

Over a year has passed since the anti-Jewish massacre of 7th October 2023.

At the time of writing, the most comprehensive account of what happened on 7th October 2023 is the 315-page Report of the parliamentary commission of inquiry led by the eminent historian Lord Roberts of Belgravia, summarizing its findings. The commission interviewed numerous victims, family members, including relatives of hostages both released and those still in captivity as well as those of the deceased, direct eyewitnesses, investigators, and forensic experts. Its members visited the attack sites and reviewed thousands of pieces of evidence, including footage recorded by the terrorists and victims on that day, as well as materials collected by Israeli authorities in the following days. The report makes it clear that the horrors uncovered by the investigation leave no doubt: rape and other acts of sexual violence, torture, humiliation, and acts of brutality were an integral part of Hamas's attack plans.

Hamas emerged as a splinter faction of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1987 with an ideological blend of Palestinian nationalism and Islamism. Its 1988 charter called for the murder of Jews, the destruction of Israel, and in her place, the establishment of an Islamic state. In the original charter, anti-Semitism is a frequent theme, notably beginning in Article 20 using arguments from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and the American Ku Klux Klan. Anti-Semitism in the UK surged dramatically following the 7th October 2023 attacks on Israel, with 2,699 incidents recorded by the Community Security Trust (CST) between October and December accounting for 66% of all incidents in 2023. The worst single week of anti-Semitism was immediately after the Hamas attack, before any meaningful Israeli response had occurred. In total, 2023 saw 4,103 anti-Semitic incidents reported, an increase of 147% compared to 2022. A November poll revealed that 77% of British Jews felt less safe in the UK, while 89% believed anti-Semitism had risen in the last five years, underscoring a significant and growing climate of hostility. This rise was also evident on university campuses, where anti-Semitic incidents more than doubled between 2022 and 2024, increasing by 117%¹.

Many of the victims of the attack were women and girls. And there is a wealth of evidence to show that many were raped, sexually tortured and mutilated. Sexual violence was, in fact, deliberately and systematically used by Hamas as a weapon with which to terrorise people. Sadly, many did not live to tell the tale. And many of those that did live may well need to keep the trauma at bay, in a perfectly understandable act of self-protection; as a defence, we would say. But the wider world has also largely been silent about these sexual crimes as well. And curiously this includes the psychoanalytic world. In fact, very little seems to have been written from the analytic perspective about it.

Sexual violence in conflict and war, including the enslavement of women and girls, is nothing new. It has been carried out during wars from time immemorial. We saw it in Rwanda where between a hundred thousand and two-hundred and fifty thousand women were raped during three months of genocide in 1994. United Nations agencies estimate that more than sixty thousand women were raped during the civil war in Sierra Leone (1991-2002), more than forty thousand in Liberia (1989-2003), up to sixty thousand in the former Yugoslavia (1992-1995), and at least two-hundred thousand in the Democratic Republic of the Congo since 1998 (UN Action 2014). Acts of sexual violence against the Yazidis by ISIS and ISIL have been

¹ 7 October Parliamentary Commission Report: <https://www.7octparliamentarycommission.co.uk/>

documented. As a result of his reports, Mukwege (Nobel Prize 2018) was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war and armed conflict.

According to Ivens (2024), Head of Open Source Research, there are multiple accounts by ZAKA emergency workers who were at the scene. Between October 2023 and June 2024. Further, Human Rights Watch interviewed a hundred and forty-four people including ninety-four Israelis and other nationals who witnessed the 7th October assault – family members of victims, first responders and medical experts. Researchers also verified and analysed over two hundred and eighty photographs and videos taken during the assault and posted them on social media or shared them directly with Human Rights Watch.

The manuals that the terrorists carried with them during the attack show clearly that they were instructed to rape women, men and children, systematically (Human Rights Council 2024). In all these cases the victims were killed afterwards by being burnt alive, or butchered - women shot and burnt in the vaginal areas and hanged on trees, having their breasts cut off and tossed out and played with, their stomachs cut open and fetuses removed.

Similar scenes of gender-based violence enacted by the Nazi Einsatzgruppen. Reproductive degradation, including mutilation of breasts and violence against pregnant women and infants, reflects a systematic assault recognized as a form of genocide by the Rome Statutes.

Fox and Kolitz 2023: 2290

The bodies of women were found completely or partially burnt in several locations. One witness told the Commission that many bodies of men and women received at Shura were burnt in the genital area. In some cases, there were indications that gasoline had been used to set genitals on fire.

