individuals for anything reminiscent of individual happiness beyond the rigid rule of the Hamas regime. Acting out aggressive and sexual desires, while at the same time taking revenge on life by murdering Jews, trying to go even beyond the act of killing, transforming their victims into something other than human beings—this is part of the core of the antisemitic delusion as it was put into practice by the slaughterers of October 7.

Nevertheless, it would be ahistorical and, in a specific sense, even dangerously false to qualify as a pogrom what happened on that day. After Auschwitz, the desire to kill Jews remains inextricably linked to the possibility of mass extermination—it was possible once, and so is possible again. What David Engel referred to with regard to the creation of the nation-state, namely that violence turned from “a societal to a governmental enterprise’, carried out not by enraged mobs but by formal, regulated, state-directed command structures,”⁵⁰ applies to a large part to the potential of realizing the antisemitic delusion as well. Auschwitz surpassed every individual anti-Jewish extermination fantasy; moreover, Auschwitz did not depend merely on the psychology of any individual or on some form of spontaneity “but on the politically organized will of the National Socialist rulers.”⁵¹

The precarious power of political gangs like Hamas, semi-state terrorist organizations like Hezbollah, and state rackets like the Islamic Republic of Iran depends solely on the antisemitic promise of annihilation. They have no perspective to offer beyond the murder of Jews and the destruction of Israel. The decisive factor is whether they actually acquire the degree of organization and the practical potential to put their antisemitic *raison d’être* into effect. And it is precisely this that has to be prevented.

50. Engel, “What’s in a pogrom?” 34.

51. Claussen, *Aspekte der Alltagsreligion*, 128.

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