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REPORT

Did the Terrorists Win in Denmark?

The Danish editor who published the notorious Mohammed cartoons now says his newspaper stood by him in public while trying to silence him in private.

BY **SIMON COTTEE**

OCTOBER 28, 2016



For someone so unassuming and affable, Flemming Rose, the former foreign affairs editor of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, has a prodigious talent for making trouble. And trouble, for its part, has a special talent for finding Rose.

On Sept. 19, 2005, Rose, the then culture editor at *Jyllands-Posten*, invited 42 Danish cartoonists and illustrators to draw the Prophet Mohammed “as they see him” for publication in the newspaper. Twelve artists took up the challenge, and on Sept. 30, that

year, *Jyllands-Posten* duly published **12 editorial cartoons** under the title, “The Face of Muhammad.” Of the 12, the most notorious was by Kurt Westergaard, depicting the prophet with a bomb in his turban. Another showed the prophet in heaven, remonstrating suicide bombers with the words, “Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins!” The purpose of this exercise, Rose later explained in a *Washington Post* **article**, “wasn’t to provoke gratuitously,” but rather “to push back self-imposed limits on expression that seemed to be closing in tighter.”

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The story of what happened next is well-known. On Feb. 4, 2006, the **Danish and Norwegian embassies** in Syria were set alight amid protests against the cartoons. A mob burned down the **Danish embassy in Lebanon** a day later. In total, 139 people were **killed** in demonstrations from Nigeria to Pakistan, and Rose and Westergaard were forced to live under armed guard, later appearing, in 2013, on an al Qaeda **hit list**, alongside the novelist Salman Rushdie and Stéphane Charbonnier, the editor of *Charlie Hebdo* who was **murdered with 11 others** at the magazine’s office in January 2015.

It has been more than 10 years since the cartoons were published, and Rose is making trouble again. But this time it involves not an inflamed mob or wannabe jihadi assassins, but his former colleagues and bosses at the newspaper he worked for his whole professional life until his **retirement** on Jan. 1 this year.

Rose's new book — his third — will be released in Denmark next Monday. His previous two books — *The Tyranny of Silence*, first published in 2010, and *Hymne til Friheden* (“Hymn to Freedom”), published last year to mark the 10th anniversary of the cartoons — are primarily about ideas, and the centrality of one idea in particular: freedom of speech. His new book, *The Possessed*, is also about ideas. But it's not a defense of abstract principles so much as an attack on those who were once closest to him, whom he accuses of abandoning their convictions in the face of a growing climate of fear and intimidation fueled by the threat of terrorism in Europe. It is less a book than a brick aimed squarely at what he sees as the hypocrisy of his former colleagues at *Jyllands-Posten*, who, he claims, tried to silence him privately, all the while defending free speech publicly.

Rose relayed all this to me when we met over coffee in Paris last week. The last time I **interviewed** him was in a café in Copenhagen last year, when he was flanked by his three bodyguards from the Danish security and intelligence service. This time Rose's security detail was conspicuously absent: He was on vacation and didn't want them around. I tried hard to convey a look of insouciance as I nervously scanned the joint for suspicious activity. Rose, 58, looked unchanged from the last time we met, which is to say: in pretty good nick.

The Possessed contains a litany of accusations levelled at his former bosses: Jorn Mikkelsen, Rose's editor in chief at *Jyllands-Posten*, Lars Munch, the former CEO of **JP/Politiken**, which owns *Jyllands-Posten*, and Jorgen Ejbol, the former chairman of JP/Politiken. They all hinge on a dual theme: the silencing of Rose, and the corrosion of free speech in a time of terror.

In public, *Jyllands-Posten* appeared to stand firmly by Rose's side: It refused to apologize for printing the cartoons (though it did apologize for having "indisputably offended" many Muslims). In 2008, it reprinted the drawing by Westergaard, in response to death threats against the cartoonist. But it didn't take long, according to Rose, for the paper to decide it had had enough of the whole affair.

One of the most striking accusations Rose makes is that, in June 2011, he was issued with what he describes as a "dictate," containing nine numbered points. In Rose's telling, this was read out to him, from a printed email, by Ejbol in a meeting which his editor in chief and the CEO of JP/Politiken also attended. Rose told me that after Ejbol finished speaking, Rose asked for a copy of the document, since it was a lot to take in. "So he gave it to me, very reluctantly, and I just put it in a cup on my desk at home, where it sat for three or four years." I asked Rose for an English translation of the document, which he sent to me via email. It reads:

- 1) *No participation in radio and tv-programmes, national and international.*
- 2) *No participation in conferences and speaking engagements, national and international.*
- 3) *Do not comment on religious issues.*
- 4) *Do not cover OIC [Organization of Islamic Cooperation], The Islamic Conference*
- 5) *Do not comment on the cartoons.* 6) *Length: So far, one year from now.*

7) *Disputable questions are to be discussed by [Lars] Munch and [Jørn] Mikkelsen. Munch makes final decision.*

8) *If Rose's book is to be published abroad a special plan has to be worked out. Munch makes final decision.*

9) ??

