

Frankfurt, Germany: Holocaust researcher Jason Stanley forced to break off his speech commemorating Kristallnacht

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On 9 November, the anniversary of Kristallnacht, American-Jewish philosopher and Holocaust researcher Jason Stanley was forced to cut short his speech at a memorial event organised by the Jewish community in Frankfurt. On Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, 1938, mobs spurred on by the Nazis attacked Jewish synagogues across Germany.

In his speech, Stanley had referred to the important role that Jewish thinkers such as Moses Mendelsohn played in German cultural life and the struggle to promulgate the ideas of the Enlightenment. Stanley also addressed the experiences of his own family. From this liberal standpoint, he went on to criticise Zionism and Israel's atrocities in the Gaza Strip. This was all too much for some members of the audience. Stanley was shouted down, and the rabbi present urged him to stop his speech.

The US professor was shocked. He had not expected such a break with the liberal traditions for which the Frankfurt community was once known, especially under conditions where many Jewish students and artists, not only in the US but also in Germany, defend the rights of Palestinians.

Stanley had prefaced his speech with the words of the liberal rabbi Leo Baeck: "A Jew does not ask what he should believe, but what he should do. What should we do today?"

The entire tenor of his speech was geared towards emphasising the merits of liberalism and the Enlightenment, which had been fought for in particular by German Jews and he also supported. He said he was closely connected to this understanding of religion.

He began with descriptions of his family history and its connection to these traditions. His great-grandfather, Magnus Davidsohn, was the chief cantor of the synagogue on Berlin's Fasanenstrasse from 1912 right up until Kristallnacht. Leo Baeck was its rabbi for many years.

His father, the sociologist Manfred Stanley, had to flee Germany as a child in 1939. His paternal grandmother, the actress Ilse Stanley, from whose memoirs *The Unforgotten* (1957) he quoted in Frankfurt, had rescued Jews from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp while disguised as a social worker. In 1939, she herself managed to flee to the USA.

His mother was born in 1940 while fleeing Poland and survived the war in the Soviet Union as an orphan. Almost all of his maternal relatives were murdered in the Sobibor extermination camp, including Stanley's great-grandmother and several great-

uncles.

As he explained in his speech, his father's family embodied a German-Jewish tradition that identified deeply with Germany. Before becoming a cantor, his great-grandfather, like his brother Max, had been an opera singer and member of the original Wagner ensemble.

For my family, it was completely incomprehensible that anyone could not consider them German. For them, Germany was a country where people of different religions basically belonged. But in 1935, my father, his parents and grandparents were stripped of their citizenship, despite their deep attachment to their country.

Stanley rightly pointed out the great contribution Jewish intellectuals and artists had made to German culture. "The loss of the liberal intellectual tradition of German-speaking Jews is a great tragedy," he explained.

Stanley himself had completed part of his academic education in Germany and taught at several American universities. This autumn, alarmed by the increasingly reactionary climate in the US under President Donald Trump, he moved from Yale University in the US to the University of Toronto in Canada. He explained that he wanted to raise his children in a country "that is not heading towards a fascist dictatorship."

Stanley has sharply criticised the Israeli military actions in Gaza from the outset and called for an end to the Israeli attacks. The Jewish community knew very well who they were inviting to their memorial service.

At one point in his speech in Frankfurt, Stanley contrasted his liberal view of the state with that of fascism:

According to Nazi political theorist Carl Schmitt, a nation is created by choosing an enemy. The choice of an enemy unites otherwise disparate elements of a society. The Nazis chose the Jews. At other times, in other places, other groups were chosen as scapegoats—Muslims, black people, transsexuals. The construction of a nation based on

the choice of a racial, ethnic, religious or sexual enemy is at the core of fascism.

The ideals of liberal democracy, on the other hand, are freedom and equality. Equality means “that no group is placed above another.” German Jews who defended these ideals became the target of Nazi hatred.

