



## **How Jewish voices critical of Israeli policies are censored in Germany**

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**Zain Raza (ZR):** Thank you guys for tuning in today and welcome to another episode of The Source. I'm your host Zain Raza and today, we'll be talking to independent journalist, economist and author Shir Hever. Shir is currently the military embargo coordinator of the Boycott National Committee of the BDS Movement [Boycott Divestment Sanctions]. Shir, thank you so much again for your time.

**Shir Hever (SH):** Thank you.

**ZR:** On the 27th of October, 2022, you were supposed to hold a lecture at the GEW [Bildungsgewerkschaft] in Heidelberg in Germany on the topic of child labour and Palestine under Israeli occupation before it was abruptly cancelled. Before we examined this topic of child labour, can you first provide some context to our viewers what the GEW is and then talk about how and why your lecture was cancelled?

**SH:** Yes, the GEW is the labour union of teachers in Germany, one of the labour unions. And it's generally a leftist organisation that represents teachers and it stands for the Right for Education, for Freedom from racism. So that quite surprised me when they decided to take a decision to censor a lecture which is about children's rights, basically.

**ZR:** So what actually happened? Talk about the chain of events.

**SH:** Yeah. From my perspective, things happened very opaquely, very quickly. I was ready for the lecture, I had the text and then at the last minute I got an email from one of the organisers from the local group here in Heidelberg who said the event is cancelled by no explanation, no nothing. Later I found out that he sent other people the letter as well, but to the other people that he sent it to, he said, well, we're open to a discussion. If you have any questions you can ask me. But he didn't give me that offer and I think that shows a certain

level of cowardice. I think he was aware and he is aware- his name is Frank Orthen- that I'm a Jew and that silencing Jewish voices in Germany is controversial, of course, but he decided to do so. When people, my friends, my colleagues started to contact the GEW and to ask why did they decide to cancel the event in the last moment, what was the reason, the state level GEW, which is based in Stuttgart answered that they received a secret letter from the officer in charge of antisemitism in the state of Baden-Württemberg; this is the state where I'm living, where Heidelberg is and Stuttgart also. And this secret letter recommended that they cancel the event. Of course, they didn't say what was in the letter. And I think that is a very interesting way for somebody who is an official of the state, who is receiving his payment from the State of Baden-Württemberg to go and send around letters and accusing people of- well, you can only guess that he was in charge of antisemitism, what he's accusing people of, without any kind of transparency. And the GEW refused to share that letter with me, and they just made a decision that the event would be cancelled. That was a very problematic position for the GEW to take. A lot of people were furious when they heard about it, including a lot of people from the GEW, a lot of teachers who are dedicating their life to educating children. They are very much opposed to the ideas of racism and anti-Semitism. They don't like it when the management is taking these arbitrary and non-transparent decisions. They started to write a lot of protest letters. I believe hundreds of protest letters arrived at the GEW here in Heidelberg and in Stuttgart for the state level. And then they started to change their story. And then they said, Well, actually, we have a concern that the speaker might say things that don't represent the position of the GEW. And I think that is also something that's worth unpacking a little bit, because the GEW holds events almost every week on many different topics. The issue of child labour actually is one of their favourite topics. They have more than 100 countries in which they report about child labour and they never ask their speakers to adhere to a specific set of rules and take responsibility for every word said by any one of those speakers and there's hundreds of events. I mean, if their position is that if they have a concern that a speaker might possibly say something that doesn't fit their policy, well, that means that every event of the GEW is completely the line of their organisation. And of course that's not possible and severely non-democratic and antiliberal. And so this is an ongoing scandal and the press continues to report about it. One newspaper has already reported on it, but several newspapers are going to publish articles as well. And there's going to be, most likely a legal case as well. And we're going to see what's going to happen, because I think and there is a serious problem of censorship in Germany, especially when the topic is Palestine, especially when speakers are Jews who do not represent the mainstream position that Jews in Germany are supposed to have; as if all Jews are supposed to have the same political opinion. And if somebody diverts from that, then censorship steps in. And this is one of the main projects of this official in charge of antisemitism in Baden-Württemberg, his name is Dr. Michael Blume, and he has already caused the cancellation of many events. And he continues to work on that. And the only way that it will stop is that people will rise up and say that it's not acceptable.

**ZR:** So the person you mentioned for anti-Semitism, Mr. Blume, how come he is in charge of

anti-Semitism? Because it sounds to me like he's censoring a Jewish voice and he's acting, in my view, anti-semitic. How do you view this as a Jewish person? Do you feel that this is coming to the borders of anti-Semitism?

