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Scapegoating and Antisemitism During the COVID-19 Health Crisis: A Critique of Jewish Identity in Germany

Abstract: Scapegoating and Conspiracy Theories during COVID-19 Antisemitism has unfortunately persisted throughout history, and the COVID-19 pandemic has not been an exception to this troubling trend. The conditions created by the pandemic, such as fear, uncertainty, and anxiety, have fueled the emergence and spread of conspiracy theories targeting various groups, including Jewish communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a plethora of baseless beliefs and conspiracy theories about its causes, which have contributed to the rise of antisemitism during this time. Pandemics, including the COVID-19 pandemic, inherently create anxiety and uncertainty among populations. This change has affected many areas, both political and social. Conspiracy theories that base the cause of the emergence of COVID-19 on Jewish identity are an essential factor for this study. Tendencies toward antisemitism and scapegoating have supported these conspiracy theories. In this study, how antisemitism manifested itself in media and online discourse during COVID-19 and how Jewish identity is affected by the process.

Keywords: *COVID-19 health crisis, Jewish identity, scapegoating, antisemitism*

Introduction

Scapegoating and antisemitism are unfortunate historical phenomena that have occurred in various contexts and places, including Germany. Germany has a complex history regarding antisemitism, culminating in the Holocaust during World War II. Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime propagated a virulent form of antisemitism, which led to the persecution and murder of millions of Jews. In more recent years, Germany has made significant efforts to address its past and combat antisemitism. However, incidents of antisemitism, including scapegoating and discrimination, still occur.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a global health crisis and acted as a crucible for societal dynamics and ideologies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been reports of an increase in conspiracy theories blaming Jews for the spread of the virus or associating

them with global control or profit motives. Such scapegoating and conspiracy theories are baseless and deeply harmful. It's important to note that antisemitism is not limited to Germany and exists in various forms across the globe. Societies must remain vigilant in combating discrimination and promoting tolerance, understanding, and respect for all individuals, regardless of their religious or ethnic backgrounds. Germany has a complex history with regards to antisemitism, stemming from the Holocaust and the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime during World War II. In the years following the Holocaust, Germany has made significant efforts to confront its past, promote tolerance, and combat antisemitism. The German government has implemented laws and policies to protect Jewish communities and promote education about the Holocaust.

The crisis is the product of adverse situations or circumstances that make our lives catastrophic. Any crisis is hard to comprehend for others without experience, and a crisis needs personal experience. My developing concern about the impact of the COVID-19 health crisis on Jewish identity and two studies on this subject were very influential in the emergence of this study. First, the European Commission published a report titled „The Rise of antisemitism online during the Pandemic: A Study of French and German Content”. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) report focuses on the proliferation of COVID-19-related online antisemitic content in the French and German contexts on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram. The study employs a data-driven approach to provide a snapshot of the nature and volume of antisemitic content and to analyze the prominent antisemitic narratives in these language contexts (European Commission, 2021, p. 8). A second study was conducted by the Department for Research and Information on Anti-Semitism (RIAS) in 2021. The reported figure of 2,738 antisemitic incidents in Germany for the year 2021 is deeply concerning and highlights the persistent issue of antisemitism in the country (Federal Association..., 2021). The pandemic's impact on society has been multifaceted, and it appears to have contributed to the increase in antisemitic incidents. This might include the spread of conspiracy theories linking Jews to the virus or blaming them for the crisis, which is a form of scapegoating.

The COVID-19 pandemic enters into the literature as a health crisis because it fulfills the definition of a crisis. According to Ernesto Lachau (1977), when deciding if something is a crisis, it has to meet one particular criterion; both decisive intervention and public awareness of the problem are present. Thus, COVID-19 checks all the boxes above that describe a characteristic of a crisis. In 2020, COVID-19 affected almost all countries and countless people beyond health, human tragedy, and the world economy (OECD, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis has massively accelerated some pre-existing infamous fashions – antisemitism, Jewish identity structure, and populism – one of the many. The recent rise in anti-Semitic sentiments and attacks in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic has raised serious concerns among scholars and policymakers alike. These attacks not only threatened the Jewish community but also challenged Germany's historical efforts to address and overcome its legacy of anti-Semitism. Furthermore, research suggests that a significant

portion of the anti-Israeli sentiment in Germany can be directly linked to deep-seated anti-Semitic beliefs, making it all the more imperative for German authorities to address the issue head-on with a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that tackles the root causes and provides support for affected communities. In this study, I will talk about how the pandemic triggered anti-Semitism and scapegoating its effect on the Jewish identity in Germany.

