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## **Committee on Antisemitism and Holocaust Denial Paper on Holocaust Distortion and Denial**

*The following paper is a living document and will be regularly updated.*

Since 2013, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) has agreed that attempts to deny or distort the reality of the Holocaust minimize awareness of the reality of the crimes of the National Socialists and their collaborators. Distortion and denial appear across the political and ideological spectrum and often accompany a wide range of motives, up to and including the rehabilitation of antisemitism and the promotion of ideologies that invite genocide and crimes against humanity.

The IHRA [Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion](#) provides contexts in which Holocaust distortion appears, explains the motives and aims of Holocaust distortion and denial, clarifies what is meant by these terms by providing some examples of its manifestations, and provides a basis for future work by the IHRA to address the growing challenges of distortion and denial of the Holocaust.

There is broad agreement among experts that antisemitism informs Holocaust Denial. The goal of denial is to recast history to erase the legacy and reality of the genocide of the Jews (i.e., the Holocaust) and related atrocities by the Nazis and their collaborators. In doing so, Holocaust deniers seek variously to make antisemitism acceptable, to provide legitimacy for Nazism, to claim that the Holocaust was a product of the Jewish imagination, or to assert that Jews invented or make use of the Holocaust to obtain political or economic ends. Yet, outright denial of the Holocaust is considerably less common than distortion of the Holocaust; a phenomenon that often shares goals with Holocaust denial.

It is often difficult to identify motives for Holocaust Distortion. At its simplest level, Holocaust distortion is rhetoric, written work, or other media that excuse, minimize, or misrepresent the known historical record of the Holocaust. The IHRA has identified at least five ways it manifests itself, including intentional efforts to excuse or minimize the impact of the Holocaust; gross minimization of the number of victims; attempts to blame Jews for the Holocaust; using the term to describe related atrocities or by engaging in false comparisons with other mass crimes; casting the Holocaust as a positive historical event; or blurring responsibility for the murders of the Holocaust.

Distinct from attempts to operationalize the Holocaust to suit narrow ideological and political ends, there are a few forms of Holocaust distortion that may not always accompany antisemitism, such as in the case of persons who are ignorant of the Holocaust or who make uninformed remarks and/or comparisons to the Holocaust. However, all forms of distortion invite even more dangerous forms of antisemitism by casting doubt on the actuality of the Holocaust and the realities of the dangerous antisemitism that led to these historical events.

## **History**

The origins of Holocaust distortion lie in the years of the Holocaust as a historical event. In part, this can be seen in Nazi-era euphemisms to describe the destruction of European Jewry, e.g., “resettlement to the East” (Umsiedlung nach dem Osten) or “special treatment” (Sonderbehandlung), as well as in Nazi-led actions, such as Sonderaktion 1005, which was an attempt to exhume mass graves and remove evidence of these crimes between 1942 and 1944. Cover up attempts continued in the postwar era, often bolstered by an unwillingness for public discussion on Nazi crimes against Jews or engagement with the legacies of the Holocaust in the lands most affected by its course. Paradoxically, it was at this time that distortion of the Holocaust increased in frequency in both Eastern and Western countries, often led by organizations or individuals with ties to extremist and populist groups.

Today, Holocaust distortion and denial cuts across political, ideological, and cultural divides. Its pervasiveness is informed by a general decline in historical knowledge across the Northern Hemisphere, a tendency to politicize and weaponize history to suit all manner of political ends, and a growing tendency to relativize and personalize historical truths out of an iconoclastic animus that denies the norms, facts, and understandings of the past. Seen over the long term, distortion and denial of the Holocaust undermines our national and international institutions, is an insult to the victims and their descendants, and aids in the completion of the Nazi attempt to eradicate the Jewish people and their history.

## **Contexts for Distortion and Denial of the Holocaust**

### **Holocaust Denial**

Holocaust distortion supports broader denial of the Holocaust and casts doubt on certain aspects of the record of the Holocaust in ways that do not violate juridical norms in certain European countries. In this context, Holocaust distortion reinforces antisemitism and related biases. The groups and individuals who employ this tactic often engage in international networks with others who may cast doubt on the Holocaust, those who pursue narrow, identity-based ideologies, and others from across the political spectrum.

## **Extremism**

Extremists mostly of the far right, but also of the far left make use of Holocaust distortion. In such cases, Holocaust distortion reframes the past in ways that absolve individuals and groups from degrees of responsibility for the crimes of the Second World War, or it attempts to erase the Jewish identity of the victims of the Holocaust, or it can appear as claims that Jews use the Holocaust for cynical ideological, political, or economic purposes.

