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Decoding Antisemitism in European Online Discourses: A Comparative Study on British, French and German Mainstream Social Media Channels

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Abstract

The emergence of interactive online spaces and the evolution of internet-based communication have dramatically changed the way the individual relates to the world and interacts with other web users. The specificities of online communication such as anonymity and mutual reinforcement of web users have led to an increase and normalisation of hate speech ([Troschke and Becker 2019](#). “Antisemitismus im Internet. Erscheinungsformen, Spezifika, Bekämpfung.” In *Das neue Unbehagen. Antisemitismus in Deutschland und Europa heute*, edited by Günther Jikeli and Olaf Glöckner, 151–72. Glöckner Hildesheim: Olms; Becker and Troschke 2023. “Decoding Implicit Hate Speech: The example of antisemitism.” In *Challenges and perspectives of hate speech analysis: An interdisciplinary anthology*, edited by Christian Strippel, Sünje Paasch-Colberg, Martin Emmer and Joachim Trebbe. Berlin: Digital Communication Research). This paper presents the results of our qualitative analysis of antisemitic content on Facebook profiles of British, French and German mainstream media, generated in the framework of the Decoding Antisemitism research project. The online debates of interest were identified in the context of discourse events – real-world events that have the potential to trigger antisemitic reactions – such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, escalation phases in the Middle East conflict, including the events of October 2023, or scandals and instances of hate crime in Europe and beyond. The results of our analyses point to several commonalities in the three language communities in how Israel is conceptualised and evaluated through stereotypes in these comment sections. On the other hand, there are also consistent differences between the three corpora in the choice of stereotypes. Another significant difference concerns the verbal immediacy and frequency with which these mental concepts are communicated in online debates. This article will attempt to map the

qualitative and quantitative patterns, compare and contrast the analyses for the three language communities and at the same time put forward for discussion possible socio-historical and -political reasons for this discursive behaviour (cf. Ascone et al. 2022. *Decoding Antisemitism: An AI-driven Study on Hate Speech and Imagery Online. Discourse Report 4*. Berlin: Technische Universität Berlin. Centre for Research on Antisemitism).

Keywords: antisemitism; hate speech; corpus linguistics; qualitative content analysis

1 Introduction

1.1 The Meaning of the Interactive Web

For decades, surveys have been the primary means to provide answers to questions about the presence of Jew-hatred and to demonstrate how frequently various forms of antisemitism emerge in specific phases among different age groups and social milieus. However, methodologically, surveys have various limitations: the artificial communication situation, priming effects, aspects of social desirability as well as the problem of a significantly limited number of response options offered, hence the limited ability of respondents to express themselves who can only provide their opinions by marking checkboxes, highlight these constraints (Brosius and Koschel 2001, 113ff.; Scherer 2006, 2). If surveys suggest that around 20% of the German population has held antisemitic views in recent decades, it is likely that the actual number is even higher, due to unreported cases and attitudes that fall into grey areas.

This is particularly stark in the context of the growing role and specific character of the internet as a space of communication. The internet is no longer a minor channel of communication for niche communities; it is now essential to how most of us converse, receive information and formulate opinions. To some extent, online communication spaces and methods mirror the offline world, but they also have their unique characteristics. One of these is the relative anonymity of the communication participants: many platforms do not require their users to provide a real name and surname or a photograph before joining a forum or posting a comment, although obligatory or voluntary account verification using identity documents is now becoming a more common practice on the part of social media providers. As a result, many web users feel liberated from the need to save face and from the usual social or legal consequences of rude, defamatory or offensive behaviour and language (Troschke and Becker 2019; Becker and Troschke 2023; Monnier and Seoane 2019). They are also less likely to feel sympathetic towards the target of such behaviour or language if their only relationship is via the internet, as the digital distance between them tends to dehumanise the other person or group (Oldfield 2023).

Another specificity of internet communication is the mutual reinforcement of opinions that takes place within its communities. Despite the fact that the online world offers virtually unlimited access to a broad range of beliefs and ideas, as well as high quality educational resources, a confrontation with them does not always result in broadening one's horizons; often, an individual perceives this diverging information as a threat to

their own set of beliefs and to their very identity. In such cases, they are likely to seek out information and user groups that will confirm their biases, further strengthening and solidifying existing views and at times the existing prejudices or discriminatory attitudes and ideologies ([Knobloch–Westerwick, Mothes and Polavin 2020](#)), including antisemitism. This can lead to greater polarisation and radicalisation of online communication spaces and consequently to an increase in the amount and intensity of extreme verbal expression, referred to as hate speech.

1.2 Methodological Considerations

Since hate speech, both online and offline, is a broad phenomenon that often eludes precise definition ([Sellars 2016](#)), empirical studies are needed in order to illuminate and detail the ways in which it is conveyed. This article attempts to map the patterns of antisemitic hate speech content online in a data sample of 13,525 social media comments collected from mainstream platforms over two time periods, in each case across three languages: English, French and German. Using both qualitative and quantitative approaches, the paper describes the key patterns that emerge from these analyses, paying close attention to the conceptual content of the data, its linguistic structure as well as the pattern similarities and discrepancies among the three language communities. It also puts forward for discussion possible socio-historical and -political reasons for this discursive behaviour (cf. [Ascone et al. 2022](#)).

The “Decoding Antisemitism” (DA) research project (2020–2024)^[1] aims to understand the correlations between current incidents and modes of crisis (so-called discourse events), the responses and perspectives taken by relevant outlets on these events and the reactions of web users who comment on the outlets’ social media channels. This three-stage approach allows us to examine the interplay between real-world triggers, media coverage and bottom-up processes in the interactive web. Crucially, the datasets used in this and all our studies are not gathered solely based on specific keywords, such as slurs. Instead, they are systematically collected within the context of the discourse events being investigated. This method ensures a consistent and thorough analysis of authentic online discourse pertaining to antisemitism.

The analyses employ a classification system developed in the course of DA, based on a profoundly expanded, refined and operationalised version of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism.^[2] Building upon the IHRA guidelines, which are limited and partly imprecise (designed for practical use rather than scholarly analysis), the classification system incorporates additional concepts from studies on antisemitism, such as stereotypes, demonising historical analogies and forms of self-positioning (such as Holocaust distortion or denial, affirmation of Nazi atrocities and trivialisation of antisemitism). Drawing from applied linguistics and social media studies, it considers elements like puns, allusions, metaphors, irony and both direct and indirect speech acts as well as cross-references and the use of web links. All these components have been unified into a guidebook comprising over 160 elements, meticulously considered during the annotation process. Our overall research project encompasses all forms of Jew-hatred – including Israel-related antisemitism, anti-Judaism, racist attitudes and forms of

secondary antisemitism – as well as the analysis of criticism of Israel as well as neutral and pro-Israel statements. This paper focuses specifically on forms of rejection, demonisation and delegitimation that constitute antisemitism.

The annotation of online comments adheres to a conservative approach: if a comment is ambiguous enough to permit at least two interpretations, one of which is not antisemitic and/or holds a degree of truth, it is classified as not antisemitic. Within the classification system, the denial of Israel's right to exist is considered antisemitic in accordance with the IHRA definition. Similarly, it categorises the celebration of Hamas attacks on 7 October, which indiscriminately targeted military personnel and civilians of all ages, in light of the clearly antisemitic Hamas Charter, as antisemitic. It also distinguishes between legitimate forms of support for the sovereignty of the Palestinian people from support of terrorism and murder.

The knowledge acquired from the extensive analysis of empirical data is consolidated by DA into biannual Discourse Reports.^[3] Additionally, the team has created an open-access Lexicon comprising 40 chapters, providing access to the guidebook used in qualitative multimodal analyses of the myriad forms of antisemitism for scholarly and civil society endeavours (Becker et al. 2024).

1.3 The Two Case Studies

As mentioned above, the analysis centres on two discourse events. The first event occurred with the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, marking the onset of a military conflict between the two nations. The second event involved Hamas attacks on 7 October 2023 in southern Israel, followed by subsequent military actions by the State of Israel in Gaza. Both incidents received extensive coverage from mainstream media in the United Kingdom, Germany and France. Media reports served as catalysts for a high volume of user reactions, primarily in the form of social media comments, which were sampled for detailed examination.

While the two events are some eighteen months apart, they are both decidedly recent; in fact, neither conflict has – at the time of writing – reached a conclusion. Also, both were intensively reported on in the media of the three European countries, suggesting that the users generating the social media comments collected within the two datasets were most likely very aware of both events.