Theoretical Framework

This mixed research was informed by ideational theory. I chose to use ideational theory for this study as my counseling approach is heavily influenced by ideationalism. Ideas comprise the core of the concept of agency through a conceptual approach. The evolution and impact of ideas on political and social life were traced since ideas are embedded in individuals, groups, and institutions (Schmidt, 2010, p. 22). Ideational theory posits that ideas, beliefs, and ideologies are powerful societal and individual behavior drivers. It provides a lens through which to analyze how antisemitism, as a conceptual construct, affects the formation and transformation of Jewish identity. It provides a lens through which to analyze how antisemitism and scapegoating, as a conceptual construct, affect the formation and transformation of Jewish identity in Germany during the COVID crisis.

Methodological approach

As a result of the exploratory character of this research, incorporating both a mixed methods approach, a deductive approach, and the ideational theory as a theoretical framework to study antisemitism and its effects on Jewish identity would be an excellent fit for this study. By combining both deductive approaches, I was well-positioned to look at both individual and collective aspects of antisemitism and scapegoating phenomena that impacted Jewish identity in Germany during the COVID-19 health crisis – starting with the qualitative phase by analyzing media and online discussions related to antisemitism during the COVID-19 crisis and exploring how the situation has affected the narratives, discourses, and manifestations of antisemitism and scapegoating and how individuals and communities in Germany are responding. In the quantitative phase, statistical data is provided by the RIAS. All in all, by combining a mixed methods approach with a deductive approach, I can explore the multifaceted relationship between antisemitism, Jewish identity, and the COVID-19 health crisis. This integrated approach allows me to examine the qualitative nuances of how the crisis is experienced and the quantitative trends that may emerge, all within the context of existing theoretical frameworks. It provides a more holistic understanding of this complex and evolving issue.

Antisemitism and scapegoating

Antisemitism has so many undiscovered dimensions and layers. One of the most archetypal features of antisemitism is prejudice against or hatred of Jews. Political scientist and author Daniel Goldhagen says that antisemitism is thought, it is emotion, it is speech, it is action, it is inaction in his book *The Devil That Never Dies* (Goldhagen, 2013, p. 46). For more in-depth antisemitism definition is made by The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA):

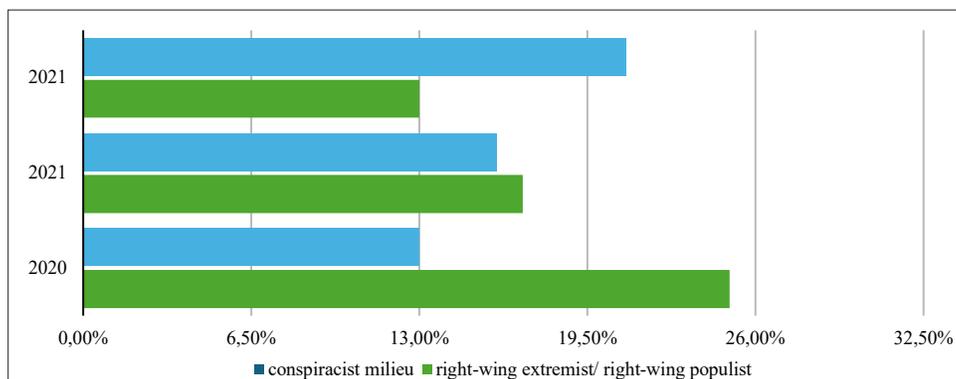
“Calling for, aiding, or justifying the killing or harming of Jews in the name of a radical ideology or an extremist view of religion; Making mendacious, dehumanizing, demonizing, or stereotypical allegations about Jews as such or the power of Jews as a collective — such as, especially but not exclusively, the myth about a world Jewish conspiracy or of Jews controlling the media, economy, government or other societal institutions; Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews; Denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust)...” (The International Holocaust..., 2016).

