



INTERNATIONAL
**HOLOCAUST
REMEMBRANCE**
ALLIANCE

Understanding Holocaust Distortion

**CONTEXTS, INFLUENCES
AND EXAMPLES**

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Understanding Holocaust Distortion

**CONTEXTS, INFLUENCES
AND EXAMPLES**

Introduction

The document presented here is based on IHRA's Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion, which covers a broad and rather complicated topic. This document provides additional detail and context on the matters of Holocaust denial and distortion so policy makers, journalists and educators or people in the judicial system (e.g. judges, prosecutors and attorneys) and interested people can identify these phenomena, place them within particular historical and political contexts, and better understand the dangers of these phenomena.

Contributions

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1

What is
Holocaust
Distortion?

Holocaust denial seeks to erase the history of the Holocaust. In doing so, it seeks to legitimize Nazism and antisemitism. Holocaust distortion is more difficult to understand and identify.

Holocaust distortion acknowledges aspects of the Holocaust as factual. It nevertheless excuses, minimizes, or misrepresents the Holocaust in a variety of ways and through various media.

In its 2013 Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion, the IHRA initially identified the following forms of Holocaust distortion:

Intentional efforts to excuse or minimize the impact of the Holocaust or its principal elements, including collaborators and allies of Nazi Germany.

For example, to assert that the Holocaust is not relevant to a nation's history because it was a Nazi German organized crime could be a form of distortion if it ignores the roles played by local collaborators or members of the Axis in the crimes of the Holocaust. Similarly, to suggest that the Holocaust did not influence postwar international norms and institutions is also a problematic form of distortion.

Gross minimization of the number of victims of the Holocaust in contradiction to reliable sources.

One form of Holocaust distortion is the assertion that the number of victims was several million less than the accepted figure of approximately 6 million Jews murdered by the Nazis and their accomplices. Note: Scholarly estimates have ranged from 5.3–6.2 million victims, with 5.7 million as an accepted figure by most experts in the field.

Attempts to blame the Jews for causing their own genocide.

Forms of blaming the victim include claiming that Jewish responses to the rise of Nazism or that participation of individual Jews in communist movements justified Nazi persecution of Jews. Such forms of distortion are historically inaccurate, lessen the burden of guilt on perpetrators, and suggest that the Holocaust was somehow justifiable.

Statements that cast the Holocaust as a positive historical event suggesting that it did not go far enough in accomplishing its goal of “the Final Solution of the Jewish Question.”

For example, the claim that the Nazis were justified in their drive to exterminate the Jewish people is not just historically spurious; it is also a bald-faced form of antisemitism that seeks to justify continued atrocities against Jews.

Attempts to blur the responsibility for Nazi Germany’s establishment of concentration and death camps by blaming other nations or ethnic groups.

This form of distortion shifts sole blame for the Holocaust onto local collaborators while ignoring Nazi Germany’s responsibility for the genocide.

Since the adoption of IHRA’s Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion, additional forms of distortion have become more apparent. These include but are not limited to the following:

Accusing Jews of “using” the Holocaust for some manner of gain.

Claims that the Jewish people “use” the Holocaust for the purposes of financial gain or to justify the establishment of the state of Israel are antisemitic conspiracy myths.

Use of the term “Holocaust” to reference events or concepts that are not related in any meaningful way to the genocide of European and North African Jewry by Nazi Germany and its accomplices between 1941 and 1945.

Because of the paradigmatic status of the Holocaust as a genocide and its symbolic status as an ultimate evil, it has become somewhat common for various individuals, organizations, and movements to claim equivalence between the Holocaust and unrelated contemporary events, genocides, and/or mass atrocities. Irresponsible comparisons can distort understanding of both contemporary phenomena and of the Holocaust. In short, drawing inappropriate comparisons degrades understanding of the implications and significance of the Holocaust.

State-sponsored manipulation of Holocaust history in order to sow political discord within or outside a nation’s borders.

State-sponsored pronouncements against other countries’ actions during the Holocaust were common to Cold War propaganda, and they have continued through the present day. Such pronouncements instill defensive responses and threaten honest engagement with this history.

Trivializing or honoring the historical legacies of persons or organizations that were complicit in the crimes of the Holocaust.

Attempts by states and/or local municipalities to stimulate new national narratives often accompany efforts to rehabilitate the reputations of persons, organizations, or ideologies associated with Holocaust-era crimes. Such actions not only distort history, they can also glorify collaboration with the Nazis or legitimize Nazi ideology.

The use of imagery and language associated with the Holocaust for political, ideological, or commercial purposes unrelated to this history in online and offline forums.

