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Essay on the Hamas attack and the atrocity images it generated

The Impossibility of Simply Moving On

Its genocidal message with direct links to the Holocaust distinguishes October 7 from previous attacks on Israel.

On October 7, 2023, something that had previously symbolized Jewish suffering outside Israel left its indelible mark on the Israeli experience: Images of unfettered and degrading atrocities and terms such as “pogrom” or “massacre”, which still fell far short of capturing the violence inflicted and suffering endured that day. Many of the country’s inhabitants awoke that morning to blaring sirens. It quickly became clear that this attack launched from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip was unlike previous clashes.

Next, news spread of terrorists having penetrated the border fence equipped with cutting-edge security technology. Were they potential suicide bombers, lone wolves like those who had repeatedly assailed Israel in random terrorist attacks from the mid-1990s? It quickly emerged that this time, hundreds of terrorists, followed by more, predominantly male, Palestinians from Gaza were entering Israel and not only overrunning frighteningly ill-equipped Israeli military posts taken completely by surprise, but also ravaging numerous villages and a music festival.

Acting with military precision and determination, the terrorists neutralized security installations, combed through streets, raided houses, destroying, looting and setting fires. They not only killed as many people as possible, including Jews, Arabs, Bedouins and Thai and Nepalese workers, but also committed atrocities that previously would have defied the imagination, at least in this conflict, atrocities Israeli historian Dan Diner described as an “orgy of violence”. This violence, whose impact was intensified with the help of body cams, live streams and a veritable flood of humiliating selfies and videos, spoke an unmistakable language. This “genocidal message”, as Diner called it, was one Israelis instantly grasped.

We have been studying the history of the Holocaust, what its consequences are and how to talk about it, for many years. We work with teachers, young people and students, both in Germany and in Israel. The shock of the atrocities committed by Hamas on October 7 remains with us even now.

What was most surprising and still deeply disturbing to those of us who experienced that day outside of Israel, in Germany, is that many people, especially critical intellectuals, did not hesitate for a moment in their startling haste to move on to the agenda of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They urged a proportional response, pointing out that one massacre did not justify another, and that the Palestinian population in Gaza should not pay the price for Hamas’ crimes, crimes which they papered over with astonishing speed, while we were still struggling to process the images and accounts of the murdered, the survivors, the displaced and the rescuers.

Had they somehow missed the humiliating footage and images of hundreds of innocent Israelis, Jews and non-Jews, of all ages, who were abducted and taken to Gaza that day? Had they not read the accounts of the survivors of the [massacre at the Supernova music festival](#),¹ in which young people described how they hid under dead bodies while witnessing their fellow concert-goers be raped and indiscriminately murdered?

Killing as many people as possible

The brutality of October 7 is in a separate category from the at times extremely brutal attacks and assassinations by Palestinians and Jews before the founding of the state of Israel. They are different from the atrocities that occurred during the Israeli-Arab wars. They are also unlike the horrific suicide attacks in which Palestinian terrorists arbitrarily murdered Israeli civilians and cannot be compared to the kidnappings and hostage-takings of the 1970s.

That is not to say that past violence was any less cruel, nor does it diminish the value of the innocent lives lost on both the Israeli and Palestinian sides. Every life lost is unique, and every form of violence has different spillover effects. What happened on October 7, however, was separate and distinct. Documents found among killed or captured terrorists contained orders to kill as many people as possible, as well as evidence of targeted attacks on schools.

By all appearances, these heinous crimes were explicitly intended to remind the Israeli population of the Holocaust. Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar and other terrorists involved in the planning and execution of the massacres had spent many years in Israeli prisons, had dealt intensively with Israeli society and were certainly also aware of the special significance the Holocaust holds for the self-image and identity of Jews living in Israel.

The associations evoked by the atrocities were therefore not a haphazard reference to past events, like in Entebbe in 1974, when Palestinian and German terrorists separated Jewish-Israeli hostages. October 7 was intended to convey to the Israeli public quite explicitly and directly that a new Holocaust could happen again at any time.