The book alluded to in point eight is *The Tyranny of Silence*, which was published in Danish in 2010 and in English in 2014. It is unclear as to what the question marks in point nine allude. Revealingly, the document opens with the following statement: “The company finds itself in an extraordinary situation. Security will always weigh the heaviest. Human lives are more important than principles.” This was a reference to the terror threat that the publication of the cartoons had brought to the paper and its employees; it was also the justification for reining in Rose.

Of course, the company *was* in an extraordinary situation at the time at which Rose received the “dictate.” In December 2010, the Danish security services, in partnership with their counterparts in Sweden, **neutralized a plot** to attack *Jyllands-Posten*. The five plotters, four of whom Swedish citizens, had planned to launch what police called a “**Mumbai**-style” attack at the offices of the paper, in revenge for the publication of the cartoons. Rose mentioned this case in our interview: “That incident was the height of the terrorist threat [against *Jyllands-Posten*], and it was one of the reasons why I accepted this eight-point dictate.” Rose also told me that, having already been accused of disloyalty and “running his own show” in an earlier conflict with his employers, he didn’t want to be charged with the accusation again, and so he felt an additional pressure to comply.

This meeting was not the first time Rose’s bosses had expressed their disapproval of his public visibility. In 2010, Rose had agreed with his employers that after the publication

of *The Tyranny of Silence*, he would keep a low profile. But Rose's definition of "low profile" was obviously at variance with that of his employers. He told me that two column-pieces he wrote — one on Kenan Malik's book *From Fatwa to Jihad* and the other on modern Russian art and insult — drew censure from his CEO: "This is November/December 2010, and then in January 2011, the CEO comes into my office, he takes out these two columns, a lot of red underlining, and he says to me, 'you have to stop, you're obsessed, people up on the fourth floor [the offices of JP/Politiken] are up in arms and saying, isn't he able to stop?' And I just laughed, and I said, 'I'm just trying to find out why I believe what I do. And for me these two columns were not about the cartoons crisis; yes, they had some relationship to free speech... but this is a very topical issue.'" Rose added, "My editor in chief didn't say anything; it was the CEO who came down to speak to me."

The "dictate" was to remain active for a year, as per point six, after which it was to be reviewed. Rose accepted this, believing that after this period, his bosses would soften their line toward him. But this never happened, he says: "We had that meeting in September 2012, the CEO, me and the editor-in-chief, and to my big surprise the CEO says to me, 'The list we agreed upon — *agreed*,'" Rose repeated this with heavy irony, "last year will be paramount as long as you're employed by this company." Rose expressed his opposition to this, but nonetheless complied with it, bending the rules here and there during the remainder of his time at *Jyllands-Posten*. One such transgression was his decision to appear in a televised debate with the Dutch far-right politician Geert Wilders. Rose said that three weeks before the event, scheduled for June 13, 2015, he took a call from Ejbol, who was then deputy chairman of the board of JP/Politiken. Ejbol, in no uncertain terms, expressed his disapproval. In Rose's version: "He starts yelling at me, 'Why the fuck did you say yes to appear on stage with this terrorist target, are you stupid? Do you have a secret death wish? You have grandchildren now. Are you completely out of your mind? It's okay if you want to die yourself, but why are you taking the company though all this?'" The breaking point came in September 2015, when, he alleges, Ejbol warned him against promoting his new

book *Hymn to Freedom* in digital media. It was shortly after this that Rose handed in his resignation.

Almost immediately he started the mental work of trying to make sense of what happened and how “everything fell apart.” When I interviewed him in December last year, he told me, off the record at the time: “We [Rose and his bosses at *Jyllands-Posten*] had a conflict and that’s why I’m leaving. They basically presented me with an ultimatum: Either you are an editor or you are a debater. And it’s a false dichotomy, because most editors are also debaters. But it was a way of telling me to shut up and keep silent about these matters.” Elaborating on his reasons for leaving, he said, “After *Charlie Hebdo* and what is going on now, I feel that this is an historical moment for Europe and it could go bad in many ways. I just want to be part of that debate, because some of the basic issues I have been thinking about for the past 10 years. That turned out to be incompatible with my role as a foreign editor... I’m going to write a book about this.” Which, true to his word, he has done. I asked Rose if it had been a cathartic experience, but he dodged the question. The point of the book, he said, is to defend the independence of the media. Rose, who is about to become a senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#) in Washington, now spends most of his time writing and debating.

