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The Hamas Pogrom Demonstrates That Zionism Has Failed, Says Israeli Historian Moshe Zimmermann

Friday 5 January 2024, by [ADERET Ofer](#), [ZIMMERMANN Moshe](#) (Date first published: 29 December 2023).

A pioneering Israeli scholar of German history, Prof. Moshe Zimmermann looks back to 1930s Europe in order to understand where Israel is headed

Photo: Zimmermann. Israel's current government, he says, is a "kakistocracy" - meaning rule by the worst citizens. If there were rankings, Netanyahu would be competing for first place with "Nero, Czar Nicholas II or Donald Trump." Credit: Hadas Parush

In the early 1960s, Moshe Zimmermann's mother was summoned for a reprimand by the principal of Ma'aleh High School in Jerusalem. She was asked to explain why her boy, who was a good student, had drawn a likeness of a man in an SS uniform on a table in the school. The fact that both the principal and the mother were proud Yekkes - Jews of German-speaking origin - undoubtedly added to the mutual embarrassment. Not to mention the fact that Moshe's father was the principal of the adjacent primary school.

"My poor mother had to explain what had befallen her jewel," Zimmermann tells Haaretz in an interview marking his 80th birthday. From the distance of years he notes that the background to the incident was the seminal historic event that was then unfolding in Israel: the [trial of Adolf Eichmann](#). "I was riveted by that story, and it was clear to me at that moment that I wanted to be a historian. As a child who grew up in a Yekke home, it was also clear to me that I ought to, and wanted to, deal with the enigma called Germany."

In the decades since then, Zimmermann became a pioneer and shaper of the study of Germany in Israel. Today an emeritus professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and former director of its Richard Koebner Minerva Center for German History, he has written and edited dozens of books and articles on Germany's Jews and their complicated and tragic relationship with their homeland, and has proved that history can also be gleaned from sports and the cinema. In contrast to some of his colleagues in academia, however, Zimmermann also goes out of his way to maintain his image as a public intellectual, one who is not afraid to sound his voice trenchantly and acutely about current events, drawing on his insights as a historian. At the height of his career he found himself in courtrooms on several occasions, fending off lawsuits that were filed against him for statements he had made.

"A historian is supposed to stimulate thought," he observed this month at a conference held in his honor at the Leo Baeck Institute in Jerusalem. "A historian who insists on being neutral, a person of footnotes, and does not provoke, is doing a disservice to the profession."

"When I think about Germany and about German historians who constantly hid behind the

'neutrality' and 'objectivity' of history, I know where that leads," he says. "Those who are colorless, who are neither here nor there, in the end collaborate with what exists. Writing a chronicle is boring. There is no point in telling what happened in Troy, for example, only in order to tell a story. A historian needs to infer from the past about the present."

Many people are [likening October 7 to the Holocaust](#). They call Hamas "Nazis" and view the pogrom that was perpetrated in communities of the south as a modern parallel to the pogroms they perpetrated.

"What happened on October 7 is very similar to the pogroms that were carried out against Jews not only during World War II, and not only by German Nazis, but also by 'good' Lithuanians, Poles and Ukrainians. As a historian, the important thing is not for me to say 'A pogrom happened here,' but to infer from that the implications for the Zionist movement. The moment a pogrom against Jews takes place in the Jewish state, the Zionist state, both the state and Zionism are testifying to their own failure. Because the idea underlying the establishment of a Zionist state was to prevent a situation like that in which Jews in the Diaspora find themselves.

"Here is what we need to think about: How did it come about that Zionism disappointed and that the Zionist state - or its prophets, from Herzl onward - is incapable of meeting the goals it set for itself? The event of October 7, a pogrom on the soil of Israel, in the State of Israel, is a turning point in our assessment of the success of Zionism, and a turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"I look at what happened," he continues, "and I say: The Zionist solution is not [really] a solution. We are arriving at a situation in which the Jewish people who live in Zion live in a condition of total insecurity, and not for the first time. Beyond this, we need to take into account that Israel is causing a reduction in the security of Diaspora Jewry, instead of the opposite. So this Zionist solution is very deficient, and we need to examine what caused this deficiency."

