HAARETZ

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‘Who are you calling an antisemite?’

In secret meetings the heads of Germany’s chief cultural bodies discussed the toxic atmosphere of fear and threats they’ve experienced lately, touching on perhaps the most sensitive issue in their country: fighting antisemitism. A parliamentary decision has transformed that struggle – and not for the better

BERLIN – Nirit Sommerfeld’s musical show has been touring Germany for years. Backed up by her klezmer band, Sommerfeld performs texts and songs, in both German and Yiddish, about Kristallnacht, yearnings for Israel and such things as Hanukkah in the Diaspora. For years, the 59-year-old singer, who was born in Israel and grew up in Germany, was the darling of the Jewish community in Munich, where she lives.

Two years ago, however, when Sommerfeld submitted a standard request for public funding for her show, she encountered hemming and hawing on the part of the cordial clerks in Munich’s cultural department, and delays in the handling of her request. “In the end they said, ‘Would you perhaps be willing for us to receive the text of the work beforehand? Maybe it will be possible to make changes here and there.’” Sommerfeld was shocked. “Excuse me? Do you want to censor me?” she shot back. She didn’t get the funding.

Last year, she rented a club for an event marking the band’s 20th anniversary. The club’s owner sent her a formal letter in which she was called upon “to confirm in writing that no antisemitic content will be given expression within the framework of the performance” – without which the club would be compelled to cancel the show. Sommerfeld fired off a strongly worded reply. “For 10 years, we have been appearing with a program at whose center is the story of my grandfather, who was murdered in a concentration camp,” she wrote, and added in bold font: “May I remind you that [he was] murdered by antisemites in Sachsenhausen?”

The explanation for both of these events can be traced back to a single root: Sommerfeld’s activism against the Israeli occupation in the territories and her critical,

very public remarks about Israel, which have long provoked the wrath of the Munich Jewish community. By submitting repeated complaints to the authorities, members of the community made it difficult for her to work.

Sommerfeld's case may be minor and local, but it's only a drop in the ocean. Across Germany a fierce campaign is underway against every person, organization or event that holds anti-Israel views, whether real or surmised.

The heart of the matter lies in a resolution passed in May 2019 by the Bundestag, the German parliament. Confirmed by a large majority, the resolution states that BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions), the movement that calls for a boycott of Israel, bears an antisemitic character. In the resolution, which is nonbinding, the Bundestag called on the government "not to financially support any projects that call for the boycott of Israel, or actively support the BDS campaign."

Despite the parliamentary consensus, the passage of the resolution was steeped in controversy. About 100 members of the Bundestag who supported the resolution published personal declarations expressing concern that it would nonetheless impinge on freedom of speech and affect people's ability to criticize Israeli policy. In addition, 240 Jewish and Israeli intellectuals came out strongly against the resolution.

A year and a half later, in the view of many, the apprehensions have been borne out. Broad circles in Germany are seriously upset at what they see as an exaggerated use of accusations of antisemitism and of the BDS label for the purpose of curtailing criticism of Israeli policy. There is a widespread view that a toxic atmosphere of fear, threats and censorship has been created.

During the past year, the heads of the central cultural organizations in Germany met once a month – in absolute secrecy – to discuss the situation that had emerged. They saw the topic before them as being connected to no less than German democracy and the freedom of artistic and academic expression. The meetings were frequently tempestuous and in some cases went on into the night. Thanks to the secrecy, and with cooperation between the directors, as well as the broad backing of the institutions they direct, the participants had the opportunity to address the subject freely for the first time.

More than 25 institutions were involved in the initiative, among them the Goethe Institute, the Federal Cultural Foundation, the Berlin Deutsches Theater, the German Academic Artists Exchange, the Berliner Festspiele (a body that promotes a variety of performing-arts festivals), the Einstein Forum (whose director is the Jewish American philosopher Susan Neiman) and many others from the heart of the establishment. Together, their leaders constitute a group of senior figures whose influence in the German cultural world cannot be overestimated.