Antisemitism has been called history’s oldest hatred, and this view is not difficult to affirm. One of the oldest antisemitic remarks made by the famous politician Cicero, 106–43BC, Roman historian Tacitus, c. 56–120AD, Roman poet Juvenal, c.55–130AD (Phillips, 2018). Throughout history, antisemitism has manifested in various forms and has been adopted and adapted by different ideologies, including nationalism. Antisemitic sentiments have been intertwined with nationalist movements, sometimes explicitly and other times subtly, further fueling discrimination and prejudice against Jewish communities. In Germany, during the Nazis, it successfully hid itself inside National Socialism ideology. Historical accounts reveal that antisemitism is robust, but frequently, it hibernates until the right time comes, whether it be crisis, conflict, or war.

The recent rise in anti-Semitic sentiments and attacks in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic has raised serious concerns among scholars and policymakers alike. These attacks not only threatened the Jewish community but also challenged Germany’s historical efforts to address and overcome its legacy of anti-Semitism. Furthermore, research suggests that a significant portion of the anti-Israeli sentiment in Germany can be directly linked to deep-seated anti-Semitic beliefs, making it all the more imperative for German authorities to address the issue head-on with a comprehensive, evidence-based approach that tackles the root causes and provides support for affected communities. Throughout history, Jews have often been scapegoated during times of crisis and societal upheaval. They were blamed

for the things they did not commit, and these actions created some infamous conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories often involve false claims that Jews are responsible for creating or spreading the virus as part of a global conspiracy to control the world, manipulate economies, or profit from the crisis. Recognizing that these conspiracy theories are baseless and deeply harmful is essential.

Figure 1. Political-ideological background of antisemitic incidents as scapegoating in 2020, 2021, 2022



Source: Department for Research and Information on Anti-Semitism (RIAS), 2020-2022.

They perpetuate stereotypes, fuel hatred, and contribute to the marginalization and discrimination of Jewish communities. They exploit people's fears and anxieties during times of crisis, seeking to scapegoat a particular group instead of addressing the complex and multifaceted challenges at hand. Various factors contribute to the proliferation of such conspiracy theories during times of crisis. These include underlying prejudices, the spread of misinformation through social media and online platforms, the amplification of extremist ideologies, and searching for simple explanations in complex situations. Additionally, societal disruptions and uncertainties can create a sense of vulnerability, making individuals more susceptible to embracing conspiracy theories to regain control or make sense of the chaos.

These conspiracy theories have spread rapidly across the world through social media and the Internet, with numerous studies reporting an increase in antisemitic posts on online platforms since the pandemic began (Milanovic, 2022, p. 570). Pandemics can create feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, which may fuel conspiracy theories. In the case of COVID-19, many baseless beliefs about its origins and causes have emerged. Furthermore, the inequities in healthcare systems and rising racism, including antisemitism and anti-Islamic sentiments, have also contributed to the scapegoating of Jews during this global crisis. It is easy to understand scapegoating phenomena under conspiracy milieu and right-wing extremist ideas since their main claim is to Jews and Jewish identity.

It appears, repeatedly, that scapegoating can take place and flourish in a crisis. Scapegoating theory refers to the tendency to blame an innocent individual or group for one's misfortune (Gibson & Howard, 2007, p. 194). The scapegoat theory predicts that threat perceptions will increase during times of crisis. When a crisis occurs, the public inquires about the casualty of the crisis to assign crisis responsibility (Cinarlı, 2016, p. 73). The consequences of such a process would lead to finding responsible for the crisis. Emile Durkheim states that finding a scapegoat would prevent individuals and society from disintegration (Nickerson, 2022). Using or referring to Jews as a scapegoat is a form of antisemitism according to the description mentioned above of antisemitism by IHRA: „Accusing Jews as a people of being responsible for real or imagined wrongdoing committed by a single Jewish person or group, or even for acts committed by non-Jews” (The International Holocaust..., 2016). The scapegoating model of antisemitism has been a prevalent phenomenon for over two thousand years, and it includes sociological, religious, and political reasons. A contemporary version of the scapegoating model of antisemitism provides for the scapegoating of Israel. Old and new, one of the standard features of the scapegoating model of antisemitism is based on the mutation of recurring old hate myths and motifs. In this article, scapegoating will be studied under antisemitism since antisemitism is more like a giant cluster that environs scapegoating.