**SH:** Well, I think that we don't know what people have in their own minds. And I don't know if he hates Jews or it's just a coincidence that a lot of the victims of his oppression happen to be Jews. But I do think that he, like many other or I would say almost all of the officials in charge of anti-Semitism in Germany and including the one on the federal level, Dr. Felix Klein, are deeply Christian people. They are evangelical Christians. And they promote their religion as political policy. They're appointed to that position because they promote pro-Israeli politics. So the governments, whether on the state level or the federal level, think that's a good idea to appoint a fanatic pro-Israeli person to that position because they don't tell the difference between Jews in the state of Israel. Not telling the difference between the Jews and the state of Israel is already anti-Semitic. So that's the problem. The problem is in the system itself, it's not the opinion of one person or the other. Michael Blume himself is confronted constantly with the multiple opinions of Jews in Germany. With the fact that a lot of Jews in Germany support the BDS movement, support Palestinian rights, and they criticise the state of Israel and the crimes committed by the State of Israel very severely. And he cannot tolerate that. That harms his world view on some level. And so the organisation where I'm a member, the Jewish Voice for Just Peace in the Middle East, this is a German wide organisation of German Jews, and he called us alleged Jews on his Twitter account because if Jews express an opinion that doesn't fit his worldview, then maybe they're not really Jews. And I think so far the mainstream Jewish community of Germany or the Jewish organisations of Germany, there is an organisation called Zentralrat, Central Committee of German Jews, which is a very problematic organisation- who has ever heard of Jews having a central committee and one central leadership? That's not how Jewish communities work. But this particular organisation is also extremely pro-Israeli. So they tend to support those Christian officers that are supposed to be combating antisemitism; not very effectively. But I think that this is going to change because right now we're in a situation where when the Central Committee of the Jews says something that is pro-Israeli, then we can all say, Well, I don't believe you. How can I know that this is really your opinion? If you would say something else, you would be censored. So as a Jew, you're only allowed to say one thing. If you're saying the one thing you're allowed to say, how can I know that you're being honest? And that is an attack on all German Jews, not just on the leftist or critical ones. It's an attack on all of us.

**ZR:** It sounds to me like there's a lot of trying to hide the fact that this is a political worldview, as you have just alluded to. Because if there was anti-Semitism, just to put that in the room, then they would provide the reasoning transparently. We saw a huge art event get cancelled in Germany and the reasoning was quite transparent. Some people disagree with that. But in your case, and I just want to focus on that, they don't provide the reasoning immediately. They don't do this transparently. They don't even talk about this being a political

thing. It goes all through the back doors. Given this whole scope, do you think you can approach this issue by talking about press freedom and political suppression?

**SH:** Well, that's a very good question, I think. Recently I gave a talk to a German audience which had nothing to do with Palestine and nothing to do with anti-Semitism. It was about the history of the United States. When I got to the topic of the 1950s and Joseph McCarthy, nobody heard of Joseph McCarthy. The level of knowledge in the general German public about McCarthyism is very low. And also, I think Germans who have experienced political oppression and restriction of freedom of expression in the German Democratic Republic, the GDR for decades and many of them still have memories of that time, because the GDR collapsed only 30 years ago. Nevertheless, this is not part of the discourse in Germany. And I think what people need to remember is not just that Joseph McCarthy used this very oppressive system of guilt by association and hinting that somebody might possess ideas that are not acceptable in order to silence them, in order to get them to lose their jobs, in order to get their friends, colleagues, family, also to be suspected of illegal or disloyal thoughts and also lose their jobs and to be silenced. This kind of McCarthyism was defeated in the United States, not by the left. It was defeated by a very strong liberal society. It was actually journalists who banded together and started to protest very vocally against Joseph McCarthy, by saying you cannot have a political debate if then somebody from the government goes and starts hinting that anyone who has an opinion they don't like is a secret communist. Or that being a communist is and should be illegal. And just like McCarthy, McCarthy didn't have any legal authority to arrest people, he was just a senator. He had commissions of enquiry, and he posed the question. The question was: Are you willing to cooperate with our investigation and to tell us whether you were a member of the Communist Party or are you now a member? And are you willing to tell us about other people? And this is very similar to what Michael Blume and the other antisemitism officers are doing. Because they send these letters- I didn't see the letter pertaining to myself, but I did see letters pertaining to other people- and Blume is posing the question: Can we be certain that this person will not express opinions that support BDS? Can we be certain that this person will not call Israel an apartheid state? And by that, he's implying that these things are not legitimate. Of course, these are completely legitimate opinions. They are held by very important human rights organisations around the world, the biggest ones, and in Israel, and in Palestine, of course. But also, he is poisoning the political debate. And that is very dangerous. And I think liberal thinkers in Germany, it doesn't matter if they are pro Israel or pro-Palestine, if they tolerate this kind of censorship, then there is not going to be a free press in Germany.