This week, in a press conference that had been planned clandestinely for months, they spoke out against the dangers they see in the Bundestag resolution. In its wake, they declared, in a joint statement, that, "accusations of antisemitism are being misused to push aside important voices and to distort critical positions." As those who stand in the forefront of the German artistic and intellectual world, they seem convinced that the BDS scare is dramatically impeding their activity and abridging freedom of expression in the institutions they lead.

It is not every day that a broad and diverse spectrum of influential members of the German establishment come together to express a unanimous critical position on the most sensitive issue on the country's public agenda: the battle against antisemitism. In Germany, it constitutes no less than a cultural earthquake. Interviews conducted by Haaretz with a range of intellectuals, academics, journalists, artists, politicians and heads of cultural institutions indicate the depth of the influence the Bundestag resolution has had on all areas of German civil society. Moreover, their views make it clear that the resolution and its consequences – which many see as the politicization of the struggle against antisemitism – may endanger that very struggle.

Guilty of signing a petition a decade ago

Without knowing the story of Dr. Stefanie Carp, it's impossible to understand how the cultural institutions were motivated to act. Carp was, until recently, the artistic director of one of the most prestigious arts events in Germany, the Ruhrtriennale, a large-scale, even spectacular, festival in which music, dance, theater, performance and fine arts are presented in abandoned industrial buildings of the Ruhr region in the west of Germany.

Carp, a cordial woman of 64, invites a journalist into her apartment in the center of Berlin. Books line the walls, and her worktable buckles under a stack of printed pages annotated in dense handwriting. This year's festival was scheduled to have as its keynote speaker the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe. An intellectual with a global reputation, Mbembe has long had connections with the German cultural elite. The charge – that he's a covert antisemite – struck like a bolt from the blue.

A local blogger and a politician conveyed the message. Ten years ago, they noted, Mbembe signed a petition calling for the severance of ties between the University of Johannesburg and Ben-Gurion University in Be'er Sheva, because of the latter's connections with the Israeli army. BDS welcomed the petition, the Bundestag classifies BDS as an antisemitic organization – therefore, Mbembe is an antisemite. The accusers spiced their allegations with two snippets of quotations culled from Mbembe's nine books. The first, which includes one of the few mentions of Israel in his work, contains an incidental comparison of the Israeli occupation to apartheid; the second proposes the Holocaust as an extreme example of "the manifestation of [a] phantasy of separation" – making him suspected of "Holocaust relativization." Mbembe was marked.

Things quickly lurched out of control. The media pounced on the "Mbembe question" with rare intensity. Articles on the subject appeared daily in all the major newspapers for months. The question of the philosopher's antisemitism soon morphed into the question of Stefanie Carp's antisemitism, as it was she who had invited him to speak. A Jerusalem Post reporter asked her whether she was ready to admit to being a "modern antisemite." The accusation continued to spiral, powered only by guilt by association. Within weeks Dr. Felix Klein, Germany's antisemitism commissioner, weighed in, asserting that the invitation to Mbembe should be cancelled. "I called him up," Carp says. "My impression was that he had not read one line of Mbembe personally. I read him whole pages on the phone – the context of these quotes – and that made him fall a bit silent, but then he said, 'Yes, but I still think he's antisemitic.'" The official seal of disapproval had been given.

Which was followed by the moral seal. Josef Schuster, the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, called for Carp's dismissal. "Josef Schuster is the highest moral instance in the German guilt narrative. If he says someone is antisemitic, and should not serve as an artistic director, that is something you cannot ignore," Carp says.

"I was absolutely shocked," she continues. "Does he know me? Does he know who I am? Because I invited to an art festival a speaker, an intellectual, whom he doesn't like or even, I guess, doesn't know? How can you say that so fast about a person without any research and without any conversation? And it's the harshest judgment you can make in Germany about someone."

Fortunately for the politicians – across the board – who did their utmost to avoid taking a position on the explosive issue, the festival, which was scheduled to take place late last summer, was cancelled, because of the coronavirus pandemic. But for Carp the real reason is clear: "cowards," she calls them. Her defense of Mbembe despite the adverse reactions means that she has entered a professional limbo. Her term as the festival's artistic director ended two months ago, and she is convinced that no one in Germany will offer her a public position.