Therefore, conceptual theory is critical because it helps us eliminate loose ends and supports the arguments made in the article. Ideational theory explains concepts of antisemitism, scapegoating, and Jewish identity. It provides valuable insights into how ideas, beliefs, and ideologies shape these phenomena and Germany's current social and political situations. Antisemitism, the hatred and discrimination directed towards Jews, is deeply rooted in ideational constructs. Ideational Theory posits that ideas, beliefs, and ideologies shape human behavior, and antisemitism is no exception. During the pandemic, antisemitic narratives found fertile ground in the context of COVID-19. Conspiratorial ideas that falsely linked Jews to the virus emerged. These ideational constructs tapped into historical prejudices, where Jews have been wrongly blamed for plagues and crises. Ideational theory helps us understand how such ideational constructs spread and gained traction, driven by fear, misinformation, and the manipulation of ideas.

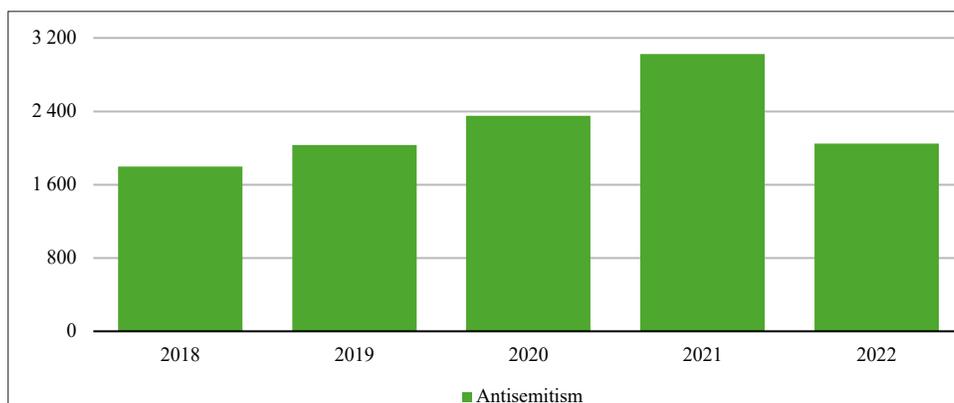
Jewish Identity

Identity is the way that people are born to determine the way they are going to think. So, their identities can be based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. According to social constructivism, identity is a social process socially constructed by actors and their interactions with their surroundings. Sociologist Stuart Hall's observation on the subject nicely captured the complexity of the identity. According to Hall, identity is best understood as a „process of identification... something that happens over time, that is never absolutely stable, that is subject to the play of history and the play of difference” (Hall, 1991, p. 5).

Hall recommends we think of identity as a „production that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall, 1991, p. 22).

Jewish identity is considered an ethno-religious identity (Friedlander et al., 2010). It is a multifaceted concept that combines religious and ethnic elements. It encompasses a range of beliefs, practices, and cultural traditions that are deeply meaningful to individuals and communities. The interplay between religious faith, cultural heritage, and a sense of belonging to the Jewish people creates a rich and diverse tapestry of Jewish identities, each unique yet connected by a shared history and heritage. Antisemitism and Jewish identity are conceptually related since antisemitism sees Jews as a distinct race of people who have fixed traits and characteristics that they are born with. These traits make them inferior to other people who are not Jews.

Figure 2. Number of reported anti-semitic cases in Germany, 2018-2022



Source: KPMD, PMK, 2018-2023.

Various historical contexts have shaped the construction of Jewish identity in Germany. One significant turning point in the development of Jewish identity in Germany was the increasing importance of historical and literary studies coupled with the rise of modern anti-Semitism. This led Jews in Germany to fashion and promote a new cultural identity that attempted to reconcile Jewishness with German traditions in response to the challenges of anti-Semitism and assimilation.

To understand the Jewish identity in Germany, we first must understand the importance of a coherent image of the self and process this coherent image into a group identity (Pickus, 1995, p. 76). Group identity allows people to be part of same-minded people and gain a sense of belonging in their social life. For German Jews, this means that integrated secular, religious, political, and social components, as well as historical memories, when tied together, provided the building steps of German Jewish culture in general. During the eighteenth century, Jews began to be joined in German culture through arts, professions,

and marriages. After decades of process of integration, it was hard to differentiate who was Jew and who was German. However, Jewish religious practices were still the same within Jews religious community, and these points had been being used by making antisemitic assumptions against Jews in Germany. Antisemitism led many Jews to reassess their identity. The question of Jewish loyalty had been questioned during the late 1870s and World War I, so Jews were already familiar with antisemitic ideas targeting them (Blackwell, 1988, p. 21). Due to this learned helplessness, they did not perceive Hitler as a severe threat when he came to power in 1933. This attitude cost them dearly when the Holocaust happened. In the aftermath of World War II, Germany embarked on a process of coming to terms with its Nazi past and has made efforts to promote tolerance, inclusivity, and the recognition of Jewish heritage and identity.

