

## Visiting Auschwitz, Merkel Warns Against Danger to Liberal Democracy

Stressing that it was “a German death camp, run by Germans,” Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke of the threat posed by revisionist history and rising hatred.



*Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, center, with Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland, second from right, at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in southern Poland on Friday. Credit...Janek Skarzynski/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images*



By [Melissa Eddy](#) The New York Times

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BERLIN — At a time of rising nationalist and authoritarian movements, Angela Merkel on Friday made her first visit as Germany’s chancellor to Europe’s most potent symbol of extremism, the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp, and warned that liberal democracy must be protected against “a very dangerous historical revisionism.”

Ms. Merkel, who has come to be seen as one of the world’s leading defenders of tolerant, democratic ideals, stepped into the Nazi camp in southern Poland where more than a million people, most of them Jews, were murdered. On a frosty morning, she and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki walked beneath the wrought-iron gateway with its infamous promise, “Arbeit Macht Frei,” or “Work Sets You Free.”

Her visit marked a decade since the founding of the [Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation](#) to preserve the site as a memorial for future generations. But as anti-Semitism and right-wing extremism strain societies across Europe, and a growing number of Germans question their country’s postwar culture

of remembrance and atonement for Nazi crimes, the symbolism of her presence at the site resonated beyond the anniversary.

After touring a laboratory that preserves artifacts like the piles of shoes, suitcases and human hair that she viewed in the camp's museum, the chancellor addressed Germany's "enduring responsibility" to acknowledge its history as the perpetrator of the Holocaust and war crimes.

"Auschwitz was a German death camp, run by Germans," Ms. Merkel said, stressing the importance of preserving evidence of those offenses as a warning to future generations of the danger of ethnic hatred.

"We Germans owe it to the victims and we owe it to ourselves to keep alive the memory of the crimes committed, to identify the perpetrators and to commemorate the victims in a dignified manner," Ms. Merkel said. "This is not open to negotiation. It is an integral part and will forever be an integral part of our identity."

In the past year, there has been a repeated chipping away at Germany's pledge after World War II not to repeat the crimes of the Nazis, who systematically killed six million Jews and several million others — including Slavs, Roma and disabled people — in addition to the millions who died in the war they waged.

German officials said hate crimes targeting Jews rose 10 percent last year, to 1,646, while physical attacks increased by more than a third, to 62, in the same time period.

In May, the government official tasked with combating anti-Semitism said that Jews should not wear their [skullcaps in public](#), sparking a debate about the threats posed to Germany's revived Jewish community. Those fears materialized on Oct. 9, when a German armed with a gun and spouting anti-Semitic tropes [attacked a synagogue](#) in the eastern city of Halle.

Only a [locked door](#) prevented him from entering and harming the congregants on Yom Kippur, the holiest day on the Jewish calendar. But he killed two people and wounded two others in a rampage that rattled the country and raised questions about modern Germany's ability to protect Jewish life.



*A vigil outside a synagogue in Halle, Germany, after an anti-Semitic attack in October.*



*Credit...Filip Singer/EPA, via Shutterstock*

Ms. Merkel condemned the attack at the time as “a disgrace for our country,” but many other German politicians pointed the blame squarely at the country’s strongest opposition party, the Alternative for Germany, or AfD. The far-right party’s leaders have [repeatedly used language](#) that echoes the racist rhetoric of the 1930s and questions the national narrative of vigilance against extremism and xenophobia.

On Friday, Ms. Merkel called on political leaders to remain committed to human dignity, civil liberties and democracy, which she called “very vulnerable and fragile, indeed.”

“These days, this is more than just rhetoric,” she said. “These days, it is important that we state this in an unequivocal manner, because what we are experiencing of late is an alarming level of racism, increasing intolerance, a wave of hate crimes.”

“We are witnessing and experiencing an attack on the fundamental values of liberal democracy,” Ms. Merkel said, “and a very dangerous historical revisionism that serves a hostility that is directed against specific groups.”



*“We Germans owe it to the victims and we owe it to ourselves to keep alive the memory of the crimes committed,” Ms. Merkel said. Credit...John Macdougall/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images*

On the eve of her visit, Ms. Merkel said that Germany would contribute 60 million euros, or \$66 million, to the Auschwitz-Birkenau Foundation, in addition to the \$80.5 million it has given over the past decade. The United States has contributed \$15 million to the endowment, which provides financial support for the [conservation](#) of the crumbling barracks and other elements of the former camp.

The German government also agreed on Thursday to cover the cost of providing security to synagogues across the country, including those beyond the larger cities where it is common to see police officers standing guard outside of Jewish institutions.

Jan. 27 will mark 75 years since Soviet soldiers liberated Auschwitz, and with the passage of time, the number of survivors with firsthand memories of Nazi horrors is dwindling fast. That has opened the door for a new generation of people on the far right to question Germany's 20th century history.

Ms. Merkel's acknowledgment of German responsibility for the death camp was important to Polish officials who have [attempted to outlaw any suggestion of Polish complicity](#) in the Holocaust and bristle at [any reference to Auschwitz as a Polish camp](#). The Germans established the camp after invading Poland in 1939.

After a [complaint](#) from Mr. Morawiecki, Netflix recently amended maps shown in the new documentary series, "The Devil Next Door," which showed Nazi extermination camps as being located in Poland.

Ms. Merkel has gone to other concentration camps during her 14 years in power, including Buchenwald and Dachau, which are in Germany, but she until Friday she had not visited Auschwitz.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl went to Auschwitz in 1989 and 1995, and Helmut Schmidt was the first German leader to do so, in 1977.