"Colleagues are scared to be seen with me, to be close to me," she says. "Some people have said that if I were on a podium, they wouldn't want to be there with me – not because they really think I'm antisemitic, but because they fear for their own careers. Even colleagues I know very well." Many of the interviewees noted the grating silence that prevailed in circles that could have defended Mbembe and Carp when the episode occurred. "So great is the sense of insecurity that there were no voices from the world of culture and art to be heard supporting Carp publicly," says Dr. Bernd Scherer, director of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of the World's Cultures) in Berlin, one of the most important centers for contemporary arts in Germany.

"A great many people sympathized with her situation," he continues. "I know that many conversations were held on the subject. But not one voice in public. That is something that must not happen, for people to be afraid that they will be branded antisemitic even though they have no connection with that. The danger is developing that in the bureaucracy, in the government ministries and in the cultural institutions, there will be an atmosphere of suspicion, insecurity and self-censorship. This has to be stopped." We are meeting in his spacious office in the Haus der Kulturen, an iconic modern building in the west of Berlin that hosts the finest concerts, exhibitions and lectures with participants from around the world. "I was truly baffled when Carp was attacked," Scherer recalls. "I thought that if Achille Mbembe could be termed antisemitic and the demand made of public institutions that they no longer invite him, then there would be many other important thinkers and artists we would not be able to invite. Because I and my colleagues from the cultural institutions are in constant touch, it quickly became apparent that almost everyone was dealing with this problem, and also that it was such a basic issue that we had to join together… to confront the matter."

That's what they did. The leaders of the initiative, whose first stage is a public statement, but which they plan to follow by a series of public events, believe that their action will stir broad support from a large number of organizations and institutions

across the country. Scherer, like all the participating directors of institutions, emphasizes repeatedly that he is against BDS. However, he noted, “This must not bring about the exclusion of significant players from the discussion, or, in other words, respond to a boycott with a boycott.”

‘Rothschilds and Soroses rule the world’

There is of course reason to be concerned about the rise of antisemitism in Germany. The far right is making inroads, both politically and in the general atmosphere, and the authorities report a significant increase in attacks on Jewish individuals and institutions over the past two years. The coronavirus crisis provides fertile ground for conspiracy theories, some of which build on the old antisemitic tropes about the Rothschilds, the Soroses and the other “Jews who rule the world.” The violent attack by a neo-Nazi on the synagogue in Halle, on Yom Kippur of 2019 (which left two bystanders dead), brought home the danger beyond any doubt.

The issue that is bothering the critics of the Bundestag resolution is whether the extension of the concept of antisemitism to encompass criticism of Israel is not actually adversely affecting the battle against antisemitism. The argument is that the ease with which the accusation is leveled could have the effect of eroding the concept itself.

It was precisely that concern that a number of Israeli and German scholars expressed in an open letter to German Chancellor Angela Merkel last July. They deplored “the inflationary, factually unfounded and legally unfounded use of the concept of antisemitism,” and maintained that it “distracts attention from real antisemitic sentiments… that actually endanger Jewish life in Germany.” The criticism is aimed primarily at Felix Klein, the antisemitism commissioner.

In the wake of Klein’s intervention in the Mbembe affair, a group of 37 scholars and artists, most of them from Israel and identified with the left there, but also from a number of prestigious institutions internationally, demanded his dismissal in a letter last April to the German interior minister. Klein, they wrote, is “clearly obsessed” with the subject of BDS, which has a “minuscule footprint” in Germany, and he devotes more time to it than to the “acute danger Jews in Germany face due to the surge in farright antisemitism.”

The antisemitism czar, the letter charged, is working “in synergy with the Israeli government” in an effort “to discredit and silence opponents of Israel’s policies” and is abetting the “instrumentalization” that undermines the true struggle against antisemitism.

The highly personable Klein, 52, is a lawyer and former diplomat who since 2018 has been the personification of official German efforts to fight antisemitism. Klein takes criticism against him very seriously, he assures me in a telephone interview, but also rejects the attempt “to hierarchize goals” in the battle against antisemitism. “There is no harmless antisemitism, all types must be fought against equally,” he says. “We must seize antisemitism at the root, even when it appears in the center of society and in academia, not only when Jews are attacked.”