Today, Jewish identity in Germany is diverse and includes individuals of various backgrounds, religious practices, and cultural expressions. It is important to note that Jewish identity is not monolithic, and individuals may have varying connections to religion, culture, and heritage. Some identify as secular Jews, while others practice Judaism more observantly. Jewish identity can also intersect with other aspects of a person's identity, such as ethnicity, nationality, or political beliefs. Notably, the rise of modern anti-Semitism in Germany during the 19th and early 20th centuries led Jews to question their place in German society and their sense of belonging and loyalty to the country (Spitaler, 2017, p. 4). Moreover, the presence of anti-Semitism in Germany has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the construction and evolution of Jewish identity.

In light of these developments, Jewish identity has been molded into today's Jewish identity. This study shows that the COVID-19 health crisis affects the diverse character of Jewish identity in Germany. Recognizing that identities are historically contingent constructions in a constant flux reminds us that one's identity is structured about one's societal position. As we move through life, our stances also move and change our identities, beliefs, and even norms. Jews in Germany have faced some old myths following them for centuries, and during the Covid, these myths have found a soil ground to grow due to the effect of the crisis.

Antisemitism and scapegoating during the Covid-19

Especially in times of crisis, people often feel threatened and do not know how to handle unexplored territory. Before diving into the socio-political effect of the COVID-19 crisis on Jews in Germany, it is crucial to understand the psychological aspect of the situation. The clinical psychologist Jordan Peterson examines this very problem from a psychological perspective. Peterson states that humans construct explored territories, which gives them security because we have already explored them and know what is happening in these territories. We know how to act in explored territory as our ancestors had already explored and mapped through time and experience. However, unexplored territory is still foreign to us because we cannot prophesy what will happen in our lives (Peterson, 1999, p. 101). When

COVID-19 emerged and spread across the globe, we found ourselves in another unexplored territory. We have no choice but to undermine everything we know and soothe ourselves to survive. Moreover, when chaos ensues, conspiracy theories also increase, and then we fear more and try to find a scapegoat to blame. Then we believe more conspiracies and blame more as if we get caught up in a vicious circle. That is precisely what happened during the COVID-19 crisis. We just wanted to find culprits so we could blame them for the very misfortune that we had experienced. COVID-19 has triggered some old misconceptions in Germany as a global health crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there were reports of conspiracy theories and misinformation circulating that falsely blamed Jews or the Jewish community for the spread of the virus. Such unfounded claims and stereotypes are not only baseless but also contribute to the perpetuation of hatred and discrimination.

One of the prominent antisemitism has started on online platforms. At the beginning of COVID-19, there was much misinformation about COVID-19 circling online. In a way, COVID-19 triggered and helped extremists and conspiracy theorists to use antisemitism as a way of explaining the root of the pandemic. Some even doubted that such a crisis exists. Suspicion leads to misinformation, targeting some groups and identities in the long run. In 2021, the European Commission published research entitled *The Rise of antisemitism online during the Pandemic* by using online data in Germany and France. There were not hundreds but hundreds of thousands of data that show antisemitic tendencies, blaming Jews or elites for COVID-19 (Comerford et al., 2021). These conspiracy theorists believe that the pandemic is a Jewish plot (Comerford et al., 2021, p. 16). However, it is essential to note that some of these users are not exclusively antisemitic. These users are supporters of the narrative called a New World Order, which supports the idea that elites in control of global finance institutions and other people would suffer because of these elites. That being said, both groups, one way or another, serve the antisemitic concept as their speeches and ideas rightly fall under the description of the IHRA.

At the beginning of the pandemic, some protestors in Germany protested the measures taken by the German government. Yet some people used this protest as a way of promoting neo-Nazi ideology. Some even wore yellow stars with this move; they equated wearing masks for the virus with the Jews wearing yellow stars during the Nazi era (Williamson, 2020).

