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BY: [ENZO TRAVERSO](#)

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## The Gaza Massacre Is Undermining the Culture of Democracy

Israel's supporters have repeatedly invoked the memory of Nazi genocide to legitimize mass murder of civilians in Gaza. Historian Enzo Traverso warns that the cynical misuse of Holocaust remembrance poses a grave danger to our global democratic culture.



The Israeli flag flutters in the middle of the European and German flags in front of the Reichstag building hosting the Bundestag, the German lower house of parliament, in Berlin, October 12, 2023. (Odd Andersen / AFP via Getty Images)

Those who thought that Orientalism was dead in the global world of the twenty-first century made a big mistake. The basic Orientalist assumptions that [Edward Said](#) analyzed more than forty years ago are visible everywhere.

All of our statesmen have gone on pilgrimage to Tel Aviv to assure Benjamin Netanyahu of their unconditional support for Israel. There is no debate, they tell us, when morality and civilization are at stake. Even now that these traditional assumptions are deeply shaken in Western public opinion by the daily spectacle of famine and the massacre of children, they combine their pleas for moderation and humanitarianism with reaffirmations of Israel's status as a victim that must defend itself.

No one ever mentions the right of the Palestinians to defend themselves against an aggression that has lasted for decades. While Israel obstructs any terrestrial delivery of humanitarian and medical assistance, Western governments (with few exceptions) imperturbably continue to support a genocidal power both financially and militarily.

After October 7, the threshold of tolerance has greatly increased, and the number of children killed under the bombs is no longer counted. Hamas killed 1,200 Israelis, including eight hundred civilians; Tzahal, the Israeli military, has killed at least thirty-three thousand Palestinians to date, including no more than five thousand Hamas fighters.

[Everything is planned](#): the destruction of roads, schools, universities, hospitals, museums, monuments, and even cemeteries erased by bulldozers; the interruption of water, electricity, gas, fuel, internet; the denial of displaced people's access to food and medication; the evacuation of more than 1.5 million of the 2.3 million people living in Gaza to the south of the strip, where they are again bombed; disease and epidemics. Unable to eradicate Hamas, Tzahal started the [elimination](#) of the Palestinian intelligentsia: scholars, doctors, technicians, journalists, intellectuals, and poets.

The UN's International Court of Justice, one of the products of the Western international order, issued a [warning](#) that the Palestinian population of Gaza is being subjected to an organized and relentless slaughter, uprooted and deprived of the most basic conditions of survival. The Israeli war in Gaza is taking on the features of genocide. Orientalism, however, is stronger than the juridical legacy of the Enlightenment.

### *Bastion of Europe*

When Orientalism was born, Jews were part of the West as ungrateful guests, excluded, humiliated, and despised, usually pushed to the margins. Even the most prominent and powerful Jews were stigmatized and considered to be vulgar parvenus. Jews embodied the European critical conscience.

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Today, they have crossed the “color line” and become part of the so-called Judeo-Christian civilization, loved and adulated by those who once despised and persecuted them. In Europe, the fight against antisemitism has become the banner behind which all postfascist and extreme-right movements coalesce, ready to fight against “Islamic barbarism” even before they have shed their old antisemitic prejudices.

In 1896, Israel’s spiritual father Theodor Herzl published the founding text of Zionism, *The State of the Jews*, in which he defined this future state as “a bastion of Europe against Asia, a sentinel of civilization against barbarism.” In 2024, the terms of the question remain substantially unchanged, but Netanyahu is much more respected and widely heard than Herzl was more than a century ago. Herzl begged for the help of some European powers; Netanyahu is not afraid of appearing arrogant and ungrateful to them.

Israel has been violating international law for decades, and today it is perpetrating a genocide in Gaza with weapons provided by the United States and several European countries. These Western powers could stop the war in a few days, but they are unable to deny their support to a corrupt, extreme-right government of war criminals because this government is part of them, so they confine themselves to recommendations and pleas for moderation.

All the major Western media outlets have unreservedly endorsed a Zionist narrative that shamelessly celebrates the history of some and ignores or denies that of others. In Europe and the United States, as Said once noted, Israel is never treated as a state but rather as “an idea or talisman of some sort,” internalized to legitimize the worst abuses in the name of high moral principles.