As for the Bundestag resolution, despite the concern it arouses about restricting freedom of expression, it is for the most part beneficial, in Klein's view. It is “an unequivocal statement against antisemitism, including in its most widespread form in Europe – the Israel-related antisemitism – and an expression of solidarity toward Israel and against the attempts to delegitimize and demonize it.”

But it appears that the excessive use of the term “antisemitism” bears implications that go far beyond the realm of culture and art. Roderich Kiesewetter, a member of the foreign affairs committee of the Bundestag from Merkel’s CDU party, thinks that the extensive invocation of antisemitism could have significant bearing on Germany’s diplomatic activity.

“Germany is trying, apparently always in coordination with Israel, to soften and neutralize resolutions against Israel in international bodies by taking part in them. In the past, Germany contributed a great deal in this regard,” Kiesewetter says. “One needs to understand that Germany makes an effort with its diplomatic corps, in the World Health Organization and other organizations, to help see to it that antisemitic and anti- Israeli formulations are revised or neutralized.” The irony is that, according to Kiesewetter, Germany is then rewarded for its efforts by being “accused for having taken part in the vote.” As a consequence, he says, “I believe that there will be significantly lower interest in continuing like this in the future.”

One of the key figures attacked in this regard, by such institutions as the Simon Wiesenthal Center, is Christoph Heusgen, who served as Merkel’s foreign affairs and security adviser between 2005 and 2017. Since then, Heusgen has served as Germany’s envoy to the United Nations, during which time he earned the dubious distinction of being included in the Wiesenthal Center’s list of perpetrators of the 10 worst antisemitic acts of 2019. The reason: He voted in favor of 25 “anti-Israeli” resolutions at the UN, and had the audacity to call for the protection of civilians on both sides from “Israeli bulldozers and Hamas missiles” in the same sentence.

It’s unlikely that Germany alters its foreign policy on the basis of public protests of this kind, but Kiesewetter’s comments do suggest that the antisemitism accusations can have a wearying effect. “From what I hear, people are tired of this constant hostility,” against purported antisemites, he says, noting that this has already led to nothing less than a “paradigm shift” in the country’s voting pattern in international forums: “The reason is that one tries to tone down toxic, evil and mistaken formulations, and amid this one is placed in the antisemitic corner. I think that it will no longer be like that in the future.”

‘Maybe I don’t know I’m antisemitic’

Back to Stefanie Carp. The first attack on her came in 2018, in her first year as artistic director of the Ruhr festival, before which, she says, she wasn’t even familiar with the term BDS. At that time she had invited a British pop group, Young Fathers, that supports the boycott of Israel, to appear at the festival. “It was terrible,” she says, “and since then I have been on their radar.” Carp was accused of being antisemitic and actually had to declare her unwavering support for Israel’s right to exist in a letter to the state parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia.

“Before the festival, when they were all against me and asked how I could have invited that band, I had to travel somewhere,” she recalls. “I sat on the train and thought, ‘Scheisse’ [shit], I made a mistake. Maybe I am antisemitic and don’t yet know it. I felt truly awful. I thought that maybe there was something in the Germans, in my generation, something that was repressed and is now emerging.”

Carp is not alone in harboring serious self-doubts on first being accused of antisemitism – showing how deeply rooted the recoil from the accusation is. Everyone interviewed for this article talked about the “antisemitic label” with fear and trembling. It’s an “extreme accusation,” a “label that finishes you socially, economically and politically,” a judgment that “removes you from the realm of civil society” and carries with it “total ostracism” – and “it’s good that it does,” the interviewees added.

The Young Fathers episode led to the local state parliament passing, in September 2018, a resolution declaring that BDS is an antisemitic movement and must not be given support in any form. The event was a watershed in terms of behavior in cultural institutions.