Right-wing supporters in Germany used these types of protests and exploited them by using antisemitic ideology and making scapegoats of Jews. In 2020, the head of the Central Council of Jews, Josef Schuster, claimed Jews were increasingly being held collectively responsible for the spread of the virus and compared the situation to narratives around the plague in the Middle Ages (Connolly, 2020). The RIAS report showed that the coronavirus pandemic, with its anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives, and the Middle East conflict with antisemitic criticism of Israel were the main drivers of the 2,738 incidents it documented (Federal Association..., 2021). The group said that the incidents included both criminal and non-criminal incidents. They also said two significant incidents sparked the manifestation of antisemitism: The COVID-19 pandemic and the uprising of the Arab-Israeli conflict in

May 2021. Moreover, the RIAS report also showed, „Both antisemitic conspiracy myths and Shoah trivialization have been normalized. This is a worrisome development” (Axelrod, 2020). In Germany, the Criminal Police Notification Service – Politically Motivated Crimes (Kriminalpolizeilicher Meldedienst – politisch motivierte Kriminalität, KPMD PMK) gathers official data on antisemitism 2018–2022.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the quantitative and qualitative data have shown that the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a wave of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty across the globe. Sadly, this has also provided a platform for the proliferation of hateful and discriminatory conspiracy theories that aim to blame and demonize specific groups of people, including Jews. It is crucial to recognize that antisemitism and antisemitism as a form of scapegoating are a societal issue that requires collective efforts to address. During the COVID-19 misinformation, lack of proper knowledge about COVID-19 had directly affected the Jewish community and, more so, on Jewish identity in Germany. Many examples supporting this problem are given in this study by browsing online news based on scapegoating and anti-Semitism against Jews in Germany. Accompanied by these examples, this study critiques the Jewish identity in Germany.

It is also important to note that conceptual theory provides a powerful lens through which to analyze the dynamics of antisemitism, scapegoating, and Jewish identity during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. It underscores the central role of ideas, beliefs, and ideologies in shaping human behavior and societal responses. The pandemic exposed how ideational constructs can be manipulated and weaponized, leading to the resurgence of antisemitism and the scapegoating of Jews. Simultaneously, the crisis highlighted the resilience and adaptability of Jewish identity in the face of ideational threats.

Understanding the complex interplay between ideational constructs and these concepts is crucial for comprehending the past and shaping a more tolerant and inclusive future. It underscores the imperative of challenging discriminatory ideational constructs and promoting positive narratives, especially during times of crisis, to combat prejudice and foster a society where all individuals, including Jews, can thrive free from discrimination and fear.

Now, it is possible to make some predictions about how to deal with such events in the future. This includes education, promoting intercultural dialogue, fostering tolerance and understanding, and holding accountable those who engage in antisemitic behavior or rhetoric. Fighting against disinformation related to Jewish conspiracy theories during the COVID-19 pandemic requires a focused and concerted effort. Fighting against these also means fighting against all forms of antisemitism and scapegoating of Jews, and these actions would lead to protecting Jewish identity and culture in Germany in the long run. Here are some strategies specifically aimed at addressing this issue: Seeking reliable sources,

verifying information before sharing, being critical of the source, educating yourself and people around you, reporting false information, staying informed about fact-checking resources, etc.

Such efforts could include targeted campaigns, raising awareness of COVID-19, incorporating Holocaust education into school curricula, and increased support for anti-racism initiatives. Additionally, German authorities need to take effective legal action against those who perpetrate anti-Semitic attacks or engage in hate speech. Germany has taken steps to support and protect Jewish communities. The German government has implemented legislation to combat antisemitism, Holocaust denial, and hate crimes. It provides financial support for Jewish institutions, Holocaust memorials, and educational programs to raise awareness and promote dialogue. However, challenges and concerns remain as this study already shows how antisemitic incidents, although relatively low compared to the past, still occur, and there are ongoing efforts to address and combat them. Holocaust education and remembrance play a vital role in promoting understanding and countering prejudice. By doing so, they can send a clear message that anti-Semitic behavior will not be tolerated in Germany and demonstrate their commitment to upholding the values of tolerance, equality, and human rights. Since Germany believes in the importance of multiculturalism, protecting Jewish identity, which has a long history in Germany, would lead Jews to feel protected in their home country.

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