The rationale for examining crises within the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict is evident. It is widely acknowledged that the Arab-Israeli conflict and its various escalation phases have consistently sparked (a) criticism of Israel and (b) antisemitic discourse on a global scale. In addition to its current relevance, 7 October marks a particularly intense escalation phase, as the violence directed against Jews on that day overshadowed previous incidents. This also applies to the immense casualties and degree of destruction on the Palestinian side. The events of 7 October represent the largest scale of mutual violence and destruction in the recent history of the Middle East conflict. This unprecedented dimension of events is also reflected in the density and directness of online communication patterns.^[4]

The war in Ukraine presents a different type of discourse event. It is a crisis, a war scenario marked by Russian aggression against Ukraine, with no involvement of the Jewish state or other related institutions. However, several factors reveal the reasoning for its inclusion in our case studies.^[5]

- Firstly, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is Jewish, which has prompted various antisemitic narratives including stereotypes, conspiracy myths and overt hate speech.
- Furthermore, from the start of the Russian invasion, online discourse has increasingly drawn parallels between Israel and Russia, with these comparisons intensifying after October 2023. Conversely, there have been some, though far less frequent, counter-narratives comparing Russia to Arab states and Iran that support Hamas. Israel's attempts at mediation have also drawn public attention to the Middle East.
- Additionally, both conflict parties in the Ukraine war have made comparisons to Nazi Germany, a drastic yet popular form of demonization that trivialises Nazi crimes.
- A notable incident was Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's claim in an interview with an Italian outlet that Hitler was Jewish, reflecting a modern antisemitic conspiracy theory.^[6]

These factors illustrate how the Ukraine-related discourse event is rife with antisemitic patterns, even though neither the perpetrator nor the victim is Jewish. The crisis in Ukraine, much like other incidents (such as financial crises or COVID-19), has led to the emergence of antisemitic constructions in public discourse.

Considering the similarities and differences between the two triggers – specifically, that only one directly involves Israel – this paper will first present each case study independently. Following this, it will undertake a comparative analysis to investigate whether a different political topic (i.e. relations between Russia and Ukraine) results in distinct antisemitic hate speech patterns in the data, such as levels of antisemitic expression, or kinds of antisemitic tropes, stereotypes and narratives. Due to the larger sample size used in the second case study, its analysis is presented in two sections, reflecting two consecutive time periods. The discussion of findings can therefore additionally trace the evolution of online antisemitism in the aftermath of October 2023.

1.4 Reflections on the Significance of 7 October

Our case studies on 7 October initially assumed that the portrayal of the attacks and subsequent Israeli military actions in online discourse would mirror previous debates on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly within the online communities we studied. This assumption stemmed from our prior experience with social media discussions during previous escalation phases which have typically sparked peaks in antisemitism. However, this assumption turned out to be inaccurate.

The reactions of social media users to news stories in October 2023 and beyond unquestionably echoed similar antisemitic themes observed in the summers of 2014 and May 2021. However, it quickly became evident that 7 October led to a far more significant surge in antisemitism. Moreover, our concern regarding this event as a turning point is less about the increased frequency of antisemitic accusations, both online and offline, and more about the evolving nature of antisemitic discourse. This evolution transcends the portrayal of Israel as an unjust state, oppressor or alleged genocidal regime – labels that often invoke comparisons to colonialism, apartheid, fascism or even Nazism. Alongside these allegations, Israel is frequently accused of exploiting historical crimes against Jews to assert a special status within the international community. The accusation of crimes against humanity is not new and is well-documented among scholars who have studied Israel's portrayal in global contexts for decades.

The recent escalation has unquestionably amplified these contentious claims, especially against the backdrop of the catastrophic situation in Gaza. Furthermore, the reclassification of Hamas from a terrorist group to a resistance movement in certain academic circles^[7] reflects a trend that began years earlier, which minimises the antisemitic roots of such groups. However, this reclassification has now taken on a more concerning persistence. The suffering on both sides has fuelled unprecedented levels of hate speech, characterised by its directness and ferocity.

While acknowledging the severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza, widely reported in the media and condemned in civil society and political spheres, we, as researchers, caution against historical analogies that distort the current realities in the Middle East. These analogies fail to accurately depict or clarify the underlying causes and developments in the Middle East as they unfold. When it comes to critiquing Israel's actions, we believe that language (and communication in general) is precise and nuanced enough to articulate and condemn the specific issues accurately. The high number of civilian casualties must be criticised. However, distorting and oversimplifying dichotomies, as embedded in these highly emotive analogies that often dominate public discourse, are not helpful. They fail to do justice to the complexity of the situation and frequently lead to an irresponsible exploitation of the conflict, often in favour of downplaying past, mostly European atrocities of unimaginable proportions.

The use of projecting historical crimes is not a novelty in this regard. The turning point on 7 October revolves around another specific aspect of antisemitic remarks. In past conflicts, Israel and Israelis have frequently been vilified by web users through projections – whether by depicting negative traits (as in stereotypes) or by attributing concrete historical crimes (as in analogies). These statements often extend to Jews worldwide through what is termed *detour communication*. This involves initially devaluing and demonising Israel, followed by similar demonisation directed at Jews in countries like Great Britain or Germany. The violence against non-Israeli Jews witnessed on the streets of London and New York in May 2021 – and especially the antisemitic hate crimes in current times – demonstrates how this type of racist antisemitism can morph from discourse (and its underlying perceptions) into tangible actions. On 7 October, this changed once again, as the majority of contentious and openly antisemitic remarks no longer distinguished between Jews and Israelis.

Moreover, the transformation was not only evident in terms of subject positioning but also in the predicate of the statements. Previously, stereotypical generalisations constituted the clear majority of antisemitic communication whereas now forms of overt verbal violence dominate the comment sections. Particularly notable was the glorification (and partial justification) of violence witnessed on 7 October. There was a straightforward affirmation, undistorted schadenfreude and an intertwining of misogyny and antisemitism, especially concerning female festival attendees. These speech acts, ultimately comprising threats, curses and death wishes, were part of our classification system, even though they previously – at least within the politically moderate online discourse we focused on – constituted a minority, if any, of the remarks classified as antisemitic. Consequently, the conventional discourse of antisemitic hate speech expanded to include aspects of racist antisemitism (equating Israelis with Jews worldwide) alongside instances of dehumanization and speech indicating a readiness for violence. Additionally, there were religiously framed forms of anti-Judaism, referencing religious authorities in the comment sections through Quranic passages and, occasionally, writings from Christianity.

For DA's work, 7 October had a significant impact as it witnessed a sharp escalation of Israel-related antisemitism, which not only exploded during periods of escalation but also structurally aligned with older forms of antisemitism. This includes the subsumed form of anti-Zionism, which fundamentally rejects Israel's existence and the right of Jews to self-determination in their ancestral homeland. If Zionism is understood as advocating for Jewish self-determination in their historic homeland then anti-Zionism, by definition, denies Jews this right, placing it within the realm of Israel-related antisemitism.

In contrast to that, alongside antisemitism, criticism of Israel in online discourse has also intensified. This includes critiques of West Bank policies, racism throughout Israeli society, the irresponsibility and corruption under Netanyahu's leadership and the overt right-wing orientation of the government's efforts in recent years to undermine Israeli democracy and align globally with right-wing populist governments. These criticisms are individually legitimate and do not contribute to a generalised, essentialist or inherently delegitimising portrayal of Israel as a state. Therefore, they do not constitute Israel-related antisemitism and are not relevant to this investigation.

2 Methodology and Dataset

2.1 Corpus Analysis in Social Media Studies

The DA research project integrates antisemitism studies with linguistics, image and discourse analysis and data science, thus making a significant contribution to establishing a transdisciplinary framework for social media-related hate studies. The project is motivated by the aim to comprehend the extent and nature of antisemitism in European societies.

The distinction between the more traditional survey-based research and our methodological approach – i.e. corpus analyses within social media studies – is obvious. As described above, the former tend to be affected by the social desirability bias and

primed by the survey questions themselves. In the latter, self-motivated statements of web users, triggered within a specific situational context, are systematically examined (Bubenhofers 2008, 2009]; Schwarz-Friesel and Reinharz 2017, 326ff.; Stefanowitsch and Gries 2006). Thus, we analyse sequences or forms of dialogism that show how web users react to events in the extra-linguistic reality and to media contributions but also how they interact among themselves. As mentioned earlier, web users are relatively anonymous and thus less susceptible to facing sanctions as in the offline world, which diminishes aspects of social desirability and potentially enhances the clarity of their statements. This also means that the communication conditions on social media platforms contribute to the increase in antisemitism and other forms of hate speech in terms of quantity, thereby leading to a normalisation of derogatory and exclusionary treatment of out-groups and minorities, ultimately increasing the likelihood of encountering hate speech even in politically less contentious online.^[8]

If antisemitism researchers examine the online discourse with appropriate tools, entirely new insights can be gained into the following questions: what topics trigger antisemitism in which country or language community? Which concepts or stereotypes are being referred to? What communicative patterns are used to spread these antisemitic concepts? Are they communicated overtly or subtly? The answer to the latter question would allow inference on which stereotypes have gained a certain social acceptability (bearing in mind that these exist within the online context and specific online milieus, and cannot be generalised across milieus and societies, online and offline).