“The politicians expect us, the directors of the institutions, to do the censoring,” Carp says. Any online evidence regarding one’s ties with the BDS movement became a cause for disqualification. “From that day on, the management [of the festival] exerted incredible pressure on my whole team. ‘Did you survey this artist? Did you find something? You have to check everybody!’ they would say. And I always had to be on guard, to tell them: ‘This is my department, not yours, they do not engage in censorship inquiries.’”

In one case, she recalls, she used a quotation – unrelated to Israel – from Naomi Klein in a statement of support for artists during the period of the coronavirus crisis. Klein, a Canadian journalist and intellectual of Jewish origin, has spoken in support of BDS in the past. To her surprise, the statement did not appear on the festival’s website. “They didn’t dare to publish the message, they were all afraid they would get into trouble. After a few days the CEO told me, ‘You have to take out the Klein quote, otherwise I won’t sign.’ In her mind she wanted to help me and avoid trouble.”

Carp, too, soon found herself also checking the background of artists in order to avoid trouble. “It’s that terrible self-censorship,” she says. And she has a host of examples. In 2019, the premiere of a Belgian performance group, Needcompany, was set to take place.

Carp: “At one point in the performance, which also appears in the [promotional] trailer, Jan Lauwers [the group’s founder] says, ‘I was in Hebron and I was shocked.’ There was a whole debate in the Ruhrtriennale about what would happen if [certain bloggers] were to hear that sentence. And then a text in the program [of the performance] described in greater detail why he was shocked.

“Management called to say that he has to skip these and other sentences. I thought maybe they’re right, we should try to avoid trouble, and tried to explain it to Lauwers. He shouted at me, ‘This is censorship! If this text is not published I will go back to Belgium!’ Management backed off and nothing happened. Everything went as

planned. But that was our daily life. There was this atmosphere of fear hanging over the festival."

The pressure is also felt vividly in the academic sphere. Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, 58, the director of the Center for Anti-Semitism Research of the Technical University, Berlin, is well acquainted with it. As a non-Jewish professor of Jewish history, she has always been compelled to explain her choice of specialization. "My second field is Spanish history – I was never asked about that," she says. "The question is often heard, how can a non-Jew really understand antisemitism. It's an implicit charge against the center, most of whose employees are not Jewish."

Schüler-Springorum cites a persistent rise in pressure on the center, which enjoys an excellent academic reputation. "It started [in my time] in 2013, when we organized a conference on antisemitism together with the Jewish Museum," she says. To deliver the opening lecture they invited Brian Klug, a Jewish lecturer in the department of philosophy at Oxford. Klug was roundly assailed by Jewish organizations for his critical views on Zionism. In an open letter to Merkel, the Wiesenthal Center wrote, in its moderate way, that "today Hitler would be celebrating the enormity of the [Jewish Museum's] policy." "It was a dramatic experience for me," Schüler-Springorum says now.

For her, the recent initiative by the cultural institutions is an opportunity not to have to stand alone any longer in the line of fire. "If we place the grim atmosphere and the bad nights to the side," she says, when asked about the situation's impact on her center's work, "the center's employees are caught up in insecurity and there is a type of self-censorship," she explains. "Sometimes one thinks, 'To go to that conference?' 'To invite this colleague?' Afterward it means that for three weeks, I'll have to cope with a shitstorm, whereas I need the time for other things that I get paid for as a lecturer. There is a type of 'anticipatory obedience' or 'prior self-censorship.'"

The pressure also seeps into the relations between faculty and students at the institution, says Schüler- Springorum. Two years ago, for example, students from the center distributed an anonymous leaflet against the lecturers, who in their view were overly engaged with questions of "classic" antisemitism. "We want to be prepared to join the debate on the theories and current characteristics and phenomena of antisemitism like anti-Zionism, Islamic and Islamist antisemitism," they wrote, identifying themselves only as "Young Scientists for Israel."

"Events like that damage the trust on which the teaching is based," Schüler-Springorum says. Implicit in the leaflet was the accusation that the academic staff is not wholeheartedly committed to the fight against, or even willing to tolerate, antisemitism. Since then she has stopped holding study tours abroad, which call for closer proximity with the students. "I feel that I no longer want to do those things, not knowing whether there are people who can vilify me as antisemitic afterward. In this regard I am cautious to an extreme, and also in general.