And what is the cause?

"We need to understand that there are different solutions for Jewish existence, and to accept that the Jews have the right to choose. Emancipation and Jewish nationhood can exist side by side. Some say that emancipation is enough for us, that we can manage the risks of life in the Diaspora. Others say they want a national solution. The very fact that the two solutions are perceived as mutually competitive is already [evidence of] the incipient failure of the nationhood solution."

To which we need to add the situation at which Jewish nationalism in Israel has arrived.

"Jewish nationhood in the Land of Israel went through a process of nationalism, racialism and ethnocentrism. It created a situation of being unable to reach a modus vivendi with the neighboring world. I look with longing at the early Zionists or at those who were in Brit Shalom [1920s intellectuals in Mandatory Palestine who sought a binational state] and who thought about something different, not about eternal war. The moment you think about eternal war, you expose yourself to the same weaknesses we saw on October 7 in the cruelest form."

So where do we go from here?

"It's clear that the two-state solution needs to be the logical result, even though at the moment it looks hopeless and totally absurd. The alternative is either for us to execute a Nazi-like act against the Palestinians, or for the Palestinians to execute a Nazi act against us, meaning an attempt to destroy [Israel] - an apocalyptic 'solution' of Armageddon.

"Eight years ago, [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu replied to the question of whether we are

always to live by the sword with 'Yes.' That is an appalling answer. There are people who would say that there is another alternative: We can expel them from the country, or the Palestinians can live under Israeli rule. But those are solutions that every sensible person would consider unrealistic, and reject. The two-state solution with a completely new conception of 'state' should be the aspiration."

A pro-Palestinian demonstration held outside the White House last month. "It's clear that the two-state solution needs to be the logical result, even though at the moment it looks hopeless and totally absurd." Credit: Jose Luis Magana /AP

Are you referring to the establishment of a federation?

"Two states, alongside each other, within a new, modern, framework. When I look at Europe, I find the light at the end of the tunnel, no matter the current plight of the European Union. It's a situation in which countries were willing to give up part of their sovereignty for the benefit of a superstructure, without giving up the old state.

"Two systems, one next to the other, in order to obviate a situation of the sort we were familiar with until World War II," Zimmermann adds. "We need to evoke the picture of Europe when we think about the Middle East, despite the great challenge of Ukraine. Some people will burst out laughing at that: 'Come off it, we're not Switzerland.' But we need to remember that the Europeans were caught up in harsh confrontations and in enmities that were thought to be eternal, yet they nevertheless succeeded in creating a European union. If it's possible there, it's also possible here. I am not being delusional."

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Moshe Zimmermann

Isn't that a utopian scenario?

"We know which forces are interfering, but the term 'utopian' says that I am inventing a story that seems unconnected with reality. That is not the case. A basis exists. We work with and cooperate with Palestinians all the time. Even the settlers take pride in the fact that the people who build their homes come from there. In other words, they are able to find a common language with them at some level. Work needs to be done on the religious component. In Europe, it has been much weakened in the modern era. In the Muslim and Jewish worlds, religion has become influential and fundamentalist, and we need to work on secularizing or liberalizing it. That is dependent on education for coexistence, instead of toward confrontation and hatred. This needs to be done with persistence, and with speed, because otherwise the solution I am apprehensive about - destruction, liquidation and expulsion - will become real. And that is something we cannot accept."

As events unfold rapidly, it's possible to forget that up until October 7 we were occupied with a different event bearing historical attributes: the legislative-regime coup. Fear for the future of Israeli democracy also led many to draw on comparisons from the Nazi period.

“As a researcher of Germany, I have tended for years to refer to the Weimar Republic, in which democracy was endangered by authoritarian, nationalist, racist and revisionist forces. For years we tried to determine where on the chronological calendar of the Weimar Republic we in Israel were situated. Now, in 2023 we are wondering: Are there not features of the regime in Israel that are familiar from German history after 1933? But the Israeli case of 2023 can be likened to every point in history in which the government was a kakistocracy – a term meaning ‘government by the worst citizens’ – be it Nero, Czar Nicholas II or Donald Trump. If there were a competition, the present Israeli government would be fighting for a place at the top of the list.”