All these considerations demonstrate how many insights social media studies can provide. We replace the artificial, constrained framework of surveys with self-motivated contributions from commenters who do not feel their freedom of speech or expression is limited. If properly designed and executed, these studies can solve puzzles about societal attitudes and trends in the near future and provide entirely new insights into the nature of hate ideologies such as antisemitism which in turn – apart from the scientific impact – enables a vast spectrum of prevention and intervention strategies.^[9]

The DA project is dedicated to these objectives. However, it focuses less on antisemitic hate speech and incitement to violence and murder from far-right or Islamist platforms and milieus which are already being investigated by other research projects^[10] and more on antisemitic discourses within politically moderate online milieus. If antisemitism persists in such spaces despite non-extreme attitudes and despite the collective knowledge of the Holocaust, it is important to understand what characterises it and how commenters express their views without colliding with the conventions of their peer groups or having to break with their own beliefs. The task of the DA project is to illuminate these discursive strategies, which ultimately make antisemitism socially acceptable on a broad societal level and thus more dangerous than the overt hate speech of extremist groups.

2.2 Addressing Implicitness

When speaking of strategies, the question of implicitness arises. In extremist milieus, due to the permissibility of antisemitic (and other discriminatory or exclusionary) attitudes, it can be assumed that the respective notion about the out-group is directly transformed into words – be it direct reproductions of stereotypes (such as Jewish power, greed, blood libel)

or swear words. This results in a one-to-one relationship between idea and expression, the concept and its semiotic framework being much more common than in mainstream spaces of communication than indirect, covert or coded speech.

However, in the mainstream this one-to-one relationship is more likely to be abandoned and elements are added (or omitted), making the message not immediately understandable, i.e. conveyed implicitly. Recipients must draw on various bodies of knowledge to close any semantic gaps or integrate world knowledge to infer the implied meaning. This is not unusual, as calculated ambiguity is part of every other advertising message and an integral part of creative media and political communication. However, the widespread encounter with implicitness in the context of antisemitism – a hate ideology that due to its plethora of concepts or stereotypes and its adaptability throughout its over 2000-year history is inherently complex – poses a huge challenge in recognising and quantifying antisemitic speech in mainstream discourses online.

For example, someone might overtly express antisemitic death wishes by stating, “Jews to the gas!” However, the same sentiment can be conveyed indirectly, such as when an influencer like Kanye West announces he would go to “death con 3 on JEWISH PEOPLE.” Referring to the highest alert state of ‘defence readiness condition’ and using a play on words, where ‘defcon’ transforms into “death con,” West subtly communicates the death wish (cf. [Chapelan et al. 2023](#)). Similarly, a web user writing “Someone should give Soros a ‘shower’;”) (cf. [Becker, Troschke and Allington 2021](#)) does not use a pun but an allusion to the gas chambers; based on historical world knowledge, readers can infer the reference to Nazi atrocities. Quantitative analysis and automatic detection face challenges, particularly with so-called indirect speech acts, where the incendiary nature arises from the combination of words in a specific context rather than individual words alone. When a commenter, in the context of Hamas attacks on 7 October, rhetorically asks, “Is that all?” the difficulty of comprehensive analysis quickly becomes evident.^[11] Exploratory studies of comment sections in the context of politically moderate media outlets suggest that the majority of statements classified as antisemitic are implicit, requiring context or world knowledge for interpretation.

The DA research team acknowledges the diversity and complexity of antisemitic communication on both content and structural levels. Given the vast volume of web communication alone, the team employs a pre-selection process for web data. Even with a large team annotating, i.e. categorising datasets, it is crucial to identify a thematic framework containing a set of ‘positive’ (antisemitic) and ‘negative’ (non-antisemitic) hits. Nevertheless, the volume of consistently analysed data significantly contributes to mapping out the typology and trends of online antisemitism.

2.3 Data Selection and Sampling

As mentioned in the article’s introduction, the DA project begins by identifying so-called discourse events – events in extra-linguistic reality that have the potential to trigger antisemitism (both offline and online). Subsequently, the project records how politically moderate leading media outlets in the UK, Germany and France describe and evaluate these events in their contributions. Following this, the main focus shifts to the reactions from web users. Qualitative content analysis is conducted using the content analysis

software MAXQDA. Employing an expanded and operationalised rendition of the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, each individual user comment is assessed to: (a) ascertain its categorisation as antisemitic; (b) identify the specific concept or stereotype it embodies; and (c) pinpoint the verbal (and visual) patterns conveying the corresponding content. The operationalisation of the definition has resulted in a guidebook comprising over 160 elements, all of which are taken into account during the annotation process. These cover classical antisemitic tropes, as well as secondary antisemitism, and Israel-related antisemitism; the definitions distinguish between generalised, unfounded statements and nuanced or verifiable critique. Multiple annotations are crucial as they illustrate how discourse in a language community, in an online milieu, evolves concerning a specific topic over a measurement period. In this manner, the project has explored 27 discourse events and qualitatively analysed over 140,000 user comments.

In addition to the evident necessity and logical prioritisation of qualitative analyses, the research design includes two further blocks that can be characterised as quantitative approaches to the outcomes of the initial detailed step. In step 2, classification models such as BERT are trained with annotated data to independently classify raw data. We have implemented a feedback loop between the large, qualitatively focused team, responsible for preparing training datasets using MAXQDA, and the data scientists overseeing the fine-tuning of the models. This loop ensures an evaluation of progress at the AI level. Results from steps 1 and 2 serve as the foundation for conventional quantitative analyses.^[12]

In this article, we explore two discourse events identified by the DA research team: the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the first half of 2022 and the escalation phase within the Middle East conflict that began on 7 October 2023. Both events have garnered significant media attention in the three countries we focused on (as well as internationally), with the intensity persisting on social media. The two case studies are based on the analysis of the following datasets collected from the official Facebook profiles of mainstream media outlets in the UK, France and Germany across the political spectrum, representing varied political framings of the discussed topics. Each dataset contains user-generated comments reacting to news stories posted by the outlets on their Facebook pages. Only comment threads with 100 or more comments were collected; the sample was taken from the top of each thread. The specific sources for the examples presented in the text are detailed at the end of the article.

– **Russian invasion of Ukraine (early 2022)**

- 31 Facebook threads (12 for the UK, 12 for France, 7 for Germany)
- 6,025 comments analysed (2,300 for the UK, 2,575 for France, 1,150 for Germany)
- Between 100 and 250 first comments analysed from each thread (to ensure equal distribution of data in terms of the political spectrum represented by leading media in each country).

– **Escalation phase within the Middle East conflict (October 2023)**

- Two distinct sub-corpora:

- Initial phase of the escalation (7–10 October): 10 Facebook threads per language community, first 150 comments from each thread, 4,500 comments analysed.
 - Second phase (13–30 October): 10 Facebook threads per language community, first 100 comments from each thread, 3,000 comments analysed.
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3 Insights from Empirical Research

3.1 Online Reactions to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine (Early 2022)

On 24 February 2022, European media headlines became dominated by the reports of the Russian army forcibly entering the Ukrainian territory. This was a significant escalation in the ongoing conflict between the two countries; the Russian government has consistently referred to the event and the subsequent fighting as a special military operation, justifying it with alleged hostile activities in Ukraine, while the international community has largely dismissed such description in favour of calling it an invasion, attack, occupation or war.

