

‘We have drawn a different lesson from history’: How the world is reacting to violence in Charlottesville

By [Isaac Stanley-Becker](#) and [James McAuley](#) August 14 at 3:25 PM

BERLIN — Much of the world looked on in horror and puzzlement as a demonstration by torch-wielding white nationalists in an American college town ended in violence and the arraignment of a 20-year-old man on charges of second-degree murder.

[James Alex Fields Jr.](#) is accused of ramming a car into a crowd of activists, leaving one dead and 19 injured. That the suspect was a Nazi sympathizer, according to his former teacher, made the weekend’s events particularly wrenching in Germany, a nation still seared by the darkest chapters of its past.

Steffen Seibert, a spokesman for German Chancellor Angela Merkel, said Monday the violence that unfolded in Charlottesville was “sickening.” He described the symbols and slogans employed in “the right-wing extremist march” — including swastikas and chants of

“Blood and Soil,” a Nazi-era motto — as “diametrically opposed to the political goals of the chancellor and the entire German government.”

Justin Trudeau, the prime minister of Canada, said in a tweet, “We know Canada isn’t immune to racist violence and hate.” Nigel Farage, the former leader of the anti-immigrant U.K. Independence Party, observed on Twitter: “Cannot believe we're seeing Nazi salutes in 21st century America.”

In countries such as Germany and France that have adopted strict codes policing hateful speech, there were also questions about why white supremacists carrying guns were allowed to assemble and propagate a message targeting racial and religious minorities.

“Most people in Germany have difficulty understanding that gatherings like in Charlottesville are possible in the U.S. because we have drawn a different lesson from history,” said Matthias Jahn, chair of criminal law at the Goethe University in Frankfurt. “Our German law centers on the strong belief that you should hinder this kind of speech in a society committed to principles of democratic co-existence and peace.”

That sense of shock was reflected in breathless media coverage, much of which focused blame on the Trump administration.

“President fails to blame white supremacists,” observed the British newspaper the Guardian. Trump on Monday ultimately condemned neo-Nazis and other groups, saying, “Racism is evil.”

A front-page headline in the French daily Libération blared, “The White House,” suggesting that the center of racial animus was the executive branch of the American government.

Chinese state media seldom misses a chance to train a harsh spotlight on American society and governance, and the China Daily newspaper

opined of unrest in Virginia: “Sickness in U.S. society will not be easy to cure.” Russia’s state-run RIA Novosti news agency attributed the violence not to racism but to the growing gap between rich and poor, and blamed “the American political and media elites“ for stoking the violence.

In a mostly isolated show of solidarity with white supremacist factions in Charlottesville, Greece’s far-right group Golden Dawn praised the rally as a "dynamic demonstration against illegal immigration" by “American patriots.”

While Jewish leaders in the United States expressed shock at the events in Charlottesville and criticized President Trump's response to the violence as half-hearted, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a close ally of Trump’s, remained notably silent. Meanwhile, Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem, warned in a statement: “The anti-Jewish ideology of the Nazis was a precursor to the eventual murderous policy and extermination of six million Jews.”

Even in denouncing the message of neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klan members, free speech advocates, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, defended the right of these groups to stage the Unite the Right rally — at the site of a Confederate statue scheduled for removal.

“Even as we protect free speech and assembly, we must condemn hatred, violence and white supremacy,” tweeted former president Bill Clinton.

For some Western democracies, the tension is not as acute.

Germany curtails speech in an effort to keep Nazi ideology at bay. The German constitution, approved after World War II, codifies individual rights such as equality before the law and freedom of speech, but postwar changes to the penal code prohibit a range of

expression linked to the Third Reich.

The statute that would have criminalized the far-right demonstration in Charlottesville, said Jahn, the criminal law professor, is a prohibition on assembly that “disturbs the public peace in a manner that violates the dignity of the victims” by venerating Nazi rule.

German hate-crime law, he said, was recently strengthened by a 2015 amendment requiring courts to consider racial motives as an aggravating circumstance.

In spite of these statutes, crime motivated by right-wing ideology has surged in Germany, according to a report issued this year by the Interior Ministry

Hajo Funke, a political scientist at the Free University of Berlin, said right-wing extremism crested last year — after months of anger over a seemingly limitless flow of asylum seekers into Germany — and has begun to abate in 2017.

“One factor is Trump, and people looking at the U.S. and saying, ‘This is not the right way,’” Funke said. “The other factor is that the euro crisis and the refugee crisis are to a degree under control.”

Like Germany, France criminalizes certain types of speech, largely designed to combat Holocaust denial.

The 1990 Gayssot Act limits an individual’s ability to question the size, scope or nature of “crimes against humanity.” While critics allege that the parameters of the legislation are too broad, — it also prohibits “any discrimination founded on membership or non-membership of an ethnic group, a nation, a race or a religion” — the measure has led to several high-profile convictions.

At the same time, French law has hardly done away with hate speech.

In 2013, in what would become one of the most high-profile cases in recent years, the Franco-Cameroonian comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala began encouraging a gesture that resembled a Nazi salute. Despite innumerable convictions and fines, he has continued with versions of these routines.

Another case is that of Jean-Marie Le Pen, the 89-year-old co-founder of the far-right National Front. Since the late 1980s, the elder Le Pen has continually referred to the Nazi gas chambers as a “detail” of history. Under the Gayssot Act, Le Pen has also been convicted and fined on numerous occasions — but has continued to repeat his remark. As recently as March, he told *The Washington Post* that he still did not regret the comment.

McAuley reported from Paris. Reporting was contributed by Luisa Beck in Berlin, William Booth in London, Simon Denyer in Beijing, David Filipov in Moscow, Loveday Morris in Jerusalem and Brian Murphy in Washington.

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