Where do you discern the danger?

“The term ‘putsch from above’ is appropriate to describe the situation. When the separation of powers is in danger, the independence of the judiciary is in danger and the rights of the individual are in danger, it’s clear that the fears of the advocates of liberal democracy are definitely justified. When the majority operates according to fundamentalist religious values or racist principles, the fears are a matter of certainty. The tyranny of the majority, together with rule over another people by an apartheid-like, racist system, is a terrible mixture, certainly if we look over our shoulder to history in other places.”

Zimmermann is currently engaged in a new research project – the study of “nations that went mad” – which sets out to explain “how nations deviate from their course and become extreme,” he says. “The occupation with Germany, which went mad in 1933, until it decreed its self-destruction, and the occupation with astonishing developments in Jewish and Israeli society, led me to deal with a trans-human phenomenon: societies that at a certain point went off-course, or simply ‘went mad,’” Zimmermann explains. “I am examining how societies arrive at a situation in which a sensible outside observer can think to himself: How could these societies, learned and rational, be swept up into collective acts of madness?”

“I am looking to locate the spot at which societies fly off-course and find themselves on a dangerous track. It’s important to locate this point in order to cope with such situations in the present.”

What do societies in which this happens have in common?

“It happens in societies that are unwilling to come to terms with insoluble situations, or in societies that are dogmatic in the search for a solution. My guide is the story of the ‘Final Solution.’ After the Nazis made certain assumptions – that there was a problem that needed to be solved – within the external conditions that were created, they had to move from phase to phase until that stage: the Holocaust. It happened without being planned in advance.”

Who is in your sights? Is Israel also on the list?

“The United States during the periods of [Sen. Joseph] McCarthy and of Trump, the Soviet Union in the period of the public trials [under Stalin], Mao’s China and also societies in the Muslim world. Israel went mad starting in 1967 when the idea of biblical territory began to dominate it politically. Romanticism is a dangerous tendency, as we saw in 19th-century Europe. The story of ‘Greater Israel’ and the settlements is the story of a society that is becoming a hostage to biblical romanticism that is sweeping the whole society to perdition. And that is the problem: Once you have embarked on the path, it’s difficult to leave it without undergoing another catastrophe. That

happened to Germany in 1945 in the most drastic way. We obviously do not want a catastrophe like that.”

Government ministers in the Knesset this past July, celebrating passage of a bill weakening the Supreme Court. Credit: Amir Cohen / Reuters

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Moshe Zimmermann was born in Jerusalem on December 25, 1943. His parents had arrived in Mandatory Palestine five years earlier from Hamburg. The family of his mother, Hannah Heckscher, of Sephardic Portuguese ancestry, lived in the northern German city for some 400 years. Some branches of the family tree converted to Christianity. One ancestor became a minister in the German government in 1848, others immigrated to different destinations in northern Europe. Zimmermann’s mother left Germany in 1937, first for England, to which her brother had also fled, and afterward, with the aid of a capital certificate – a privilege reserved for affluent families – immigrated to Palestine.

His father, Karl (later Akiva) Zimmermann, was also born in Hamburg, but the family’s origins lay in Eastern Europe and they were thus viewed as Ostjuden (“Jews from the East”). “My father wanted to be a German writer, but in 1933 he could not enter university,” Zimmermann says. As a substitute, he attended a seminary for Jewish teachers and taught in a Jewish school in Stuttgart. He too immigrated to Palestine in 1938, with a Mandatory worker’s certificate, which he obtained by learning carpentry.