Both framings have had direct impact on the narratives around the conflict, in terms of political statements as well as mainstream media coverage in the three countries under examination – the UK, France and Germany. On the one hand, the Russian President Vladimir Putin and other government officials have on more than one occasion repeated the claim that one of the aims of the Russian operations was to “de-Nazify” Ukraine. He drew on the collective memory of the Nazi regime and its actions in an attempt to position Ukrainian leadership, army and people as a destructive influence in the region, which needs to be counteracted or even pre-empted. On the other, western media and politicians have also used references to Nazism in order to unambiguously criticise Putin and his decisions and to portray Russia as the villain. While this is a testament to the fact that the events of Nazism and the Holocaust have not been forgotten and are still synonymous with ultimate evil in this part of the world, the comparisons have also opened the way to debates in social media comments which at times questioned truthfulness of historical facts, fuelled conspiracy theories and activated antisemitic stereotypes. While conspiracy myths are not exclusive to antisemitism (as seen e.g. in the debates surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic), they represent a central element in historical antisemitism, setting it apart from other hate ideologies. Racism typically involves devaluation whereas antisemitism constructs difference, portraying Jews in a tripolar arrangement as both subhumans and as controlling lobbies of media and states. The online commentary on Russia and Ukraine has also undoubtedly been shaped by disinformation activities which have since been more broadly acknowledged and analysed, the relative unexpectedness of the events and the general atmosphere of distrust, fear and anxiety, fuelled by the geographic proximity (from the point of view of European web users) of the conflict. It is perhaps no surprise that in such a context online debates turned towards narrative tropes of good and evil, utilising old stereotypes and repeating familiar accusations.

In some cases, the specific themes of the online debate in social media comments were directly prompted by the content of mainstream news stories. At the beginning of May 2022, in an interview for an Italian television channel the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov referenced the old (and long since debunked) conspiracy theory according to which Adolf Hitler “also had Jewish blood” while discussing Ukraine and its president Volodymyr Zelenskyy; he also suggested that Jews are “usually the most ardent antisemites.” Earlier, in March of 2022, the then Prime Minister of Israel Naftali Bennett attempted to mediate talks between Russian and Ukrainian governments, inserting himself and the State of Israel into the media coverage of the conflict. Social media comments often employed simplistic comparisons between the invasion of Ukraine and the Middle East conflict, which enabled simultaneous critique of Russia and Israel, and on some occasions crossed into Israel-related antisemitism. However, it is telling that antisemitic concepts sometimes appeared in online debates without such direct triggers, although their range and percentage varied across the discourse samples collected from the social media in the three countries.

3.2 United Kingdom

The UK dataset comprised 2,300 comments, collected from official Facebook accounts of leading news outlets in the country across the political spectrum.^[13] Of the three countries, this sample contained the highest share of antisemitic comments: 14.8%. Considering the themes of the online debate discussed in the previous paragraph, it is perhaps no surprise that the most common antisemitic concept in the dataset was the stereotype of innate EVIL^[14] nature (present in 47% of antisemitic comments). This age-old demonising characterisation of Jewish nature still perseveres in social media comments; while some used it directly: “They are devils” (GUA-FB[20220307]),^[15] others used shared knowledge of historical facts and figures to insinuate the same meaning: “Stalin Hitler Churchill all Had Jewish blood running through the veins... FACT!!!” (DAILY-FB[20220502]). One comment claimed that “The J~~X~~WS are involved in every war in the last 300 years. Z” (BBC-FB[20220502]), implying not just dark intentions but also a disproportionate amount of influence over world events, thus rehashing the stereotype of Jewish POWER. The EVIL stereotype was often extended to the State of Israel or its citizens. Responding to a news report about Sergey Lavrov’s claim of Hitler’s alleged Jewish origins, one comment said “Yeah, it’s a heavy comparison: Israel is far worse” (GUA-FB[20220307]). Elsewhere, when one commenter asked “Putin will fall. We had people like him in the past but where are they today?,” another replied “residing in Israel” (BBC-FB[20220502]).

The second most common antisemitic concept in the dataset, antisemitic CONSPIRACY (38.7% of antisemitic comments), was often found in comments discussing the Lavrov allegations. Many comments in this category express agreement with or respect for the Russian minister: “Schlickgruber is jewish surname its true” (DAILY-FB[20220502]), “What Lavrov said is absolutely true, bravo Russia for your honesty” (GUA-FB[20220505]), or even expressed surprise that others may not be aware of this: “I thought that was common knowledge (INDEP-FB[20220502]). Some commented that “Is-not-real is so mad because the Russian minister is telling the truth” (DAILY-FB[20220502]), suggesting not just that the claim is true but that the Jewish state (here represented by a DELEGITIMISING pun) is supposedly aware of it but prefers it to stay hidden. This comment implied that the nature

or intentions of present-day Israel were on a par with those of Hitler: “Looking at the actions of Israel now in Palestine. One tends to agree [with Lavrov’s claims]” (BBC-FB[20220502]). By agreeing or expanding on the false claims of Hitler’s Jewishness, such statements activated a NAZI ANALOGY and often essentialised Jews or Israel as EVIL. Often, they also presented the Holocaust as a Jewish crime, consequently BLAMING JEWS FOR ANTISEMITISM (34.6 % of antisemitic comments): “Hitler did all these atrocities to Jews to prove that he is German” (DAILY-FB[20220502]).

The mention of this claim by a public figure, and the broad media coverage of his words, brought forth other antisemitic conspiracy theories, often placing responsibility for World War II on Jews: “That’s why i always say WW11 was a planned war. The Jewish elite with their allies stage the war...” (DAILY-FB[20220502]), “If one looks at the facts, for example the Straussians in the American administration, the financing of Hitler by the Rothchilds and so on, you will realize that Lavrov is absolutely correct! These people have only one religion and that is money!” (GUA-FB[20220502]). However, some comments insinuated the existence of current rather than historical conspiracies, frequently naming the Ukrainian president as a central figure in supposed Israeli plans: “Zelensky plays the Jew card all the time: in the end he’s just an Israeli comedian and the Ukrainian people have been brainwashed into Euromaidanism much like the Germans were into Nazism” (INDEP-FB[20220502]), “This gay guy a Zionist puppet willing to destroy 48 million people lives to make few millions or send 200,000 Jews to the Zionist Israeli kingdom at the holy land as a gift to occupation forces and settlers !!! MAD MAN” (INDEP-FB[20220502]), “Zelensky is nothing but a NWO puppet bought and paid for by Soros and Schwab and personally I don’t be[lieve] a word he spouts” (EXPR-FB[20220412]).

However, antisemitic conspiracy theories did not dominate the whole dataset. Many web users compared either the Ukrainian or Russian side to the Nazi regime, in the process distorting and RELATIVISING THE ANTISEMITISM of its actions (12.6 % of antisemitic comments). One comment claimed that Putin “is fighting Nazis actually, like all good communists do, so ... He is a lot like blm and antifa” (SPECT-FB[20220225]), while another that “Russia’s diplomaci and actions are exactly the same as Hitler’s and nazi party in 1930s and later when started invading neighbouring countries and caused millions of victims in the worst world war today !” (GUA-FB[20220502]).

3.3 France

While the level of antisemitic content in the French dataset was slightly lower than in the UK sample (11.84 % of 2,575 analysed comments^[16]), the distribution of the most frequent antisemitic comments proved strikingly similar. It is hard to determine the reasons for this with complete certainty. However, comparable triggers, i.e. media reports with similar focus in both the UK and France, have likely played a significant role in the shape of online discourses in the two countries. Once again, news of Sergey Lavrov’s interview in which he alluded to a conspiracy theory centred around Hitler’s alleged Jewish parentage echoed through the social media comments. It could also be tempting to make statements on the discourse patterns characteristic of Facebook in comparison to other major social media networks; nevertheless, these two datasets are far too small to generalise the conclusions to the entire platform, and the German discourse sample presented in the following section defies such generalisations.

Similarly to the UK data, most antisemitic comments in the French corpus essentialised Jews or Israel as EVIL (49.8% of all antisemitic comments), calling the Jewish state “the origin of all misfortunes” [“L’origine de tous les malheurs”] (LEPOI-FB[20220227]) or claiming that Jews “have chosen evil for several millennia, their choice is made, they will be there for you” [“Ils ont choisi le mal depuis plusieurs millénaires, leur choix est fait, ils seront là pour vous”] (MONDE-FB[20220321]). Many of the narratives which again emerged in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks on Israeli citizens of 7 October 2023 and Israel’s subsequent military actions in Gaza – both of which seem to have prompted an intensification of Israel-related antisemitism – were also already present in the first half of 2022. Among fair criticism of Israel’s conduct during the ongoing Middle East conflict, there were also comments which portrayed Israel as essentially EVIL, CHILD MURDERING and DECEITFUL: “They do the same thing to the Palestinians, stealing everything from them, their rights, their homes, their graves... Killing them, locking them up, harming their children... EVIL who wants to pass itself off as good” [“Ils font la même chose aux Palestiniens, à tout leur voler, leurs droits, leurs maisons, leur tombes... Les tuer, les enfermés, faire du mal à leurs enfants... LE MAL qui veut se faire passer pour le bien”] (LIBER-FB[20220305]).