Destruction of both an individual and a collective sense of security

The new quality and the scale of these massacres were aimed at bringing about the obliteration of both an individual and a collective sense of security, compounded by the failure of Israeli security agencies and political leaders in Israel's right-wing governing coalition. In addition to the mass killing, degradation, sadism and inhumanity, the crimes targeted the very heart of the basic human need to trust that we feel safe in the world, an experience that [Dan Diner once described as a "civilizational rupture" in reference to the Shoah](#).²

[Israeli sociologist Natan Sznaider](#) sees October 7 not only as a turning point in Israeli history, but as "part of the global Jewish destiny."³ It is impossible to simply move on after witnessing the events of that day without reflecting, at least for a moment, on the significance and nature of these crimes.

¹ <https://taz.de/Angriff-auf-Israel!/5965719/>

² <https://taz.de/75-Geburtstag-des-Historikers-Dan-Diner!/5767952/>

³ <https://taz.de/Soziologe-ueber-Israels-neue-Regierung!/5915492/>

It is unfortunately an all-too-common pattern of public discourse – naming the Israeli victims and condemning Hamas in one breath, only to denounce the Israeli response and deplore the civilian victims in Gaza in the next, as [Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek](#) did [at the book fair in Frankfurt](#),⁴ for example – that ends up negating the significance of October 7.

A moment of pause

Of course, there must be a time and a place for expressing compassion for the innocent victims in Gaza who die or are injured by Israeli military strikes against Hamas or by stray rockets from the terrorist organizations involved. We must also claim the time and space to [critically examine the responsibility the Israeli government bears](#).⁵ There should be and there is plenty of space for criticism of the Israeli occupation and addressing the fate of the Palestinians. But all of this should happen at a different time and place than this moment of pause so that we can reflect on the novel quality of this renewed civilizational rupture.

Grasping the pain of others cannot mean that we ignore the painful experiences of some by reflexively pivoting to the suffering of others moments later. There are some who are unable to consider for a moment what distinguishes October 7 from the many other horrific dates marking the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, instead immediately allowing their focus to wane, reassuring themselves of their universal humanism by pointing to the victims among the Palestinian civilian population. Such persons fail to recognize the fundamental assault on all humanism and every form of human emancipation that the horrors of that day represent.

Understanding the pain of others should not mean that these kinds of crimes and the concomitant shattering of all certainty are simply contextualized within a long history of conflict and violence, thereby rendering them invisible.

Specific quality of inhumanity

Contextualizing them in this way produces the exact opposite of universal humanism and ultimately makes it impossible to separate out the specific quality of inhumanity. This is what US philosopher Judith Butler appears to do in “The Compass of Mourning”, in which she places the atrocities committed by Hamas within a history of indiscriminate violence. Her essay, which condemns the violence perpetrated by Hamas “without qualification” and then enumerates Israel’s atrocities in extended and very explicit passages, is a philosophical compass to avoiding coming to terms with the existential and epistemological consequences of October 7 only to quickly return to the time-worn coordinates of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Any contextualization of the atrocities of October 7 that that does not seek to relativize them should first of all raise awareness of the ideological foundations of Hamas and its state and non-state supporters and call these out as such. Although Hamas has openly stated its ideology, for example in its infamous charter, there is a reluctance in Germany to describe it as anti-Semitism, hate speech and propaganda, thereby – as did the absolutely deplorable words of the Israeli defense minister, who referred to Hamas as “human animals” – warping the essence of these criminal acts.

⁴ <https://taz.de/Debatte-auf-der-Buchmesse/!5963830/>

⁵ <https://taz.de/Autor-Klein-Halevi-ueber-Israel/!5965041/>

These were not human animals, not barbarians who committed such acts, but highly ideologized, well-trained human perpetrators who carried out their mission of systematically murdering, torturing and degrading Jews and other inhabitants of southern Israel with full conviction and without hesitation.

Furthermore, contextualization means acknowledging that the history of the Holocaust is not a distant memory, but that references to National Socialism in the past are now deliberately employed as a component of this new genocidal violence. The analogies that emerge are therefore not simply instruments strategically deployed in the political discourse by way of comparing or equating the two sides but are deliberately and performatively evoked in the form of the inhumanity, degradation and devastating violence that was manifested in Kfar Aza, Be'eri, Nir Oz and other places in southern Israel.

Consequently, October 7 does not represent just another round in an ongoing conflict, but rather marks a rupture characterized by the fact that the people who lived and died in these places were denied any possibility of emancipation or universal justice. As a manifestation of this new quality of genocidal violence in the 21st century, October 7 therefore makes it impossible to simply move on.

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