Human Rights Council 2024: 27

Rescue workers testified that in many cases they had refrained from taking photographs of the bodies as they were so badly mutilated, out of respect for the dead. In a two-month investigation by *New York Times*, Gettleman et al. (2024) they established that the attacks against women were not isolated events but part of a broader pattern of gender-based violence on 7th October:

Relying on video footage, photographs, GPS data from mobile phones and interviews with more than a hundred and fifty people, including witnesses, medical personnel, soldiers and rape counsellors, The Times identified at least seven locations where Israeli women and girls appear to have been sexually assaulted or mutilated.

Gettleman et al. 2024

Further, they

...interviewed several soldiers and volunteer medics who together described finding more than thirty bodies of women and girls in and around the rave site and in two kibbutzim...legs spread, clothes torn off, signs of abuse in their genital areas.

Gettleman et al. 2024

A key police witness, Sapir, describes:

The first victim ... a young woman with copper-color hair, blood running down her back, pants pushed down to her knees. One man pulled her by the hair and made her bend over. Another penetrated her, .. and every time she flinched, he plunged a knife into her back.
Gettleman et al. 2024

She testified that she watched another woman ‘shredded into pieces.’ While one terrorist raped her, another pulled out a box cutter and sliced off her breast, ‘One continues to rape her, and the other throws her breast to someone else, and they play with it, throw it, and it falls on the road.’ She further testified that men sliced another woman’s face and then the woman fell out of view. Also, that she saw three other women raped and terrorists carrying the severed heads of three more women (Gettleman et al. 2024).

The use of sexual violence by Hamas as a weapon of war, as a new form of terrorism, ‘sexual terrorism’, is, perhaps, one of the most horrific atrocities committed against the Jews since 1945. And it is reminiscent of the unspeakable ‘experiments’ of Josef Mengele, the Nazi ‘Angel of Death’, as he was known. His gruesome tests on Jewish prisoners in German concentration camps during the Second World War included the amputation of the healthy limbs of his victims. Hamas also mutilated its victims, as well as carrying out a pattern of sexual torture and even necrophilia. But there are also other close links between the ideology of Nazi Germany and that of Hamas.

Interviews with traumatised members of the public show that people had difficulty finding words to express their feelings about what had taken place (Ram 2024). The idea of something being ‘beyond words’ reminds us of Lacan’s concept of the Real as a rupture in the Symbolic. In fact, Lacan spoke of the Real as a trauma; that is, trauma is ‘the encounter with the real’ (Lacan 1998: 53). On this view, trauma can be seen an affective excess which the conscious mind cannot hold, assimilate or integrate or put into words. What leads to the development of a trauma reaction, is the failure of language to hold the event, thus leaving one speechless. Language has a limit, trauma is unassimilable. As Lacan puts it, ‘the Real is that which always returns to the same place (Lacan 1998: 49)’. The Real is beyond the Symbolic, it exists outside of the Symbolic and it resists symbolization and signification. ‘The real .. presented itself in the form of that which is unassimilable in it - in the form of the trauma’ (Lacan 1998: 55).

From early on, Freud thought about the meaning of trauma, bringing up the question of how much affective tension of this kind an organism can tolerate. He argues in *Studies on Hysteria* that ‘the construction of hysterical symptoms can proceed on the strength of recollected affects as well as fresh ones’ (Breuer and Freud 1955 [1893-1895], SE II: 158). This is the operating assumption behind the formation of hysterical symptoms. Freud also argued that, strictly speaking, an affect cannot be repressed, only a representation or idea of it. What is repressed, in other words, is something derived from perception. But the affects may undergo some kind of change (Freud 1957 [1915e] SE XIV).

In the first place, it may happen that an affective or emotional impulse is perceived but misconstrued. Owing to the repression of its proper representative it has been forced to become connected with another idea, and is now regarded by consciousness as the manifestation of that idea. If we restore the true connection, we call the original affective impulse an ‘unconscious’ one. Yet its affect was never unconscious; all that happened was that its idea had undergone repression.

Freud 1957 [1915e] SE XIV: 177-8

In his later writings, Freud understood trauma as something that overwhelmed the psyche, causing the ego to employ defences employed in an attempt to protect and rid itself of painful thoughts, memories, or impulses (Freud 1959 [1926d]). Freud states that ‘the content of a repressed image or idea can make its way into consciousness, on condition that it is *negated*’ (Freud 1961 [1925] SE XIX: 235). Thus, negation (*Verneinung*) allows the ego to acknowledge unconscious material - including potentially traumatic content - while maintaining a defensive stance toward it. In contrast, denial (*Verleugnung*) involves an outright rejection or disavowal of reality itself, often seen in response to overwhelming or traumatic experiences. While Freud saw trauma as the return of repressed material, Lacan thought of it as an intrusion of the Real.