**ZR:** This has been an ongoing persecution in Germany and according to my observation, journalists have done little to nothing here. Are you really that optimistic that the liberal society in Germany and journalists will take this issue seriously? We're seeing this with Julian Assange. He doesn't get the same coverage as, for example, Alexei Navalny. And we see that when we talk about Israel, the frame of articles; I'm talking about Israeli apartheid and occupation. The frame of articles, it's just some left wing organisation or independent media

organisation such as us that talk about on this end. Are you really that optimistic that this change of tide will come in Germany?

**SH:** Well, I am optimistic, actually. But I think that everyone in Germany, each and every one of us, we have to be thankful to the Palestinian struggle for freedom. Because the thing that is going to make the change for us is the fact that now the mainstream and political- in Germany- is very pro-Israeli and very anti-Palestinian. A lot of anti-Palestinian racism is accepted in Germany as simply part of the consensus. But this is changing because the Palestinians are able to show to the world what are the crimes committed against them. One by one, states around the world are changing their opinions. Recently, there was a vote in the United Nations demanding that Israel will be held accountable by the International Criminal Court for the crime of illegal occupation. That's a very important change in the perception of the occupation that it is no longer legal under the Fourth Geneva Convention as long as Israel follows that convention. But now they're saying that actually after so many decades, you can no longer call it temporary. And Ukraine voted in favour of that resolution. But Germany voted against. Germany is now part of a very small minority of countries, including Hungary, including Italy, which is now under a far right government and the United States. These are now becoming a very small group of pro-Israeli countries that are promoting far right politics. And more and more countries around the world are changing their opinion and are saying, we can't tolerate this anymore. And I think what it's going to happen is that at some point, most Germans would say, there's a limit of how much we're willing to suffer and pay for a pro-Israeli position which is so blind and disconnected from the rest of the world. If you want to be consistent in our support for human rights, then we have to support Palestinian freedom and we can no longer be progressive except on Palestine. And when that happens, all of this censorship of Palestinian speakers in Germany will suddenly be revealed to be extremely racist and problematic. And I think that will be a turnkey moment for liberal and freedom of speech in Germany.

**ZR:** Let us now examine the topic you were going to hold a lecture about. And I know you can't hold that whole lecture in length here, but could you briefly talk about child labour in Palestine under Israeli occupation and why you think it is important to highlight it in Germany?

**SH:** Yeah, I mean, this is a topic that's very close to my heart because in my own observation, the field research that I did, it's something that you cannot avoid. You cannot ignore it. It's happening all around you. And there's very little reporting about it. Human Rights Watch wrote a very detailed report in 2015. That's already seven years ago. But you know how human rights organisations work. They move on to the next topic. And they didn't do a follow up. And last year, the U.S. State Department actually wrote a report about child labour in Palestine. But they are only interested in the West Bank because, according to their logic, children who live in Gaza, because they don't recognise the government in Gaza, the Hamas government, and they define the Hamas party as a terrorist organisation, that somehow means

that children don't have rights and there should be no accountability for these rights. And that is a severe oversight. The children are not to blame for the Hamas government. And so I think that's something that gets a little bit out of our perspective. And a lot of families in the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip, also inside Israel, a lot of Palestinian families, they don't have a choice but to send their children to work. The children cannot go to school because the families are not able to provide enough food for themselves. And because of the security apparatus, the checkpoints that prevent freedom of movement, sometimes children under the age of 16 are the only ones who can travel. And everyone is aware of this. One time I was visiting a factory, a packing house in the occupied West Bank, which belonged to a settlement, to an illegal settlement. And I saw people working there and they allowed me to come in. But I noticed, this was not the topic of my research at the time, but I noticed that some of the workers in the packing house seemed very young, and this doesn't look right to me. And then I turned to one of these kids to ask him, How old are you? And as soon as I did that, the room became empty. All the kids disappeared because they knew that it's illegal for them to be there. They knew that the employer knows. The employer told them, if anybody asks, you have to get out of there right away so that nobody would write a report about child labour in this factory. And this was a shock for me I have to say.