After this passage and his expression of solidarity with “Passdeutsche,” i.e. migrants who are once again being treated with hostility today, Stanley received applause.

He described the turn to Zionism and a purely Jewish state as a feasible lesson to be drawn from the Nazi persecution of the Jews, but one that many liberal Jewish intellectuals did not share. Like his father and himself, they rejected “the idea of a state based on ethnicity, race or religion, even if it is our own. Others simply condemn the apartheid system of the State of Israel and feel connected to the fate of the Palestinian people.”

His parents were deeply divided on this issue. His mother was deeply committed to the idea of a Jewish nation state, while his father rejected it. He understood his mother’s point of view, even though he disagreed with it.

At the end of his speech, Stanley addressed the dangers of the shift to the right in many parts of the world:

In Germany, we are once again witnessing the rise of forces that claim immigration threatens the tradition of European enlightenment and Germany’s supposed greatness. But the core idea of European enlightenment is the common humanity of all people. The core of National Socialism, on the other hand, is the opposite. In view of the horrors of Kristallnacht, we must commit ourselves to a Germany that is free from the poisonous ideology that led to the expulsion of my German family and the mass murder of my Polish family.

Stanley described “support for Hamas’s mass murder of our people on 7 October” as “unacceptable anti-Semitism.” However, he added that anti-Semitism also includes “holding individual Jews responsible for Israel’s actions.” “Criticism of Israel’s atrocities in the Gaza Strip” and “criticism of Israel’s long-standing unequal treatment of the Palestinian people” are not anti-Semitism, he said. He added: “A significant minority of American Jews are critical of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians. Among young American Jews, the number of critical voices is significantly higher.”

These remarks clearly went too far for many in the audience.

Stanley then criticised, without naming them directly, the practice now common in Germany of prosecuting any criticism of the Israeli government and its criminal actions in Gaza as anti-Semitism. Germany seems to have “decided that only those Jewish voices that unconditionally support Israel count.” The Germans had thus “assumed the power to determine who is Jewish and who is not.” That was intolerable.

Stanley defended journalist Masha Gessen, who had received the Heinrich Böll Foundation’s Hannah Arendt Prize in 2023. The award ceremony was cancelled, however, because she had compared Gaza to a Jewish “ghetto in a Nazi-occupied Eastern European country” in an article in the *New York Times*.

Hannah Arendt, who advocated a state “that grants Jews and Palestinians equal rights as equal citizens,” would also no longer be allowed to speak in Germany today, Stanley concluded. The same applies to Albert Einstein, who supported “a binational state with free immigration for Palestinians and Jews.”

This was apparently too much “liberality” for the leaders of the Jewish community. Stanley was unable to deliver the last third of his speech. Rabbi Julien Chaim Soussan, who was already on stage ready to recite the mourning prayer El Male Rachamim, addressed the speaker directly, asking him to conclude. Shocked, Stanley left the synagogue through a side entrance, after he had noticed several angry people assembled at the main entrance.

In an interview with the *taz* newspaper, Stanley later explained: “People in the audience shouted at me. There was also applause for my speech. But some just yelled.” He said he did not understand the reaction. In his opinion, the Jewish community that had invited him should have allowed him to finish his speech. “It was about Kristallnacht and the legacy of liberalism. That includes freedom of expression.” He described the reaction of the Jewish community in Frankfurt as “a betrayal of the liberal German-Jewish tradition.”

The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper printed a slightly abridged version of the entire speech, which has since been placed behind a paywall.

The Jewish community in Frankfurt distanced itself from the speaker the next day. Benjamin Graumann, chairman of the community, rejected the American philosopher’s accusations and accused him of exploiting a memorial event on 9 November by giving a provocative lecture. Anyone who draws conclusions from the crimes of the Nazis other than from a strictly Zionist standpoint will apparently be denied speaking rights. So much for democracy and freedom of expression.



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