Why was the use of sexual violence condemned in the case of the Yazidis but not in the case of 7th October?

Amichai Magen, the inaugural Visiting Fellow in Israel Studies at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies (FSI) wrote:

...there is the obvious meaning, capturing the silence of death after the acts of violence. But there is also the silence of the international community, the complete shock experienced by Jewish communities all around the world, that on Oct. 8, some people denied this ever happened ... After the screams, we experienced a moral silence, a moral eclipse. And then there is the silence of the invisible wounds, the broken minds, the broken souls, the broken families.

Parker 2024

Anti-Semitism, a term not without a difficult history of its own (Hoffmann 1988), has a long history; although studies of the phenomenon are not found before the modern rise of anti-Semitism (de Lange 1991). The Holocaust is undoubtedly *the* extreme and enduring example of where, when unbridled, it can end up, and we need to keep that in mind. Especially as anti-Semitism has increased dramatically since 7th October.

The anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany and its collaborators started at least six years before the outbreak of the Second World War and resulted in the murder of at least six million Jews in Europe. German government agencies, Nazi Party organisations, and local authorities instituted numerous anti-Jewish laws. In 1933, Jews were banned or restricted from several professions and the civil service. After hounding the German Jews out of public life by the end of 1934, the regime passed the Nuremberg Laws in 1935. The laws reserved full citizenship rights for those of German or related blood, restricted Jews’ economic activity, and criminalised new marriages and sexual relationships between Jews and non-Jewish Germans. As this is closely linked to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1947, it is also connected to the Palestinian cause and the ideology of Hamas.

Some have tried to make sense of the Holocaust in psychoanalytic terms. For example, Feldman defines for the first time the trauma of the Holocaust as a radical crisis of witnessing the unprecedented historical occurrence of...an event eliminating its own witness (Feldman 1992).

Western values are characterised by liberalism. Importantly this includes tolerance of extra-marital sex, contraception, abortion, homosexuality etc. And it also includes protections under the law to protect people against sexual violence of any kind. This is common to all Western countries. Western values are also characterised by tolerance of minorities; people with

different cultural values. This can mistakenly lead us to be extremely hesitant about criticising the lack of liberalism in relation to sex, and the treatment and place of women in society in minority groups. Although geographically in the Middle East, Israel is, to all extent and purpose, a Western country. The only democracy in the Middle East. And culturally it shares all the Western liberal values. But rather isolates it in relation to its neighbours.

In the West, the Left and the younger generation especially feels a great sense of guilt about its colonial past, particularly about slavery; and it considers the Palestinians as the underdog and roughly supports Hamas, and sees Israel as a quasi-colonising Right-wing aggressor. This explains the wave of demonstrations on university campuses, in Western capitals, since Israel waged its war against Hamas; and on Hezbollah in Syria. Here it is often difficult to separate opinions about Israel from opinions about the Jews. That the psychoanalytic consensus has in the last twenty years has positioned itself at the Left and far-Left of the political spectrum. Perhaps this is part of the larger shift in psychiatry and psychology away from psychoanalytic thinking and the mind to the brain. Psychoanalysis is no longer a main-stream form of treatment. This Left-ward shift has meant that many analysts, and academics that think psychoanalytically, support the Palestinian cause, if not terrorism; and are highly critical of Israel which they see as repressive. The fact that in Islamic countries women and homosexuals often have less rights under the law than they have in the West, and that other aspects of liberty are restricted in Muslim countries, is something the liberal Left tends to avoid. We ought not to forget that despite the recent rise in anti-Semitism in the West and demonstrations against Israel on university campuses, much is done in Western countries to protect the rights of its Jewish citizens. Many Western governments, including Great Britain and the US, proscribe Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organisations; and many Western democracies consider Israel a valuable ally and supply arms to it.

Nevertheless, before the Second World War, anti-Semitism was associated with the far-Right, but since 7th October we have seen a rise in anti-Semitism within the far-Left. So perhaps we should be cautious to explain away the silence of the psychoanalytic community in the face of the sexual violence meted out on 7th October in purely conscious terms; might there not also be beneath the silence some hidden anti-Semitism here? Psychoanalysis, after all, sees the symbolic, language, the world, founded on something that is absent (Lacan, 1991). Yet we should not assume it, for silence can signify many things. And when colleagues are denouncing Israel, those who are silent may well be supporting it.

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