Once again, multiple comments (30.8%) accepted or repeated antisemitic CONSPIRACY content: “Hitler was Jewish, it’s a historical fact” [“Hitler était juif, c’est un fait historique”] (LEFIG-FB[20220502]). The comments often framed conspiracy theories as verifiable historical reality, “an established and documented historical truth” [“une vérité historique établie et documentée”] (BFMTV-FB[20220502]), often appealing to the authority of websites, television programmes or historians: “documentaries on Arte investigated this, historians said Hitler had J...wish blood” [“Les documentaires sur Art ils ont fait des enquêtes les historiens ils l’ont dit hitler avait du sang j...f”] (LEPAR-FB[20220502]). One comment argued this based on alleged physical appearance and genetics, although such discourse seems very rare: “Hitler is a Jew, look at his face and height, Jewish genetics” [“hitler c’est un juif regarde son visage et la taille génétique juif”] (LIBER-FB[20220502]). However, many simply AFFIRMED antisemitic claims (22.95% of all antisemitic comments). Unlike in the UK data, a common theme here was the gleeful support for “the truths that irritate... 😊” [“Les vérités qui fâchent ... 😊”] (LEFIG-FB[20220502]), “the truth that hurts” [“La vérité qui blesse”] (LEPAR-FB[20220502]), “the truth [that] haunts you” [“La vérité vous hante”] (LIBER-FB[20220502]). Some specified who this would allegedly be uncomfortable for: “Hitler was Jewish... showing that the truth bothers the Western media and Israel” [“Hitler était juif... comme quoi la vérité dérange les médias occidentaux et Israël”] (LIBER-FB[20220502]).

Israel was at the centre of some conspiracy claims. One comment alleged that “the Israelis wanted to take control of Ukraine in the same way that they took control of the first Soviet Bolshevik government!!!...We know the rest! !!” [“les israéliens voulaient prendre le contrôle de l’Ukraine de la même façon qu’ils ont pris le contrôle du premier gouvernement bolchevique soviétique !!!...On connaît la suite !!!”] (LEPOI-FB[20220227]). However, most recycled the tropes of Jewish financial and political POWER: “Behind Hitler, there was the Rothschild family...” [“Derrière Hitler, il y avait déjà la famille Rothschild...”] (LEPAR-FB[20220502]), “yes, and Soros? What do you think? The financier of Daesh” [“oui et Soros g qu’en pensez-vous ? L’argentier de daech”] (MONDE-FB[20220321]).

As before, due to the nature of this conspiracy theory which alleges Hitler's Jewishness, many statements discussing this claim as true developed into implicit or explicit expressions of **BLAMING JEWS FOR ANTISEMITISM** (29.1% of antisemitic comments): "Well yeah. Hitler's father was Jewish. And the one who financed Nazism too" ["Ben ouai. Le père d'hitler était juif. Et celui qui a financé le nazisme aussi"] (LIBER-FB[20220502]). In some cases, this was extended to other public figures: "the Ukrainian president can very well be a Nazi, even if he is Jewish, because Hitler was Jewish and a Nazi too" ["le président ukrainien peut tres bien etre nazi meme si il est juif car hitler etait juif et nazi aussi"] (LEPAR-FB[20220502]).

3.4 Germany

The comparative analysis of data from three European countries was intended to reveal the similarities and differences in online discourse. An unexpected finding was the limited data available for collection from the Facebook pages of German mainstream media (only 7 viable threads, comprising a total of 1150 comments^[17]) and the low level of antisemitic content within the sample (only 2.35%). Subsequently, there was less material for thorough examination of the conceptual and linguistic patterns of antisemitic expression in comparison to the other two countries. For example, where Sergey Lavrov's claims regarding Hitler's alleged Jewish origins prompted enthusiastic agreement or the spread of further antisemitic conspiracy theories in the UK and French data, the social media comments in the German dataset largely dismissed or ridiculed his words. Where British and French comment sections depicted Jews or Israel as murderous, conniving or powerful, German comments critical of Israel rarely crossed the line into antisemitic ideation. Only the news of peace talk mediation attempted by Naftali Bennett seemed to have slightly more impact on the debate here.

These results are also interesting when compared with the analysis of German discourse samples collected in October and November 2023 following the Hamas attacks and Israel's military actions in Gaza: this later data contains higher levels of antisemitism, conveyed through both classical stereotypes and Israel-related tropes. Other case studies carried out by the DA team also tend to reveal more pronounced presence of antisemitic comments than the dataset examined here. It therefore seems that the discourse trigger – that is the events of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine as well as the intensity or angle of media coverage – failed to trigger antisemitic narratives in Germany to the same extent as in the UK or France. As a result, the examples presented below are less representative than the examples in the previous two sections.

Although the most frequently used concept in the sample was once again **EVIL** (40.74% of all antisemitic comments), the examples were generally much more muted than those presented earlier in terms of language and usually qualified for antisemitic classification on the basis of the broad generalisations they contained (in this case, temporal): "For 70 years, Israel has done worse to its neighbours than Putin. But unfortunately, people are blind and deaf" ["Seit 70 Jahren tut Isreal den Nachbarn schlimmer als Putin. Aber die Leute sind leider blind und taub"] (SPIEG-FB[20220305]). Still, one example stated that "Jews are the greatest danger to the world humanity. Zelenskyy is also a Jew. He is also

trying to start the Third World War” [“die yuden sind die größte gefahr tür die welt menschheit.zenenski ist auch ein yude. Der fersucht auch dehn 3. Weldkrieg anzustiften”] (SPIEG-FB[20220503]).

Some comments utilised stereotypes centred around the alleged Jewish or Israeli PRIVILEGE (14.8%). They either suggested that these groups receive a FREE PASS from the international community, that is get away with actions which would not be permitted to other countries or nations, or alleged they receive less or no criticism for such actions due to a TABOO surrounding such criticism. One comment sarcastically advised that Russia should “get tips” from Israel “on how to take over a country without being punished by the global community” [“Holt sich Tipps wie man ein land an sich reißt ohne von der weltgemeinschaft bestraft zu warden”] (SPIEG-FB[20220305]). Another complained “Woe betide anyone who says something against Israel” [“Wehe es sagt jemand was gegen Israel”] (SPIEG-FB[20220502]).

A similar number of comments (14.8%) DELEGITIMISED ISRAEL’S RIGHT TO EXIST. This web user suggested both that Israelis originate from outside of the Middle East and that the State of Israel is in fact Palestine under occupation: “his ancestors are from the West like the rest of occupied Palestine (Israel)” [“Seine Vorfahren sind aus dem Westen so wie die restliche besetzte Palästina (Israel)”] (SPIEG-FB[20220305]). Another comment claimed that Israel was a Western project, responsible for CHILD MURDER: “if the West hadn’t invented Israel, then we wouldn’t see dead children” and ironically urged another commenter not to admonish Israel: “please, it would be so boring without dead children in Palestine” [“bitte nix über israelische Taten sprechen 🧑. Denn wenn der Westen Israel nicht erfunden hätte, dann würden wir doch keine toten Kinder sehen. Also ich bitte Das wäre so langweilig, ohne tote Kinder in Palestinian”] (SPIEG-FB[20220305]).

4 Online Reactions to the Middle East Conflict Post-7 October 2023

On 7 October 2023, Hamas militants infiltrated southern Israel from Gaza, launching an unprecedented and violent assault on Israeli civilians. Over 1,200 civilians were killed, while hundreds more were assaulted, injured and subjected to violence. Additionally, over 250 Israelis were taken captive. The perpetrators further exacerbated the situation by parading the bodies of some victims through the streets of Gaza.

This event is significant since it represents the deadliest attack on Jews since the Holocaust. Subsequently, the Israeli invasion of Gaza marked a profound shift in the ongoing Middle East conflict. The gravity of these events reverberated across major conventional media and social media platforms. Recognising their significance, we examined various Facebook profiles, measurement timeframes and language communities to discern both shared patterns and unique responses to the unfolding crisis in the Middle East.

4.1 First Measurement Period (7–10 October)

In our initial investigation, we studied the Facebook profiles of prominent media outlets in the United Kingdom, France and Germany during the early stages of the escalation. Our corpus consisted of social media threads responding to reports on the Hamas atrocities. These threads, published between 7 and 10 October, primarily centred on the Hamas attacks rather than the subsequent Israeli military actions in Gaza. For each language community, we analysed 1,500 comments.