**ZR:** Let's switch gears here and talk about the Israeli election, which happened in the beginning of November. Israel marked its fifth election in less than four years. And we saw the return of Benjamin Netanyahu to power as prime minister despite ongoing corruption charges. Can you comment on the outcome of the election?

**SH:** Well, there's a lot to say about the outcome of the election, but I think what all of us have heard and what has been experienced is that these are very right wing politicians, very right wing parties which belong to actually parties that were banned in Israel as terror organisations, which are now being whitewashed and being allowed to be in the Knesset and probably in the coalition for the first time. And it looks like they will have very important portfolios. So that's something that is shocking to a lot of people. It's not shocking to me. I could see this trend happening very clearly. But I think that one of the main reasons that this is happening is because of the way that the international community has dropped the ball. And a lot of Israelis, they understand that the state of Israel is built on ethnic cleansing. They understand that there is an apartheid situation. They know it. They don't like to talk about it, but they know it. And they know that the so-called left parties or the liberal Zionist parties have always supported that policy. But they tried to dress it up and they always said, well, Israel is a Jewish state, but it's also a democratic state. And people understood this is a contradiction. You can't really have both. But it's nice to show a face to the world of the state of Israel as a semi European Western style kind of a state which pretends to be a democracy. Now, this didn't make any difference in the international relations because even though everyone can see through the mask, countries such as Germany continue to provide Israel with 100% support. And it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that apartheid is illegal according to the Rome convention. It doesn't matter that the occupation is ongoing for more than five

decades. The German government will continue to support the state of Israel no matter what. And then Israelis say, So why should we vote for the disguise? Why should we vote for these liberal Zionist parties and not just vote for the candidates that say very openly what we think and just call openly for deporting the non-Jewish population, the Arab Palestinian population, in order to create a pure Jewish state. It's a bloodcurdling language. I mean, it's very scary, of course it's scary. But it's only on the open what has already been accepted by all of the Israeli political or at least all the Israeli Zionist parties for many, many years. And Netanyahu is a populist. And one of the main things that populists do is they bring those things out into the open and they dare people to say, Look, I'm going to say openly what everyone has been thinking. Do you dare to stand against me? And I will expose all of the internal contradictions in your own position until now. It's the same thing that Trump did, and it's the same thing that other people are doing. Netanyahu is just very good at it. So it's also not surprising that he won.

**ZR:** You talked about the far right coalition forming Netanyahu's administration. How will this political configuration affect Palestinians? I'm talking about apartheid, I'm talking about Gaza effect going forward.

**SH:** Well, there are two conflicting things here. Because on the one hand, Netanyahu has always been a dog that barks but doesn't bite. In the sense that he threatened to invade Gaza but when he was prime minister, he only invaded once with ground troops and he tries to avoid it as much as possible. He keeps promising to attack, but never actually attacks. He also promised to go to war with Iran, and he didn't, thankfully. So in that sense, it looks like there is maybe some reason for hope. Another thing is that the settlers who are attacking Palestinians very brutally on the ground in the villages in the West Bank, the settlers have justified those attacks as a way to protest against the government, which they consider to be a leftist government. Now, when these same settlers are now in the government, how can they protest the government? So they have no reason to conduct pogroms in the West Bank. But before I'm going to jump into too much optimism here, it's important to understand that the other part of this is also the question that the settlers ask themselves: How much can I get away with before the Israeli military will stop me? And the Israeli military generally allows the settlers to get away with a lot. Very rarely do they open an investigation when settlers kill Palestinians, but sometimes they do. And the settlers know that they cannot just go with an automatic weapon and kill as many people as they want, because there are some limits. But with these far right settlers in the government, maybe even the Ministry of Defence, and if not the Ministry of Defence then the Ministry of Public Security, which is like the Ministry of Police, then nobody's going to stop it. And this is also very scary. So we have to keep that in mind as well. It's not enough to just hope that now they don't have a reason to attack because many of them will attack with or without a reason.

**ZR:** Dr. Shir Hever, independent journalist, economist and author, thank you so much for your time.

**SH:** Thank you.

**ZR:** And thank you guys for tuning in today. Don't forget to subscribe to our YouTube channel and to join our alternative channels on Rumble and Telegram and to donate so we can continue to produce non-profit news and analysis. I'm your host Zain Raza, see you guys next time.

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