Moshe was the first child born in the family – he has three siblings: two sisters and a brother. All of them were educated in the state-religious track and went on to become liberals and left-wingers, “according to the Israeli categories,” Zimmermann says. In Israel, his father was the principal of the Ma’aleh primary school, which Moshe attended. “The whole elite of the National Religious Party [NRP] went there and received a liberal state-religious education: the children of [the philosopher and scientist] Yeshayahu Leibowitz and the children of [NRP] cabinet ministers Burg – with the exception of Avrum – [Haim Moshe] Shapira and [Zorach] Warhaftig. Some in my class became settlers, including a rabbi in Hebron, and others, like me, are on the left side of the map. A classmate of mine was Herzl Halevi, whose nephew is the army chief of staff [Herzi Halevi, who is named for his uncle, who died in the Six-Day War]. Two years below me were the writer Haim Be’er and the [late] journalist Amnon Dankner.”

What is your first childhood memory?

“For a historian, the term ‘memory’ is very problematic. The first photograph in my possession that is relevant for me is of a boy standing on a balcony on King George V Street in Jerusalem next to [what became the] Israeli flag. The date is May 8 or 9, 1945. With the aid of the photograph, I can still remember the celebration that took place to signify Germany’s defeat in World War II.” Later memories are related to the War of Independence. They revolve around “a boy going to kindergarten who has to worry about a shell falling or a sniper operating from the Old City.”

He lived adjacent to the first Knesset building, on King George Street, in the city center, and followed Israel’s unfolding history from that same home balcony. “I remember the demonstrations against the Reparations Agreement [with Germany] and the attempt to assassinate MKs and [bring down] the government. I remember the major politicians who scurried about in front of our home.”

Zimmermann left Jerusalem when he was in his 50s and lives today in Kiryat Ono, east of Tel Aviv, with his partner. His only child, Ariel Zimmermann, is a judge in Tel Aviv District Court. “Today’s

Jerusalem is alien to me," he says. "My Jerusalem is the western part. The eastern part is not mine to this day. I don't have a connection to it."

He recalls that he was a "good student, but some were better than I was." In history he remembers once receiving a grade of 8.5, "which is the last grade before the one that's given to God." At 18 the army declined to draft him because he was too thin. He took advantage of the time to embark on undergraduate studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Subsequently, after gaining some weight, he was drafted and was given a singular assignment. "I was in charge of the libraries and the publications of the judge advocate general's unit," he says. "I don't have 'falafels' [slang for epaulettes] on my shoulders. It's not the kind of service you brag about, but from my point of view, it was very beneficial."

What did you learn there?

"Everything about public international law and the problems the military prosecution had with that. The judge advocate general at the time was Meir Shamgar [later the president of the Supreme Court]. During the Six-Day War, in which I did reserve duty, my assignment was to provide military prosecutors with the 'security toolbox.' We knew very well, in advance, that we were organizing for a situation of occupation, and a manual was prepared for the staff about how to comport themselves according to international law."

The materials Zimmermann is referring to, aka "Shamgar's toolboxes," included texts about the laws of war, international conventions, legal history and relevant drafts of legislation.

The two-state solution needs to be the logical result... The alternative is either for us to execute a Nazi-like act against the Palestinians, or for the Palestinians to execute a Nazi act against us.

Zimmermann resumed his studies after his army service; one of his teachers was the renowned historian Jacob Talmon. He wrote his doctoral dissertation in Jerusalem and Hamburg in the 1970s, on the subject of the connection between German nationhood and Jewish emancipation. "It was clear to me that German nationhood was very important for Germany's Jews, because it was the pre-national reality of separate German entities that blocked their way to equality of rights. But that connection was unstable. The Jews became national-oriented Germans, and the German nationalists said, 'We don't want them,' and invented the new antisemitism. Before, they hated the Jews because they were different; now they hated them because they were trying to be similar."

What does the German antisemitism of that period have in common with the present-day antisemitism on campuses in the United States and on the streets of some European cities?