4.2 United Kingdom

The Hamas attacks on Israeli civilians in October 2023 elicited a significant response from UK media, with a considerable volume of coverage and reader engagement. In our analysis of the 1,500-comment corpus,^[18] we found that the average proportion of antisemitic statements was 21.6%. This indicates a range of levels, varying from less than 10–44% in specific threads.

However, what stood out was not only the high frequency in certain threads but also the nature of antisemitic expression within the dataset. Instead of perpetuating the demonisation of the Jewish state, rooted in a repertoire of stereotypes and analogies commonly associated with Israel-related antisemitism, and subsequently the vilification of the Jewish-Israeli out-group, comments were primarily characterised by forms of self-positioning. These forms are also evident in the relativisation or outright denial of the Holocaust, in the affirmation of antisemitic actions and justification of Nazi crimes – and in classic speech acts such as insults, threats, death wishes and calls for violence. Such statements not only construct the out-group as an “enemy,” but also always communicate the attitude, the impulse emanating from themselves. In the context of 7 October, there was notable affirmation, glorification and justification of the Hamas crimes witnessed in the kibbutzim and at the Supernova music festival which, given the continuous work on escalation phases in our project, is something unprecedented and can be described as a turning point.

The most prevalent form of antisemitism observed in the dataset was the AFFIRMATION AND CELEBRATION OF THE HAMAS ATTACKS, constituting 27% of the antisemitic comments in the corpus. This trend was particularly evident in responses to news articles detailing the Hamas atrocities, rather than more general reports of the conflict. Notably, previous phases of the conflict did not witness such explicit endorsements and celebrations of terror attacks, indicating a shift in antisemitic discourse regarding Israel.

The AFFIRMATION varied in terms of their specificity. General expressions like “Allahu Akbar,” “Free Palestine,” and “From the River to the Sea,”^[19] semantically open and highly context-dependent, would not typically be annotated as antisemitic in other discourse events, following our conservative annotation scheme. However, careful observation showed that the first of these expressions took on a different, clear meaning when uttered in the context of 7 October – a discourse event characterised by forms of mass violence accompanied by the very same phrase. The intended meaning of the other

two statements could be understood as legitimate (and desirable) calls for peaceful coexistence. However, this interpretation would be highly improbable and even grotesque in a comment section directly referring to the violence of that day.

Other forms of affirmation were more direct and clearly verbalised the commenters' positive stance towards the actions of Hamas: “way to go HAMAS... we support you...,” “Joyful 🎉 About time they taste it” (TEL-FB[20231009]), “Amazing scenes coming from Gaza long live Palestine **PS**” (INDEP-FB[20231008b]) or “Free Palestine from Israeli brutality ❤️🇵🇸” (BBC-FB[20231008]).^{[20], [21]}





In terms of antisemitic concepts, we observed in the dataset that the aforementioned affirmation was accompanied by the DENIAL OF ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST (18%), as in “Modern news sounds like it's terrorists attacking but it's just people trying to get there homes back!” (INDEP-FB[20231008b]) – as well as the attribution of ISRAEL'S SOLE GUILT IN THE CONFLICT (16.9%), as in “We support those heroes who retaliate against oppressive evil regime with war crimes and its barbaric assignments not only children also journalists” (BBC-FB[20231009]). From the entire arsenal of Israel-related antisemitism that is at play during previous escalation phases, these two concepts represent by far the most dominant forms in the comment sections we examined following 7 October.

Other, less frequent concepts were the NAZI ANALOGY (“Supernova festival a bit like raving next to Auschwitz Birkenau,” GUA-FB[20231009]), the DENIAL OF THE ATROCITIES (“Hamas did not kill any civilian person [they] did not harm any child or civilian person,” BBC-FB[20231007]) and classic images of JEWISH EVIL (“Its Israel who has been committing genocide of Muslims since decades and all the devil powers are with her... 😡,” (TEL-FB[20231009])).



4.3 France

In France, much like in the UK, the media extensively covered the Hamas attacks. Within the French dataset,^[22] approximately 16% of comments showcased antisemitic notions. Mirroring trends in the British corpus, the predominant form of antisemitism (55.2%) involved either direct or indirect ENDORSEMENT OF ANTISEMITIC VIOLENCE. This suggests that while overall levels of antisemitism remained consistent with earlier measurements, the severity and fervour of such sentiments heightened. Expressions of explicit support for Hamas, such as “Long live Hamas” [“Vive le Hamas”], often coincided with broader endorsements of the Palestinian cause, such as “Total support to Palestine” [“Soutien total à la Palestine”] (FRANC-FB[20231009]). Furthermore, some justified the attacks as acts of self-defence or retaliation against Israeli actions, asserting, “It is only payback for the Zionist parasites” [“Ils n'ont fait que rendre la monnaie de leur pièce aux parasites sionistes”] (MONDE-FB[20231008]).

It is striking that, in comparison to the United Kingdom, there is a significant quantitative gap between the speech act of affirmation and antisemitic concepts such as the NAZI ANALOGY (10.4%), SOLE GUILT (10.3%), EVIL (10%), DENIAL OF ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST (9.5%) and ISRAEL AS A TERROR STATE (6.5%). Interestingly, in the first measurement period, the notion of ISRAEL'S SOLE GUILT, frequently communicated in comment sections of British media, does not seem to play a substantial role in the French data.

The NAZI ANALOGY was frequently employed to express support for Hamas. Comparisons between Hamas and the French Resistance were common, as seen in comments like: “How did we end up turning resistance into terrorism? During the occupation in the 1940s, the Resistance took up arms against the Germans and they were glorified?” [“Comment on arrive à transformer la résistance en terrorisme? Pendant l’occupation dans les années 40 la résistance ont bien pris les armes contre les allemands et on les a glorifié?”] (LEFIG-FB[20231008a]). Another comment, while invoking the Nazi analogy, also aligns with negationist narratives: “Hamas is paying it back for their people killed since 48 by  committing genocide (Holocaust), but a real one, and the perpetrators are the survivors of 45 ” [“Hamas rend la monnaies de son peuple qui se tue par les  depuis 48 faisant un génocide (holocauste) mais un vrais et les bourreaux sont les rescapés du 45 ”] (LEFIG-FB[20231008b]). This comment notably projects Nazi atrocities onto the Jewish state while denying the existence of the Nazi genocide by contrasting the “real” genocide of Palestinians with the supposedly “fabricated” one of the Jews.^[23] In addition to direct references, the analogy also manifested through puns, such as “Isra Heil” (MONDE-FB[20231008]).

Commenters expressed the (Hamas justifying) concept of SOLE GUILT by making broad allegations that ultimately called for the dismantling of Israel: “This incredible and historical attack is nothing but the consequence of the Israelis’ illegal occupation of the Palestinian territory, by the way they are the only ones responsible and have to leave the occupied land immediately” [“Cette attaque incroyable et historique n’ai que les conséquences de l’occupation illégales des israéliens sur le Territoire palestinien, il doivent d’ailleurs s’en prendre qu’à eux même et quitter immédiatement les territoires occupés”] (MONDE-FB[20231008]).

DENYING ISRAEL’S RIGHT TO EXIST is often expressed as “Israel has no right to peace and security. For the simple reason that it has no right to exist” [“Israel n’a droit ni à la paix ni à la sécurité. Pour la simple raison qu’il n’a pas droit à l’existence”] (LEFIG-FB[20231008a]), or justified by vaguely referring to authorities: “Even historians and archaeologists deny knowing a land called Israel, while they affirm the existence of Palestine” [“Même les historiens et les archéologues nient avoir connaissance d’une terre qui s’appelle Israël par contre ils approuvent tous la terre de Palestine”] (FRANC-FB[20231009]). Additionally, the perception of ISRAEL AS A TERRORIST STATE is frequently implied, as seen in statements like “How many Palestinians killed by the terrorist state of Israel !?!” [“Combien de Palestiniens morts par l’état terroriste d’Israël!?!”] (LEFIG-FB[20231008b]).

A prominent feature in the French corpus is the association between the TERRORIST STATE accusation against Israel and the portrayal of EVIL: “Israel has been experiencing for 72 h what the Palestinians have been experiencing for 56 years” [“Israël vit depuis 72 heures ce que les palestiniens vivent depuis 56 ans”]; “Look at this hypocrisy, for a long time now Israel has been killing innocent Palestinians every day, but you Westerners have never condemned Israel’s terrorist acts” [“Regarde moi cette hypocrisie depuis longtemps Israël tue tout les jours des innocents palestiniens mais vous les occidentaux avait jamais condamné ces actes terroristes d’Israël”] (LEFIG-FB[20231008b]).