"Honestly, the resignation of Peter Schäfer was a major turning point for me," she continues. "I asked myself what the future cultural and academic freedom was, if such a well-known scholar could lose his job."

Stefanie Schüler-Springorum was not the only person who spoke with Haaretz who mentioned the case of Peter Schäfer, a highly esteemed professor of ancient Judaism and Christianity studies, seeing it as a watershed. His resignation, in June 2019, as director of Berlin's Jewish Museum, came a few weeks after the Bundestag resolution and for many signaled the exponential leap that the resolution entailed.

Schäfer, 77, has refused requests for interviews for the past year and a half. A few days after he resigned, in the midst of the media furor, the expert on antisemitism (among other things) who was accused of being antisemitic himself sat himself down and started to work intensively on a book about the history of antisemitism. "That saved me," he says now in a telephone interview, upon the publication of the book, which he wrote with record speed. "The writing helped me overcome all that and not to fall into a deep hole."

The events that led to his resignation drew the protest of 95 museum directors and curators and 445 Jewish studies scholars, from around the world. But the letter of support that moved him most came from 45 Talmudists, not necessarily people who hew to the consensus. "The most important and best-known hakhmei Talmud [Talmud scholars] supporting a German goy!" he says with a laugh.

Schäfer first found himself on the radar of the anti-BDS warriors with the Jewish Museum's exhibition "Welcome to Jerusalem" and its accompanying program. Initial reactions to the show were uniformly excellent, "and then suddenly it turned topsy-turvy," he relates. A volley of tweets from the former MP and ardent Israel supporter Volker Beck, along with a series of articles in the conservative daily Die Welt set the tone. The exhibition – whose offense seems to have been presenting Jerusalem from the perspective of the three monotheistic religions with a presence there, which meant including a Muslim narrative – was a "historical distortion," the museum is "anti-Israeli" and the conferences it holds are swarming with BDS supporters and people close to the Muslim Brotherhood. "A reporter for The Jerusalem Post sent inflammatory emails," Schäfer recalls, "with questions like 'Did you learn the wrong lesson from the Holocaust?' And, 'Israeli experts told me you disseminate antisemitism – is that true?'

Josef Schuster, the German Jewish community head, also joined the protest. "We talked about the exhibition," Schäfer says, "and he complained that it was one-sided, that things can't go on like this and what a pity, etc. Later, during the same conversation, my jaw dropped when he said he hadn't actually visited the exhibition."

The criticism gained momentum – a condemnation even arrived from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Schäfer experienced a barrage of attacks, some of them personal and particularly vicious. In the end, though, it was a critical tweet about the Bundestag resolution, issued by the museum's spokesperson, that opened the gates of hell. "The atmosphere was very heated," Schäfer recalls. "That was the point at which things became so inflated that I decided that it didn't make sense anymore, that incitement would go on and on. I could have fought back, but I knew that would hurt the museum." Schäfer decided to resign. "It was my own decision," he says, "but I can say also that I no longer had backing from the political arena. When things reached the boiling point, the politicians said that this really didn't make sense and that it would be better if I resigned. That was indeed said to me."

The final chapter in his new book, “A Short History of Antisemitism” (in German), is devoted to BDS and the Bundestag resolution. “The whole debate over BDS was rife with the clear instrumentalization by some of the accusation of antisemitism in order to liquidate undesirables, to destroy their reputation,” Schäfer says. “The accusation of antisemitism is a club that allows one to deal a very rapid death blow, and political elements who have an interest in this used and are using it, without a doubt.”

Schäfer too attests to the ongoing pressure that was felt in the museum due to the accusatory atmosphere: “More and more, with every guest we invited, we would consider whether we would get battered again. This person is a BDS sympathizer, maybe we should drop the idea of inviting him. The museum staff gradually entered a state of panic. Then of course we also started to do background checks. Increasingly it poisoned the atmosphere and our work.”