Decades of military occupation, harassment, and violence thus appear as the self-defense of a threatened state, and Palestinian resistance a manifestation of antisemitic hatred. Reinterpreted from an Orientalist perspective, Jewish history unfolds as one long martyrdom awaiting a well-deserved redemption, and the Palestinians become a people without history.

#### *Reason of State*

Pro-Palestinian students are depicted as rabid antisemites in much of the mainstream media. In several US universities, they have been blacklisted or threatened with sanctions because of their participation in demonstrations against the Gaza genocide. In [Germany](#) and Italy, rallies have been brutally repressed, while the French prime minister [Gabriel Attal](#) announced severe measures against pro-Palestine activists.

The memory of the Holocaust is ritually celebrated as a civil religion in the European Union, and the defense of Israel has become, as Angela Merkel and Olaf Scholz have repeatedly affirmed, the “*Staatsraison*” of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Today, Germany

invokes this memory to justify the massacre of Palestinians in Gaza. After October 7, the country is pervaded with an atmosphere of witch-hunting against any form of solidarity with Palestine.

Yet Germany is only the paroxysmal expression of a broader tendency. This explains why, especially in the United States, many Jews have raised their voices to say, “not in my name.” When the Federal Republic of Germany backs Israel by invoking *Staatsraison*, it implicitly admits the immorality of its policy.

The references to “reason of state” are both curious and revealing as an implicit admission of moral and political ambiguity. As any scholar of political theory knows, this concept reminds one of the dark and hidden sides of political power. Usually identified with Niccolo Machiavelli’s thought, even if the term itself does not appear in his writings, *raison d’état* means the transgression of law in the name of superior imperatives of state security.

It is by invoking *raison d’état* that the secret services of states that have abolished the death penalty plan the execution of terrorists and other people who threaten their social and political order. From Machiavelli to Friedrich Meinecke and Paul Wolfowitz, *raison d’état* alludes to a “state of exception,” the immoral side of a state that transgresses its own laws. Behind *raison d’état* stands not democracy but Guantanamo.

Thus, when the FRG backs Israel by invoking *Staatsraison*, it implicitly admits the immorality of its policy. Today, Germany’s unconditional support to Israel compromises the democratic culture, pedagogy, and memory that had been built over the course of several decades, and particularly after the *Historikerstreit* in the middle of the 1980s.

This policy throws a dark shadow on the Holocaust Memorial that stands in the heart of Berlin, which does not appear anymore as the expression of a tormented historical consciousness and the virtues of remembrance, but rather as an imposing symbol of hypocrisy.

### *The Sanction of Justice*

In 1921, the French historian Marc Bloch wrote an interesting essay on the propagation of false news in wartime. He observed how, at the beginning of World War I, just after the invasion of neutral Belgium, German newspapers published innumerable reports on unbelievable atrocities. “A false news item is always born from collective representations that predate its birth,” Bloch wrote, drawing the following conclusion: “The false news is the mirror where ‘the collective conscience’ contemplates its own features.”

Reading Western newspapers after the Hamas attack of October 7, historians had a curious feeling of *déjà vu*. This time, however, the oldest antisemitic mythologies were suddenly

mobilized against the Palestinians. Bloch stressed that false news and legends had always “filled the life of humanity.” Many historians of inquisition and antisemitism have carefully described the role played by the myth of “ritual murder” from the Middle Ages to late Czarist Russia. The rumor that Jews were killing Christian children to use their blood for ritual purposes was widely spread before carrying out a pogrom.

After October 7, most Western media, including many prestigious and supposedly serious newspapers, published news about pregnant women disemboweled and [children beheaded](#) or put in ovens by Hamas fighters. These [inventions](#) spread by the Israeli army were immediately accepted as evidence — both Joe Biden and Antony Blinken [repeated them](#) in their speeches — whereas their refutation was only whispered at the margins a few weeks later. Myths are performative, as Bloch observed: “The moment an error becomes the cause of bloodshed it is irrevocably established as truth.”

Zionist true believers do not differ very much from Stalinist true believers.

After World War II, many communist Resistance fighters who had been deported to the Nazi camps denied the existence of the Soviet gulags. They had deeply internalized a powerful syllogism: the USSR is a socialist country, socialism means freedom, therefore concentration camps cannot exist there and must be a product of US propaganda.