"In the meantime, the State of Israel was created, which became a platform for antisemitic attacks. I am not saying that there is antisemitism because of Israel. Heaven forbid. Antisemitism exists because of a legacy of prejudices. But the platform that's called Israel allows antisemites to express

themselves not in the old way of 'Jews have crooked noses,' but to speak about 'Israelis' - who [just happen to be] 'Jews.' That takes us back to the most relevant question today: How can one distinguish between references to Israel that are antisemitic and those that aren't? That requires a great deal of differentiation. And then you say: When there are stereotypes, beliefs and antisemitic intentions behind criticism of Israel and its policy, we are in the realm of antisemitism."

As far as Israel's leaders are concerned, every critique of the government is antisemitic, isn't it?

"That's the catch. Israel is aware of this difficulty and is abusing that knowledge. Official Israel makes sure to interpret every criticism of this sort as antisemitism. Because Israel dared, with its effrontery, to present itself as the exclusive representative of Judaism and of the Jewish people, it is bringing about a situation in which whoever attacks Israel can make use of the same Israeli arrogance that identifies Jews with Israel, in order to speak in condemnation of Jews when they speak about condemnation of Israel.

"The result is that pressure is created from both sides. From the Israeli side, every criticism of us is antisemitism; and from the antisemitic side, everything Israel does is Jewish. That is the thin rope on which we walk all the time. And because it is so thin, there is usually a fall from one side of it or the other, and so this argument is mostly not useful."

Moshe Zimmermann. Credit: Hadas Parush

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Zimmermann's critique of nationalist extremism in Israel has landed him in court several times, after he pointed out similarities he observed between Nazi Germany and phenomena that occur in Israel.

"I have suffered personally from the self-righteous approach of 'There can be no comparison.' My attempt to draw a comparison between a particular element in the Third Reich and what is happening here became the foundation for a judicial campaign against me. And it was very difficult to explain to judges - though in the end it succeeded - what the role of the historian is, why these comparisons are appropriate and why, also as a Jew, one must always make comparisons," he says. "Whoever, like me, received a state-religious education, learned virtues that the Torah speaks of - *kal vehomer* [roughly, all the more so], *gzeira shava* [a parallel between]. That means you make a comparison and from it you reach a conclusion."

In 1995, half a year before the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, Zimmermann was at the center of an affair that caused a public furor. A local newspaper belonging to from the Yedioth Communications Group interviewed him and titled the resulting article, "Children of Hebron settlers are exactly like Hitler Youth." Zimmermann was quoted as saying, "There is a whole segment of Israeli society that I unhesitatingly assert is a copy of Nazism. Look at the children in Hebron, they are exactly like Hitler Youth... From the age of zero their head is stuffed with 'bad Arabs,' antisemitism, how everyone is against us. They're transformed into paranoids from a master race, exactly like Hitler Youth." In the interview, Zimmermann also drew a comparison between "Mein Kampf" and the Bible as books from which an extreme ideology could be derived.

Zimmermann maintained that his words had been taken out of context, and set forth his version in an article he published in Haaretz. "When the question is asked, in reaction to the terrible things children from Hebron said on the anniversary of the death of Baruch Goldstein [perpetrator of the 1994 massacre of 29 Muslim worshippers in the Tomb of the Patriarchs there], as to whether there is a place for comparing their views to what we encountered in the study of National Socialism, we need to take seriously the comparison as the grounds for a reply.

"And the positive reply, however grave it sounds, has a basis. So too in regard to another comparison that was discussed in angry tones. The allegation was made that publishing chapters from 'Mein Kampf' in Hebrew, for teaching purposes, is liable to have a detrimental effect on readers in Israel. To which I responded that in Israel, as differentiated from the countries of Europe, racist, right-wing extremism is nourished also from the use of the Bible, and not 'Mein Kampf.' However, are we to therefore ban dissemination of the Bible in Israel?" Concluding the article, Zimmermann wrote, "Precisely because I am knowledgeable about the history of Nazism, I can warn about the harmful potential that is latent in every society."