## **Comparative historical narratives**

In many countries, experts have noted that attempts to grasp the legacies of multiple occupation experiences or life under multiple totalitarian regimes often leads to a competition for memory that sees the history of the Holocaust as exceptional or not part of a national history by casting it as the product of an outside occupier. Ahistorical claims that communism was a Jewish-run enterprise make this even more complex, and rhetoric along these lines brings with it the suggestion that the Holocaust was somehow excusable or warranted. Such thinking has encouraged some societies to avoid understanding differences between the crimes of the twentieth century, in part to displace blame on groups outside of the nation state.

## **Politicization and Declines in Knowledge**

Increasingly, political and cultural leaders make use of Holocaust tropes to build popular understanding of a wide range of ideological goals. Inappropriate comparisons between contemporary political leaders and the Nazi leadership are one form of this, as are attempts to cast present-day events as a “Holocaust.”

For many, the term “Holocaust” is simply a sign of a terrible event in history. Such individuals and movements may not be able to recognize its particularities, the suffering of its victims, or its broader context. This lack of historical awareness informs politicization or the misuse of Holocaust imagery, and it also engages strongly with other forms of denialism, such as climate denial, anti-science movements, or other contemporary phenomena that relativize established truths and narratives.

## **Countering Holocaust Distortion and Denial**

It is a responsibility of the IHRA and in keeping with its mandate to counter actively and regularly the phenomena of Holocaust distortion and Holocaust denial. Denial and distortion of the Holocaust are not only amoral, they prevent societies and individuals from a better engagement with the past – a necessary condition for the development of healthy democracies with engaged citizens who build their communities on shared experiences.



Recommendations on future initiatives include:

### **Education**

Despite decades of emphasis on Holocaust education at the secondary level, Holocaust distortion and denial continue to gain strength in IHRA countries and beyond. Moreover, polls indicate a general decline in historical awareness across the Northern hemisphere; a phenomenon that no doubt helps inform denial and distortion of the Holocaust. Future educational initiatives must acknowledge that secondary school learning is merely a foundation for a more sustained approach to building awareness of the Holocaust. Education must take place in tertiary settings, including (but not limited to) at universities, cultural institutions, and in professional development programs. Moreover, such education must include teaching on the identification of bias, not just historical fact and interpretation. Finally, it is necessary to learn about the ways that denial and distortion function, and then to teach students at all levels to react to these forces.

### **Political Responsibility**

The IHRA and all its member states must make sustained efforts to identify and condemn all misuse of Holocaust imagery and tropes by political, ideological, and cultural leaders, irrespective of the medium where such misuse occurs. If leaders make inappropriate use of this history, so too will the broader population, thereby taking national communities further from an honest confrontation with the past and toward a less democratic society. By bringing about change in rhetoric around the Holocaust, our leaders can help reorient society to a better relationship with this crucial and relevant subject.

### **Strategic Responses**

Given the limited capacities of the IHRA, it should set standards to determine when and how to respond to certain cases of distortion and denial of the Holocaust. Such responses should include media outreach and the provision of educational materials, as well as direct engagement with political leadership in IHRA member countries.

### **New Media**

The IHRA must engage with new media to help it establish standards for the identification and tracking of distortion and denial. Such engagement must allow the IHRA to play an advisory role, often in concert with other interest groups who are tackling hatred in new media spaces. Owing to limited capacities, the IHRA may not be able to develop specific mechanisms for the tracking and identification of all forms of distortion and denial, but it will be able to serve as advisors and/or provide guidance on ways to combat such issues.

### **Provision of Resources**

The IHRA must develop and refine existing resources to allow for the identification of all forms of denial and distortion of the Holocaust. Moreover, there is need to utilize these resources as models to address related forms of denial and distortion, such as that of the genocide of the Roma or more contemporary genocides, such as the genocide of the Tutsi, where the phenomenon of denialism is becoming all too common. Finally, the IHRA must make available resources that respond to cases and manifestations of Holocaust distortion and denial, including but not limited a series of FAQs on denial and distortion, as well as a list of examples of distortion and denial with historically informed responses.

### **Engagement with Likeminded Bodies**

To address denial and distortion of the Holocaust, the IHRA must enhance engagement with organizations dedicated to minimizing denial and distortion of other phenomena. There is a growing collective tendency to relativize the truth or to seek solace in belief over fact, and these trends are having an indelible and negative effect on social, political, and cultural development across the IHRA and in countries close to the interests of the IHRA. The solution to one phenomenon will affect the others, and so it is necessary to build bridges to other causes to identify patterns and solutions.