A similar denial is widespread today among people convinced that Israel, a country risen from the ashes of the Holocaust, cannot perpetrate a genocide. In their eyes, Israel is an authentic democracy and the occupation of Palestinian territories a necessary protection against a vital threat. Believers create their own truths, truths that do not disturb their faith. Zionist true believers do not differ very much from Stalinist true believers.

Western media outlets comfort these prejudices by spreading lies. Orientalism is the breeding ground of myths, denials, and false news. Reversing reality, a paradoxical narrative has thus been drawn up that transforms Israel from oppressor into victim. According to this narrative, Hamas wants to destroy Israel, anti-Zionism is antisemitism and denies Israel’s right to exist, and anti-colonialism has finally revealed its anti-Western, fundamentalist, and antisemitic matrix.

The struggle against antisemitism will be more and more difficult after it has been so ostentatiously misunderstood, disfigured, weaponized, and trivialized. Yes, the risk exists of trivializing the Holocaust itself: a genocidal war waged in the name of Holocaust remembrance can only offend and discredit that memory itself. The memory of the Shoah as a “civil religion” — the ritualized sacralization of human rights, anti-racism, and democracy — will lose all its pedagogical virtues.

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In the past, this “civil religion” has served as a paradigm for building up the memory of other crimes and genocides, from the military dictatorships in Latin America to the Holodomor in Ukraine, right up to the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. If this memory were to be identified with the Star of David worn by an army carrying out genocide, the consequences would be devastating.

For decades, Holocaust memory has been a driving force for anti-racism and anti-colonialism, used to fight against all forms of inequality, exclusion, and discrimination. If this memorial paradigm were to be denatured, we would enter a world where everything is equivalent and words have lost their value. Our conception of democracy, which is not just a system of laws but also a culture, a memory, and a historical legacy, would be weakened. Antisemitism, which is historically declining, would experience a spectacular resurgence.

### *The Force of Desperation*

The Hamas attack of October 7 was atrocious and traumatic. It was intended to be so, and nothing justifies it. But it should be interpreted and not merely deplored, even less mythicized and surrounded with an aura of diabolic atrocity.

There is an old debate on the dialectic between goal and means. If the goal is the liberation of an oppressed people, there are means that are incompatible with such an objective: freedom does not harmonize with killing civilians. However, these incongruous and despicable means were used in the course of a legitimate struggle against an illegal, inhuman, and unacceptable occupation.

October 7 was the extreme outcome of decades of occupation, colonization, oppression, humiliation, and daily harassment. All peaceful protests have been suppressed in blood, the Oslo Accords have always been sabotaged by Israel, and the Palestinian Authority, utterly powerless, acts in the West Bank as the police adjunct to Tzahal. Israel was preparing to “negotiate peace” with the Arab states on the backs of the Palestinians, and its leaders openly acknowledged the goal of further expanding colonies in the West Bank.

Suddenly, Hamas put everything back into play. Its attack revealed the vulnerability of Israel, which could be attacked within its own frontiers. Through Hamas, Palestinians have appeared capable of attacking and not just suffering. Palestinian violence has the force of desperation. It is not a question of sharing that desperation, but it is necessary to understand its roots.

To date, on the contrary, any effort to understand it has been eclipsed by an absolute and unwavering condemnation that was quickly turned into a pretext to legitimize a war against

Palestinian civilians far more lethal than the Hamas attack. This explains the popularity and support for Hamas, which is certainly not reducible to its coercive authority, particularly among young Palestinians of the West Bank.

If terrorism is always unacceptable, that of the oppressed is usually engendered by that of their oppressor, which is far worse.

Murdering and injuring civilians was harmful for the Palestinian cause. The inescapable reprobation of these means of action, however, does not put into question the legitimacy of Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation, a resistance that implies the recourse to arms. Terrorism has frequently been the weapon of the poor in asymmetrical wars. Hamas corresponds well to the classic definition of the “partisan”: an irregular fighter with a strong ideological motivation, rooted in a territory and a population that protects them.

The Israeli army takes prisoners, including teenagers and family members of fighters whose administrative detention can last months or years, while Hamas can only take hostages. Hamas launches rockets, while Israel inflicts “collateral damage” during its military operations. Its terrorism is merely a counterpoint to Israeli state terrorism. If terrorism is always unacceptable, that of the oppressed is usually engendered by that of their oppressor, which is far worse.