Interestingly, these initial reactions to Hamas attacks in October 2023 seem to focus more on supporting Hamas (or Palestine as a symbolic representation of the group) than on condemning Israel. This highlights that seemingly positive statements can still constitute

hate speech and antisemitic discourse, emphasising the importance of context in understanding their nature.

4.4 Germany

The Hamas attacks on Israeli civilians generated a highly amplified response also on German social media. Within the dataset,^[24] a total of 12.6 % of all comments were identified as antisemitic, although there was a wide range of 8–29 % of antisemitic comments in the individual threads. Even though the average proportion of antisemitic comments is comparable to other discourse events on German-speaking online milieus of the political mainstream,^[25] some thematic and conceptual peculiarities are striking.

First of all, the antisemitic statements articulated within the first phase of the conflict justify the cause of Hamas' attack by reference to Israel's behaviour, attributing to it the SOLE GUILT FOR THE CONFLICT (29.6%): "What has Israel done with all the Palestinians?! Think first!!! What happened before. Where all this anger comes from..." ["Was hat isreal mit den ganzen Palästinenser gemacht?!Erstmal nachdenken!!! Was vorher geschehen ist. Woher diese ganze Wut kommt..."] (WELT-FB[20231008]).

Also, ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION was often completely denied (24%): "The Jews are the problem. We all know that. They don't own the country" ["Die Juden sind das Problem. Wissen wir doch alle. Ihnen gehoert das Land nicht"] (WELT-FB[20231008]). In accordance with that, the presentation and legitimation of Hamas's actions as a fight for freedom pervaded the entire discourse: "In Ukraine, these people are called freedom fighters" ["In der Ukraine nennt man die Leute Freiheitskämpfer"] (BILD-FB[20231009c]).

Moreover, these attempts to legitimise Hamas's violence through Israel's actions culminated in open AFFIRMATION OF THE TERRORIST ATTACKS (20.1%) – "Awesome what the Palestinians have pulled off, cheers to Hamas for a great action" ["Geil was die Palästinenser da abgezogen haben ein hoch auf Hamas geile Aktion"] (BILD-FB[20231009b]) – or articulation of the desire for future and even more extensive violence against Israel and/or Jews: "I hope Israel becomes history like Ukraine" ["ich hoffe Israel wird Geschichte so wie die Ukraine"] (BILD-FB[20231009c]).

Images of Israel's sole guilt and its delegitimation were strengthened by the accusation that the attack is due to Israel being a TERRORIST STATE (12.7%) – "The Palestinians are fighting against the terrorist state of Israel" ["Die Palästinenser kämpfen gegen den Terrorstaat Israel"] (BILD-FB[20231009a]).

As in previous case studies, German-speaking web users expressed stereotypes about an alleged INFLUENCE ON THE MEDIA and ON PUBLIC DISCOURSE (11.3%) as well as antisemitic CONSPIRACY THEORIES (7.4%) and claimed that Israel is committing GENOCIDE against the Palestinians (5.8%):^[26] "If someone wants to liberate their country and save their people from genocide, they are not a terrorist but a freedom fighter!" ["Wenn jemand sein Land befreien will und sein Volk vor einem Genozid retten will ist kein Terrorist sondern ein Freiheitskämpfer!"] (BILD-FB[20231009b]).

4.5 Second Measurement Period (13 October–1 November)

To further investigate the unfolding situation in the Middle East, we expanded our Facebook^[27] corpus by collecting 1,000 comments per language community. These comments were sourced from responses to media reports published between 13 and 31 October. The reports covered both the Israeli military bombing campaign and the anticipated invasion of Gaza that followed the 7 October attacks.

4.6 United Kingdom

The UK dataset^[28] encompassed various topics, ranging from reports on Israeli bombing raids to UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s visit to Israel. Among the responses analysed, 19.9% were identified as containing antisemitic content. Notably, there was a significant decrease in the expression of AFFIRMATION AND CELEBRATION OF ANTISEMITIC VIOLENCE compared to comments posted immediately following Hamas attacks. As media coverage shifted back to its typical focus on Israeli military actions rather than Hamas violence, the pattern of antisemitic expression also reverted to its baseline levels. The most prevalent antisemitic concept expressed was the portrayal of ISRAELIS OR JEWS AS EVIL (27% of antisemitic comments). For example, users positioned Israel as outside of humanity and accused it of exerting undue INFLUENCE over non-Israeli political systems, stating “humanity will win the fight against the Zionist lobby, we will” and “you might own the politicians but you don’t own the people” (BBC-FB[20231018]). The second most frequent concept was the accusation that Israel was COMMITTING GENOCIDE against the Gazan population (17.5%). Commenters often used language evocative of the Holocaust (which is simultaneously denied in its magnitude in the first example) to emphasise the severity of the alleged atrocities, such as “2.5 million people are subjected to a war of extermination and a siege that has never happened in history” (BBC-FB[20231018]), and “Shame on the world! They kept watching when Hitler did it and now when Netanyahu is doing it! A genocide of Palestinians!” (INDEP-FB[20231013]).

References to ISRAEL AS A TERRORIST STATE (11%) were also prevalent, with comments such as “Zionists is evil Zionists is the first terrorist Organization in the world” (DAILY-FB[20231020]) or, through indirect reference, “israel the real isis” (BBC-FB[20231017]). The DENIAL OF ISRAEL’S RIGHT TO EXIST (10%) was often the ultimate conclusion of antisemitic comments, with statements like “actually what is not easy to believe Israel when it’s whole existence is a lie” (BBC-FB[20231017]). Additionally, users employed the NAZI ANALOGY (6.5%) to condemn Israeli actions, such as “Israel is the new nazism” (INDEP-FB[20231013]), “there no better than the Nazis” (DAILY-FB[20231020]), and “And you think hitler is the worst ... now i understand why he did the Holocaust” ([INDEP-FB[20231013]).



4.7 France

In the French corpus, ^[29] 8.9% of comments contained antisemitic statements, indicating a decrease compared to the immediate aftermath of the attacks. Similar to the findings in the UK dataset, there was a reduction in the severity and frequency of antisemitic remarks: while AFFIRMATIONS OF HAMAS VIOLENCE were prominent in reactions to media articles following the attacks, they accounted for only 10% of antisemitic comments during the subsequent phase of the conflict.

The predominant concept in this corpus is the portrayal of EVIL (20.2%). Comments often demonised Israel's actions or character, describing it as “a very murderous country” [“Israël est un pays très meurtrier”] (MONDE-FB[20231101]) or “an invasive metastasised cancer” [“un cancer invasif ayant métastasé”] (LEFIG-FB[20231101]). The latter example, likening Israel to a disease, echoes historical forms of antisemitism from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

With 12.3%, the updated stereotype assigning SOLE BLAME TO ISRAEL for the conflict continues to hold significance with a slight increase: “If only Israelis went back home in Europe and US the war would be over” [“Si seulement les israéliens rentrent chez eux en Europe et US la guerre sera fini”] (MONDE-FB[20231021]). Statements like these reveal the conceptual proximity to attempts to DENY ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST, perpetuated by the false belief that Israel was established on Palestinian territory: “What I'm saying is that the creation of this pseudo state is not legitimate and has been imposed by a colonial force” [“Ce que je dis c'est que la création de ce pseudo état n'est pas légitime à été imposé par une force coloniale”] (MONDE-FB[20231012]); “persecuted and without land. What is the miracle solution: steal the others' land. Easy solution” [“persécutés et sans terre. Quelle est la solution miracle: voler la terre des autres. Facile comme solution”] (LEFIG-FB[20231101]).

According to such perceptions, Israel is a colonial state and the Arab-Israeli conflict activates memories of European expansionism: “This is not a war of religion but a conflict between settlers and settled...” [“Ce n'est pas une guerre de religion mais un conflit entre colonisateurs et colonisés...”] (MONDE-FB[20231021]). Colonialism analogies represent 9% of the antisemitic discourse, together with the NAZI ANALOGY: “It's sad to see that humans have forgotten their past and now do worse than what the Nazis did” [“C'est triste de voir des humain qui sont oublié leur passé et maintenant ils font pire que les nazi ils ont fait”] (FRANC-FB[20231101a]).