That prompted some politicians to call on the attorney general to launch an investigation of Zimmermann on suspicion of incitement and insurrection. MKs from the NRP termed him an "Israel-hating paranoiac" and described what he had said as "shocking incitement that could aid Israel haters and Holocaust deniers." Lecturers at the Hebrew University urged the institution to be rid of him, and Haaretz columnist Dan Margalit wondered, "If a Jewish professor in Jerusalem talks about Bible study in Israel in the same comparative context as inculcation of Hitler's 'Mein Kampf,' what is left for Germans to repent about?"

Three defamation suits were filed against Zimmermann - all of which were ultimately unsuccessful. He also recruited the Nazi era in his defense, when he wrote in Haaretz, "Many like to quote Heinrich Heine's dictum, 'Where books are burned, people too will ultimately be burned.' This has a prelude: Where people question legal free speech, they will ultimately burn books. On May 10, 1933, that happened in Nazi Germany. I wonder: Will that be recommended now by those who wish to eject me from the university because of my opinions? To burn the books I have written, or the lectures I gave? There will be a lot of work here, because it's not just my academic studies. Every year, tens of thousands of students learn from textbooks that I took part in writing. Will they too be burned at the stake?"

You claimed that what you said about the Hebron settlers was taken out of context. What did you actually say, which you continue to stand by?

"I gave an interview in which I explained that behavior of the sort that characterized the Reich is found among us as well. I spoke about a prominent case that gives rise to a comparison between the education of children in Hebron and the education of the Hitler-Jugend. Or, if I look at [Meir] Kahane, who disseminated a leaflet and introduced 'Kosher Daughter of Israel' legislation - stipulating that Jewish women need to be protected by the law from having sexual contact with non-Jews - we are in the same school as National Socialism. I am a historian. I am not doing this in order to vilify or to make headlines, but in order to learn from history. By analytical methods, I try to understand what can improve and benefit our society in the present and the future."

You paid a price.

"It didn't give me much satisfaction to sit in court. It cost a lot of time and money and hurt my public image - people consider you an Israel-hater. Even in the period before the social media, the post office and the telephone were working. I got my portion in very large doses. I saw the scale of hatred and misunderstanding. People claimed I was an SS man only because I explained to them that Kahanism contains the same elements you find in Nazism.

"But as a historian, it was my duty. And the more time that passes, what was written about me in Wikipedia as a denigration, becomes the Balaam-like example of 'came to curse, left by blessing' [from Numbers 24]. Because of what I was quoted as saying, which wasn't accurate, settlers and their supporters took me to court three times, and in each case the defamation suit was rejected. What's interesting is who those people were. Rehavam Ze'evi, who later became a cabinet minister,

a few parents from Hebron, who were joined by Mrs. Orit Strock [currently a cabinet minister from the Religious Zionism party] and all kinds of others. In retrospect I can say that they proved that what I maintained is right: that there is place to compare certain elements of Israel's behavior with what I am familiar with from German history after 1932 as well."

Itamar Ben-Gvir distributing copies of a book by Meir Kahane outside of a Jerusalem high school, in 2000. Credit: Noga Raviv

You aren't the first or the last to draw that comparison. Prof. Leibowitz spoke of "Judeo-Nazis" before you, and [Yair Golan](#), when he was deputy army chief of staff, spoke after you about similar "processes."

"I spoke in a period when the right was afraid of the left. Today the Israeli right rules with a high hand. It's the consensus. If you examine what I said then, the warning was well-grounded. What I said at that time is proving itself today, and the matter should have been dealt with already then."

The story of 'Greater Israel' and the settlements is the story of a society that is becoming a hostage to biblical romanticism that is sweeping the whole society to perdition. Once you have embarked on the path, it's difficult to leave it.

Moshe Zimmermann

A few months later, in October 1995, the late journalist Amnon Dankner, speaking on the television program "Popolitika," said in reference to Itamar Ben-Gvir (at the time a 19-year-old far-right activist belonging to the Kach party), "One is permitted to defend oneself against little Itamar the Nazi," and told the man who is today a government minister, "Shut your mouth, dirty Nazi." Ben-Gvir sued him. This time Zimmermann was involved in the trial behind the scenes. "I had to prepare a professional opinion about whether the doctrine espoused by Ben-Gvir resembles Nazism." The court affirmed the defamation charge, but ruled that Dankner would pay compensation of just one shekel.