Jean Améry wrote that, when he was tortured as a Resistance fighter by the Nazis in the fortress of Breendonck, he wished to give “concrete social form to his dignity by punching a human face,” the face of his oppressor. One of the most difficult tasks, he observed in 1969, consisted in transforming sterile, vengeful violence into liberating, revolutionary violence. His arguments, reflecting on the work of [Frantz Fanon](#), deserve a lengthy quotation:

Freedom and dignity must be attained by way of violence, in order to be freedom and dignity. Again: why? I am not afraid to introduce here the untouchable and abject concept of revenge, which Fanon avoids. Vengeful violence, in contradiction to oppressive violence, creates equality in negativity: in suffering. Repressive violence is a denial of equality and thus of man. Revolutionary violence is eminently *humane*. I know it is difficult to get used to the thought, but it is important to consider it at least in the nonbinding space of speculation. To extend Fanon’s metaphor: the oppressed, the colonized, the concentration camp inmate, perhaps even the Latin American wage slave, *must be able to see the feet of the oppressor* in order to be able to become a human being, and, conversely, in order for the oppressor, who is not human in this role, to become one as well.

*From the River to the Sea*

October 7 and the Gaza war set the seal on the failure of the Oslo Accords. Far from laying the foundation for a lasting peace based on the coexistence of two sovereign states, these agreements were immediately sabotaged by Israel, becoming the premise for colonizing the West Bank, annexing East Jerusalem, and isolating a corrupt and discredited Palestinian Authority.

The two-state hypothesis has become impossible, although in the circumstances of the genocidal war in Gaza, a binational state is hardly imaginable, either.

The failure of the Oslo Accords marks the demise of the two-state project. Still vaguely contemplated by Europeans and Americans — without consulting any Palestinian representatives — for a postwar reassessment of the region, today this essentially means one or two Palestinian Bantustans under Israeli military control. The two-state hypothesis has become impossible, although in the circumstances of the genocidal war in Gaza, a binational state is hardly imaginable, either.

Twenty years ago, Edward Said thought that a binational, secular state capable of guaranteeing its Jewish and Palestinian citizens complete equality of rights was the only possible path to peace. This is the meaning of the slogan today claimed by millions of protesters around the world (including a great number of Jews), “From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” although most mainstream media persist in considering it antisemitic. Of course, the future of Israel-Palestine must be decided by the people who live there. Self-determination, however, should not avoid some historical lessons. Today, a two-state solution could only work through a process of cross-ethnic territorial purges. This would be an irrational solution in a land shared by the same number of Jews and Palestinians.

Even supposing the creation of Palestine as an authentically sovereign state, which is highly improbable, this would not be satisfactory in the long run. A Zionist state beside an Islamic one would be a historical regression that could not provide a home to any dialogue or exchange between cultures, languages, and faiths. As the twentieth-century history of Central Europe and the Balkans tells us, this perspective would result in tragedy.

What is at stake today is not the existence of Israel but the survival of the Palestinian people. Many therefore see a binational state in which Jews and Palestinians would coexist on equal bases as the only solution. Today this option seems impracticable, but if we think in the long term, it appears logical and coherent. In 1945, the idea of building a European Union by gathering together Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands looked odd and



naive. History is full of prejudices that are abandoned and retrospectively appear stupid. Sometimes tragedies serve to open new perspectives.

Twenty years ago, Said asked with concern “where are the Israeli equivalents of Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Athol Fugard, of the white writers in South Africa who spoke out unequivocally and unambiguously against the evils of apartheid?” This silence is equally deafening today, broken by a few isolated voices. But the situation has profoundly changed. Israel has revealed itself to be vulnerable and above all, through its destructive fury, devoid of any moral legitimacy.

The Palestinian cause has become a banner of the Global South and of large swathes of public opinion, especially young people, in both Europe and the United States. What is at stake today is not the existence of Israel but the survival of the Palestinian people. Should the Gaza war end in a second Nakba, it is Israel’s legitimacy that will be permanently compromised. In this case neither American weapons, nor the Western media, nor German *Staatsraison*, nor the misrepresented and reviled memory of the Holocaust will be able to redeem it.

Enzo Traverso teaches at Cornell University. His most recent book is *Revolution: An Intellectual History*.