Instances of AFFIRMATION, often expressed overtly and coupled with accusations of Israel being A TERRORIST STATE, constitute 10.1% of the comments categorised as antisemitic: “Bravo, one day they'll eradicate Israel” [“bravo a eux, un jour ils vont aneantir israel”] (FRANC-FB[20231101a]); “resiste hamas resiste  

4.8 Germany

The corpus^[30] comprises comment sections reacting to various German media reports (shifting to domestic reactions to the events), including pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Germany, assessments by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the Federal Chancellor's visit to Israel. Only 8.5 % of all analysed comments were identified as antisemitic during this phase, possibly due to the change in reporting. Users often seized on reports about the actions of the German government as an opportunity to criticise or express dissatisfaction with domestic politics, effectively redirecting the discourse.

Interestingly, the portrayal of ISRAEL AS SOLELY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CONFLICT occurred significantly less frequently in this phase, accounting for only 8.2 % of all antisemitic comments. Additionally, the prevalence of AFFIRMATIONS OF VIOLENCE decreased from 20.1 % in the initial phase to 12.5 %. Instead, users reverted to familiar patterns, characterising Israel as a TERRORIST STATE (17.6 %): “For over 70 years, the terrorist State of Israel has trampled on human rights” [“Seit über 70 Jahren tritt der Terrorstaat Israel das Menschenrecht mit Füßen”] (WELT-FB[20231031a]) or as the “rogue State of Israel” [“Schurkenstaat Israel”] (SPIEGEL-FB[20231031]).

Furthermore, there is a frequent invocation of the concept of POWER OR INFLUENCE (14.1 %) when dismissing depictions of Hamas atrocities – and thereby, conversely, also DENYING THE ANTISEMITISM motivating Hamas actions (9.4 %): “These are fake pictures of other wars, e.g. Afghanistan, Syria and so on, you shouldn't believe them” [“Das sind fake Bilder von anderen krieg lässt zb Afghanistan, Syrien und so weiter, das sollte man nicht glauben”] or “Israel has some really nice fairy tales in store” [“Israel hat richtige schöne Märchen auf Lager”] (WELT-FB[20231031b]). In other statements, commenters present these depictions as disinformation exploited by Israel to completely annex Gaza: “This whole report is untrue, no bodies, only a few suspicious pictures, all nicely planned by Israel so that they can occupy the last open prison” [“Dieser ganze Bericht ist schon keine Wahrheit alles ohne Leichen nur ein paar Verdächtigen bilder alles schön von israel geplant damit sie das letzte offen Gefängnis besetzen können”] (FB-WELT[20231031c]).

This idea of disinformation arising from ISRAELI OR JEWISH POWER OVER PUBLIC OPINION (16.4 %) was expressed less frequently in the first phase. This shift may be attributed to the need to justify demonising Israel's actions while avoiding glorification of Hamas violence, which is increasingly socially unacceptable.

Finally, there are statements that portray Israel as an EVIL ENTITY detrimental to humanity in its entirety (11.7 %): “Imagine the worst thing you can say about Hamas, multiply it by a thousand, and it still won't come close to the oppression, killing, and dispossession inflicted by the Israelis on the Palestinians” [“Man denke sich das Schlimmste, was man über die Hamas sagen kann, und multipliziere es tausendmal, und es wird immer noch nicht gegen die Unterdrückung, das Morden und die Enteignung ankommen, die die Israelis den Palästinensern zufügen”] (WELT-FB[20231031c]).

5 Conclusions

Our analysis of over 13,500 user-generated *Facebook* comments collected from leading mainstream media across three European countries over two distinct time periods aimed to answer some of the urgent questions around online antisemitism. Some of the answers could be at least tentatively predicted beforehand: it was safe to assume that Israel's military actions in Gaza would, as in previous escalation phases of the Middle East conflict, trigger criticism of Israel, which then would utilise some of the classical or modern antisemitic tropes. However, a close examination of the data also revealed that attacks on Israeli citizens proved to be an even more powerful polarising trigger, provoking sympathy but also a rise in online and offline antisemitism, and catalysed a discourse shift towards a different set of antisemitic expression across all three language communities under analysis. We also saw that a seemingly separate political event, that is the Russian invasion of Ukraine, swiftly became a pretext for antisemitic expression.

The antisemitic content in online reactions to the invasion of Ukraine in late February of 2022 and subsequent weeks seemed to be strongly dependent on the manner in which the events were framed by both the media coverage and political actors. However, it is telling that when both the Ukrainian and Russian officials used Nazism and the Holocaust as a point of reference in their narratives, online comment sections (in France and the UK) were quick to vilify the victims of these events, that is Jews, and by extension also Israel. The antisemitic discourse drew comparisons between Israel and Russia, either condemning both or focusing solely on Israel. The reports of Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett attempting to negotiate peace talks between the governments of Ukraine and Russia soon after the invasion were often met with suspicions of evil intentions, hypocrisy or manipulation, and prompted demonising descriptions of Israel. Web users also embraced the antisemitic conspiracy theory alluded to by the Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov and claimed the existence of other conspiracies with Jewish figures or the State of Israel at their centre.

Unlike in France and the UK, the news of the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have played a limited role in sparking antisemitism in German comment sections and did not provide fertile ground for antisemitic conspiracy theories or other antisemitic tropes, suggesting that in the German politically moderate online debates this conflict was disconnected from antisemitic narratives. In the DA research project, we had observed a similar pattern in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic (see [Becker, Troschke, and Allington 2021](#)). Conversely, the topics that do provoke strong engagement and higher levels of antisemitic expressions are discussions surrounding Germany's own history (which frequently bring out tropes of secondary antisemitism) and reports of Israel and the Middle East. These differences highlight the importance of qualitative analysis of the data, in combination with quantitative research, and the cultural and historical understanding of each language community whose discourse is under examination.

The heightened level of antisemitic discourse after the 7 October attacks was striking, particularly in the British data. This manifested as a significant narrowing down of the antisemitic arsenal, focusing primarily on the (direct or indirect) speech acts of affirmation (pertaining to Hamas crimes), denial of Israel's legitimacy and the demonisation of the state as the primary instigator of the conflict. This pattern of

discourse was also prevalent in the French corpus, albeit accompanied by a wider array of stereotypes and analogies aimed at demonising Israel and Jews globally. The interplay between concepts and speech acts was even more pronounced in the German context.

Compared to previous case studies on online responses to the Middle East conflict, we could observe a decline in these patterns of demonisation, particularly noticeable in British and French contexts. Antisemitism seems to have undergone further normalisation in recent years, coinciding with debates involving influential figures like musician Kanye West or businessman Elon Musk as well as the rightward shift in Israeli governance and domestic as well as international outrage about the judicial reform. This normalisation has led to more direct forms of self-positioning, such as affirmation, justification and denial, without the need for accompanying attitudes to be reinforced by distorted allegations in the form of stereotypes or analogies.

Another aspect is the nature of the discourse event: while the escalation phases in recent years have been initiated by rocket attacks and sporadic violence against Jews, the impact of Hamas's actions on 7 October was unprecedented in Israel's history. Hence, the prospect of a potentially successful destruction of Israel seems to have brought about substantive and structural changes in online antisemitic communication, where affirming violence and advocating for the murder of Jews predominated in online reactions.^[31]

Furthermore, in all three language communities, the concepts of questioning Israel's right to exist and the terror-justifying implication of Israel bearing sole guilt in the conflict played significant roles. This changed during the second measurement period, as affirming statements were once again overshadowed by demonizing stereotypes and analogies. The comparative analysis across the three countries underscores that the narrative portraying Israel as evil dominated the discourse, with the caveat that German discussions also featured notions of Jewish influence on the media.

Predicting the future trajectory of this pattern remains challenging; thus, ongoing analyses are crucial as media reporting on the conflict decreases in intensity and frequency. The breadth of concepts and linguistic patterns revealed through meticulous examination of social media content from comparable time periods and responses to similar triggers underscores the extensive range of antisemitic hate speech. It has also highlighted significant shifts in online antisemitic discourse over a relatively short period.

These findings underscore the complexity of online antisemitism and emphasise the importance of further qualitative and quantitative studies in this field. Such research not only enhances academic understanding of this phenomenon but also provides insights for preventive and reactive measures, given the pivotal role of social media in shaping collective attitudes in our society: legislative actions, educational initiatives and, critically, more effective online moderation. The latter is particularly challenging due to the vast volume of user-generated content and the often implicit nature of antisemitic comments, as demonstrated in this study.

Longitudinal analyses could further illuminate discernible online trends, as observed in the comparative case studies presented here. This approach would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving global landscape of antisemitism, alongside other hate ideologies and belief systems, providing ongoing insights for social sciences and practitioners combating hate speech.

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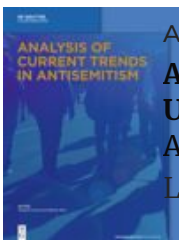


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