In another lawsuit, which Zimmermann filed against Haaretz and against a former student of his, he lost. Zimmermann maintained that an article the student published in the paper libeled him by claiming that he compared Israel to Nazis while Germany supports him financially. The court rejected the suit, stating, "It is inconceivable that a professor, as a public personality, can publish his controversial opinions, which include a comparison between Hebron youth and Hitlerite youth, but in contrast, will refuse to accept criticism of his views." Zimmermann says today that he regrets that lawsuit.

Back to 1995. Two months before Rabin's assassination, Zimmermann published an article in Haaretz that today reads like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Under the heading "Weimar writing on a Jerusalem wall," he wrote, "The history of the Weimar Republic, a clear-cut test case of the collapse of democracy in the 20th century, appears more relevant than ever." He warned against the way in

which “the enemies of democracy are exploiting its operating rules without the democratic regime being able to defend itself properly,” adding, “One of the paradoxes of democracy is that its dismantlement is not felt on the spot.”

Warning against the prospect of political assassination, he noted, “Those who are familiar with the history of Weimar – that of Germany on the way to the Third Reich – knows that the assassination of citizens, police officers and statesmen who represented the republic, by far-right extremists, threatened democracy more than a decade before the change of government.” Citing the assassination of the German-Jewish Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau in 1922 by right-wing extremists, he observed that this is “often considered the beginning of the end of German democracy then” – and linked that situation with the Israeli reality on what would turn out to be the eve of the Rabin assassination.

That was 28 years ago. Can we say that you were right?

“I wrote then that a political killing was looming. Anyone who was alert, as I was then, to the comparison between the Weimar case and the State of Israel, knew the direction in which things were developing.”

On the other hand, there are now left-wingers who say they have “sobered up” from their naive belief that peace with the Palestinians was possible. The right is delighted. They say they demanded that the “Oslo criminals” be tried back in real time.

“Talk of the ‘Oslo criminals’ recalls the ‘November criminals’ of November 1918 – the month in which the Germans signed the armistice agreement. At that time, the German right wing branded those people, who we know in hindsight did the right thing, as criminals. And the Israeli right is branding the people who paved the way to Oslo as criminals. I am not one of those who ‘sobered up.’ The great prospect for which we strove was Oslo. The two sides, one alongside the other, with mutual acceptance.

“I am not naïve. I know that among the Palestinian population there was a large enough force that was in favor of Greater Palestine, just as on the Israeli side there are the advocates of Greater Israel. The crime is the collaboration between the extremists on this side and the other. Accordingly, there is no place for ‘disillusionment’ about Oslo. The disappearing Israeli left is attesting to the fact that it has lost its confidence when it uses the same linguistic coinages as the right.”

In Germany, too, some are saying they are “disillusioned” with the policies of the former chancellor, Angela Merkel, who opened the gates to immigration and let some people into Germany who don’t wish to adopt German values. Just recently there were reports of raids on terrorist properties, including of Hamas, in Germany. And against this background the far right is gaining strength.

“The extreme-right, populist party entered the Bundestag in 2017. What had been considered impossible became reality. Six years later, that party [the AfD – Alternative for Germany] is only getting stronger. The policy of all the traditional parties – not to cooperate with it – will become even more complicated. Will the ‘firewall’ between the establishment parties and this party be breached? The concern is that in the end people will say there is no other choice, we need to cooperate with them.

Members of the far-right AfD take a selfie in the Bavarian parliament this past October. Credit: Matthias Balk/DPA

“From that moment we know how the disaster will occur, because we Israelis have excellent experience. Netanyahu needed [Ben-Gvir’s party] Otzma Yehudit for parliamentary reasons at first,

and then as ministers. Judging by this model, we should be apprehensive that the flood will arrive in Germany, too.