I contacted Lars Munch, now chairman of JP/Politiken, and Jorgen Ejbol, now vice chairman of JP/Politiken and chairman of the Jyllands-Posten Foundation, for comment on Rose’s allegations. Munch, who was also speaking on behalf of Ejbol said, via email: “Mr. Rose gives his version, however, this was not about Mr. Rose but about the security of more than 2000 loyal employees.” Rose, who is acutely sensitive to the charge of disloyalty and writes about this at length in his new book, will no doubt seize on the word “loyal” in this statement. It is notable that Munch doesn’t engage with or contest the allegations in Rose’s version. When reached for comment, Mikkelsen said, “I have nothing to add to this,” referring to the joint response from Munch and Ejbol that I had forwarded to him via email.

As Rose sees it, the restrictions that were imposed on him amounted to a fundamental breach of journalist ethics. In his estimation: “They [his former bosses at the paper] broke the law about media responsibility, according to which it’s only the editor in chief who decides what is to be written in the paper.” Rose also thinks that his “silencing”, as he describes it, is a paradigm case-study in the sociology of fear, and of how terrorism erodes trust not only in distant others, but also among close friends. The political theorist Michael Walzer **defines** the “ramifying evil of terrorism” as “not just the killing of innocent people but also the intrusion of fear into everyday life, the violation of private purposes, the insecurity of public spaces, the endless coerciveness of precaution.” I relayed this quote to Rose, who is a keen admirer of Walzer’s work. Referring to the new book, he said, “It’s really about how the threat of terror destroyed professional communities, friendships and principles, because if the four key actors — me, the CEO, the chairman of the board, the editor in chief — if we, just 10 years ago, were sitting around this table and had talked about the principles we would agree on everything... But when the pressure started to build we ended up on different sides of the barricades.”

The book is also indirectly about the discrepant ways in which terrorism intrudes on the interior world of its victims. In October 2009, the **FBI foiled a plot to assassinate** Rose and Westergaard. One of the plotters, an **American of Pakistani heritage**, was linked to a terrorist attack in Mumbai the previous year and had visited Denmark twice on **reconnaissance missions**. Last year, within hours of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, al Qaeda reissued a hit list in which Rose appeared alongside a crossed-out Stéphane Charbonnier. The threat on Rose’s life, in other words, was — and remains — real. It is not just the crazed fulminations of an obscure cleric. You would think that this would have an enervating effect on him. But the opposite seems to have happened: It has energized him. And it has had a radicalizing impact, making him even more defiant and vociferous in his defense of free speech. “I’m an atheist, and I can only say that the reactions to my drawing have made me stronger in my faith,” Kurt Westergaard told Rose in an interview for *The Tyranny of Silence*. The same can be said of Rose: that the

cartoons crisis made him stronger in his faith in free speech. But, if Rose's account is to be credited, the opposite seems to have happened to his former bosses at *Jyllands-Posten*.

Rose also alleges that his former bosses accused him of being a fanatic. He is obviously still wounded by this. At one point in our interview, he insisted, "I am not a fanatic, I am not obsessed by anything, the fanatics are those who want to attack us". He also reversed the charge, accusing his former employers of harboring a fanatical attitude toward him. The "possessed", in the title of Rose's new book, are his former bosses.

I'm not sure if I entirely buy this denial. Of course, Rose is not a fanatic in the way his jihadi foes are. On the contrary: He is deeply humane and liberal, he is skeptical, and he has a voracious appetite for ideas and irony. But the cartoons, indisputably, are the story of his life. Like a war, they have given it a radiant meaning and purpose. They have animated it with a deep life-and-death drama. And, like all wars, they have intensified and put to the test personal relationships.

The cartoons cataclysm, for Rose, was the elevated emotional experience of his life. How could it have not been? And he has — thus far — survived it. Yet, as his new book demonstrates, he is not yet ready to let it go. "Could boredom be more terrifying than all of war's terrors?" asked the philosopher Hannah Arendt in her introduction to J. Glenn Gray's classic war memoir *The Warriors*. The trouble with Flemming Rose is that he would probably answer yes.

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