

The Commentator
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The cowed West strikes again
By Lawrence J. Haas

Another attack on free speech. Another cowed governmental response. Another speaker in hiding. Another incident for the media to ignore.

Ah, just another day in the West.

The latest outrage comes from the city of Arnhem in the Netherlands, where a doctoral student who interviewed a group of teenaged Muslim-Turkish immigrants on TV about their Jew-hating, and challenged their views, is now in hiding at the suggestion of Arnhem's mayor, Pauline Krikke.

Mehmet Sahin – a doctoral student and volunteer who attempts to re-educate street youths in Arnhem – interviewed the Dutch-Turkish youths last month on Nederland 2 TV. Upon hearing their hatred of Jews and admiration for Hitler, he called the boys “pathetic” and challenged them to think differently. The interview was later subtitled into English and went viral.

Once again, Western officialdom treats a free speech practitioner as less a hero than an irritant, sending the person into hiding for his “own sake,” thus encouraging future efforts to restrict free speech and perpetuating the West's head-in-the-sand approach to a real problem. Once again, media attention to the incident – beyond, in this case, the Netherlands and the Jewish press – is confined largely to right-wing blogs and websites.

So, here's an idea to alter this sickening cycle of intimidation and appeasement:

Rather than ship the victim off to hiding, the government in question should spend whatever it takes to protect the person – bodyguards, a bullet-proof car, and so on – and encourage the person to continue his or her public activities, making clear that free speech is a top governmental priority.

In the interview in question, the bearded, bespectacled Sahin leans forward in a chair. The youths sit on couches, dressed as you'd expect – in jeans, short-sleeve polo shirts, long-sleeve flannels, floppy sweats, and so on.

“As far as I'm concerned, Hitler should have killed all Jews,” one boy says, evoking laughs from the others. “What Hitler said about Jews,” the boy adds, “is that there will be one day when you see that I am right that I killed all the Jews. And that day will come.”

Another boy explains, “The hatred for the Jews is because they will try to steal somebody's country like in Gaza. They kill a lot of people.” Asked whether Hitler was justified in killing millions of Jews, he says yes because “now millions of Palestinians are being killed.” Challenging that allegation, Sahin gets nowhere.

The first boy acknowledges that he has no Jewish friends but insists, “You don’t have to know any Jews to say something about them.”

A third boy assures the interviewer that the views of these youths are neither confined to them nor even to the immigrant community, saying, “Nobody in our school likes Jews. Come to our school. I mean it.”

In response to the video, the Simon Wiesenthal Center sent a letter of protest to Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, whose government reportedly has said and done little if anything since the incident.

“The statements made by young Dutch immigrant teenagers lauding Adolf Hitler and his efforts to murder Jews, are deeply dismaying,” wrote Rabbi Abraham Cooper, the Center’s associate dean, and Mark Weitzman, its director of government affairs, “especially considering that they were made in the country that was the home of Anne Frank and that was only two years ago, Chair of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (formerly the International Task Force for Holocaust Education, Research and Remembrance)...

“We call upon you to take action on a broad front to investigate the presence of anti-Semitic attitudes in Dutch society,” they continued, “and to take steps to vigorously combat the spread of those beliefs. Anti-Semitism cannot be allowed to flourish and poison the minds of the next generation.”

Krikke, Arnhem’s mayor, advised Sahin to go into hiding with his family after he received death threats. In his neighborhood, people are collecting signatures to make Sahin leave.

Fortunately, some elements of Dutch officialdom have begun to take notice. One Labor Party parliamentarian said he will highlight the issue during Parliament’s question period. Leading newspapers wrote about the Wiesenthal Center’s letter of protest, with one reporting it on its front page. Prosecutors in Arnhem are reportedly considering charging the youths with incitement.

Fine.

But governmental efforts in Europe to ensure a free flow of ideas in the public sphere remain woefully inadequate.

Meanwhile, Sahin and others who do the hard work of promoting inter-faith tolerance have their work cut out for themselves.

“I hate Jews period,” the first boy tells Sahin in the interview. “You can’t get that thought out of my mind.”

Lawrence J. Haas was Communications Director and Press Secretary for Vice President Al Gore. He writes widely about foreign and domestic affairs and is the author of "Sound the Trumpet: The United States and Human Rights Promotion."