"The difference is that the Germans understand well what the Third Reich was and they have a defensive shield in the form of a constitution. But the case of Germany can't be isolated from the European situation. So we need to be concerned about what is happening in Germany. I also find it very worrisome that ties exist between the populist right there and the settler right in Israel. A kind of fraternal alliance based on enmity for Muslims."

Let's talk about Islam in Germany. The authorities there are intervening to prevent Muslim demonstrators from denying Israel's right to exist, and this after Merkel said in the past that "Islam has become part of Germany."

"There are about five million Muslims in Germany. You can't say that they don't belong while you agree that Jews belong to Germany when there are no more than 200,000 of them there. The demand being made of those Muslims is to adapt themselves to the German constitution. Anyone who disagrees with the constitution is ostracized. Every time Israel attacks Gaza, there are Muslim elements in Germany, some of them well instructed by the Turkish government and indirectly also by Iran, who speak out against Israel and use antisemitic slogans.

"There are antisemitic elements in the Muslim world, but in the past it displayed a more tolerant attitude toward Jews than the Christian world. In the wake of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the use of European antisemitic slogans by the Muslim world emerged as a weapon against the Jewish state."

You maintain that Israel has also contributed to this development.

"Israel does everything to place weapons in the hands of its enemies. The moment the Israeli government includes outright racists who talk about 'Jewish power,' 'erasing the Arabs' or annexation, you are serving those forces. When we act very cruelly against Gaza - and I of course remember the cruelty of October 7 - it's clear that people who feel that they identify ethnically or religiously with the group that is suffering will take to the streets.

"And that gives rise to another paradox: They are serving their enemy. The German right, which constantly talks about the mistake of accepting Muslim elements as refugees in Germany, says: 'We were right in 2015 when we said that they must not be admitted. The Muslims are showing us that they are against the Jews, against the constitution, and we, as a result, are in favor of the Jews.' I hope that readers will be aware of the ironic note: Suddenly the populist German right is on the side of the Jews.

"That is a tactical achievement, of course," Zimmerman continues. "Public opinion polls show that it's those who vote for this right who display the highest level of antisemitism. Most Muslims in Germany have undergone an integration process, and don't have the struggle against Israel on their agenda. But those elements who do so are now receiving a voice, in the social media. So there is a dual danger. On the one hand, that the Muslim element in Germany will acquire a clear antisemitic hue; and on the other hand, that the German right will be reinforced by this situation - and after all, we don't want that."

During your years in academia you also dealt with the attempt by the Education Ministry to shape the education of Israel's children in history. What did you want to see included in the curriculum in Israel?

"That a multicultural way of life is preferable to a culture war, and that an attempt at dialogue is

preferable to war. That Jewish nationalism arose as part of the national movements of Europe. That antisemitism is a prejudice, hatred between societies. That other genocides have also taken place [beside the Holocaust]. They said, 'Heaven forbid, it was something exceptional, different, something else entirely, we are special, there's no comparison.'"

What happened to the program you formulated and proposed?

"It was attacked by political elements and became a dead letter."

To conclude, Zimmermann wishes to return to his favorite arena: comparing between then and now. "When I look at the Israeli propaganda system - 'Together we will win' - it's hard for me not to remember the spirit of steadfastness in a war I am familiar with from German history. You're in a tough situation, and you know that you somehow have to cultivate this spirit of 'We will hang in there.' That's the type of thing that generates misery. The comparison is of course not one to one, but in Germany in 1944 slogans appeared such as, 'Our walls are broken but our hearts are firm.' Today you see, 'Together we will win' in every corner of the country. It's an attempt to generate unconditional support, which prevents a discussion about the goals of the war and the logic of the war.

"You have to be very careful about the work of propaganda," Zimmermann sums up. "Anyone who has studied German history and watched Goebbels' career, sees what a dangerous instrument propaganda is - one that can lead to a loss of the way."

Ofer Aderet

P.S.

• HAARETZ. Dec 29, 2023:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-12-29/ty-article-magazine/.highlight/the-hamas-pogrom-demonstrates-that-zionism-has-failed-says-historian-moshe-zimmermann/0000018c-b225-d45c-a98e-bb6d24480000>