Schäfer is convinced that the resolution was accompanied by a significant danger. “The Israelis and the Jewish colleagues who tried to block the resolution maintained that it didn’t only fight antisemitism, but in the end was liable even to strengthen antisemitism, and I think they were right. It is liable to distract attention from the true antisemites and from the issues they promote. They can say that it’s all only political, it’s a political game. That’s a danger.”

The attacks directed at cultural and art institutions and at the academic world have not passed over the media, too, in particular journalists who dared to cover the episodes critically. Last May, for example, Stephan Detjen, chief correspondent of the Deutschlandradio, criticized the handling of the Mbembe affair by the antisemitism commissioner, Felix Klein. In response, Klein told Der Spiegel that the correspondent was now getting what he deserved, hinting that there were demands that he be fired. An inquiry by them to the government ministry in charge revealed that no such demands had been made.

“I never saw a situation in which an official in the Interior Ministry, a commissioner of the federal government, speaks about a demand to fire a journalist because of a remark he didn’t like,” Detjen says in a telephone interview. But he is well aware of the implications of dealing with the issue of antisemitism. “When you speak out on these subjects you need to know that there will be a frontal attack. The attacks can go beyond content; some are personal and are intended to damage your reputation. The result is the creation of heavy pressure.”

What happened between 11:27 and 4:19

It’s recently become clear that even Israelis living in Germany aren’t immune. A year ago, a group of Berlin-based Israelis decided to establish a discussion group to study the Zionist narrative on which they were raised. Last October, the group organized a series of online lectures in conjunction with the Weissensee Academy of Art Berlin, under the title, “The School for Unlearning Zionism.” A few dozen people tuned in, and the organizers also planned to mount a small exhibition. For a week the project proceeded uninterrupted in a modest Zoom window on the margins of the web. And then someone said “BDS.”

The sequence of events that catapulted the local initiative onto the agenda of federal government agencies illustrates the larger story vividly. On November 7 at 11:27

A.M., Israeli journalist Eldad Beck tweeted about “an anti-Zionist curriculum funded by the government of Germany.” Two hours later, a tweet in German referred to “a bunch of BDS supporters who are meeting in a public institution.” At 1:53 P.M., the former politician Volker Beck tweeted about the “scandal,” and reported that he had already contacted the culture minister about the matter. At 4:19 P.M., a particularly volatile email landed in the offices of the art academy. A reporter from Die Welt was asking where the academy stood on BDS.

The machine had begun to rumble.

The next day the project’s site was blocked by the academy hosting it, and the small budget it had been allocated was canceled. The German Education Ministry rushed to state that the financing had not come from public funds. In an official statement, the Israeli embassy termed the project “antisemitic.” The American Jewish Committee condemned “Israel’s delegitimization.” A central foundation for combating antisemitism added the project to the list of antisemitic events it documents – between swastikas on a sports field in Leipzig and a violent attack on a student wearing a kippa at the entrance to a synagogue in Hamburg.

The group of organizers, some of whom are not from an activist background, spoke of a “sense of betrayal.” “The project has no connection with BDS,” says Yehudit Yinhar, one of the organizers. “But we refuse on principle to allow the question of ‘BDS yes-or-no’ to be the framework within which every conversation about Israel and Palestine takes place. That is so simplistic.” Yinhar, 35, a former kibbutznik and active in the Combatants for Peace NGO, and these days an activist and an art student in Berlin, adds that “the Bundestag resolution is something that can be pulled out every time a Palestinian or a non-Zionist Israeli wants to speak.”

The resolution also hampers the participation of Jewish and Israeli left-wingers who want to take part in political forums. “It is very difficult to invite a large segment of the progressive Jewish population, people on the left or critics of the occupation, if they call for some sort of political action,” says a senior figure in a German political institute, someone with a Jewish-Israeli background, who asked not to be identified by name. “After all, people don’t come just to say, ‘Oy, this isn’t good.’ We’re all political people, and this is a problem that has to be solved, the occupation has to be stopped… If you can’t talk about that, what do you say? ‘Oy, it’s so hard, oy, it’s so good that the Israeli left is fighting’?

“If that’s what’s happening," he added, "everything becomes totally nonpolitical. All your work no longer has political meaning, it’s voided of content. It looks like a series of evening talks for retirees.”