Increasingly, language and images associated with Nazism appear in a variety of contexts, particularly online, in an attempt to cast negative aspersions on others or in order to attract public attention. Overusing the word “Holocaust” in ways divorced from discussion of the history or its relevance can contribute to the word losing its significance and meaning.

Holocaust distortion can be influenced by a country’s experiences during and after World War II: Was it a perpetrator state? Was it occupied by the Nazis or a member of the Axis Alliance? Was it neutral, or one of the Allies? What were its experiences during the Cold War and what are its present political conditions?

In some countries, the history of the Holocaust can be manipulated to suit narrow ideological and political ends. History museums may even engage unwittingly in acts of distortion as purveyors of a national narrative. For example, some institutions may draw an equivalence between Nazi crimes and those crimes of the Stalinist regime in ways that de-emphasize the Holocaust. Sometimes, these efforts promote narratives of national suffering or the reputations of national heroes, some of whom might have been participant in the persecution of Jews.

Holocaust distortion may also arise out of a desire to obscure the roles played by religious institutions, political parties, educational institutions, and prominent figures in the arts and sciences in Holocaust-era crimes.

It might result from comparing atrocity crimes without careful contextualization. While a careful and fact-based comparative approach may be fruitful, unreflective equations of the Holocaust with other atrocity crimes may hide certain aspects of the history, further its political instrumentalization, or imply links between genocides that diminish or trivialize the Holocaust.

Finally, some Holocaust distortion results from lack of awareness. Declines in historical knowledge or a lack of opportunity to engage deeply with the subject can lead to ignorance, misrepresentations, a lack of sensitivity, and uninformed remarks and/or comparisons to the Holocaust.

Regardless of the motivations, all forms of Holocaust distortion risk inviting or building legitimacy for more dangerous forms of hate: Distortion can undermine the historical and contemporary importance of this unprecedented tragedy and its lessons for today.

2

Historical

and

Geographical

Contexts

The attempt to deny or distort the reality of the Holocaust actually began with the Holocaust itself.

Denial

The legacy of state-sponsored distortion and denial of the Holocaust is long. In many ways, it began during the war, when members of the Axis Powers notoriously engaged in all manner of attempts to cover up crimes in the lands where the Holocaust occurred. By the late war, the Allies variously downplayed the genocide or remained focused on other aspects associated with the conflict.

Wartime
propaganda

The entire operation of mass murder of Europe's Jews was enacted through euphemisms and coded descriptions, such as "special treatment" (*Sonderbehandlung*) to describe the murder of Jews, *Endlösung* ("final solution"), which referred to the systematic extermination of the Jews as well as through formal programs like Special Action (*Sonderaktion*) 1005, the Nazi program that used slave laborers to exhume mass graves and destroy the corpses of Jews and other victims.¹ In his infamous speech of October 4, 1943, Heinrich Himmler emphasized the Nazi commitment to secrecy and denial, stating to his audience of SS men that the genocide of the Jews was "never mentioned and never to be mentioned."

Postwar
cover-up
attempts

In the first years after the WWII the Holocaust was hardly a topic of national or international discourse. In some Western European countries such as France, the Netherlands, or Austria, myths of heroic resistance flourished. Similarly, in countries that fell under communist rule, myths of antifascist resistance and heroism became the new state doctrine. In both cases there was no room left for the history of the Jewish victims or survivors and their fate.

In the 1960s, authors in Germany and Austria engaged in efforts to whitewash the National Socialist regime and some of its leaders (and, in some cases, themselves). Certain publishing houses specialized in such publications, and many of their clients were rightwing extremists or, in the Austrian case, nationalistic German student fraternities with antisemitic legacies that had begun in the 19th century.

1970s/80s:
International
networks

In many ways, however, open Holocaust distortion and denial began in France, where writers produced some of the earliest works that questioned the reality of the camps. Over the course of decades, so-called experts like Paul Rassinier and Robert Faurisson² collaborated with international compatriots, such as Bradley Smith and Mark Weber of the Institute of Historical Review (IHR), leading to an international movement that brought together American, Canadian, French, German and Austrian deniers.³

At its prime, the IHR's circle extended outside of the US, and included such figures as Germany's Ernst Zündel, who lived in Canada; the Australian Frederick Toben; Germany's Germar Rudolf; and Britain's David Irving. Zündel, in particular, received support from Austrian deniers like Emil Lachout, who had produced a fake document trying to prove that there were no gas chambers in a series of concentration camps. One of the IHR's important early efforts included outreach to the Arab and Muslim world, where Holocaust denial developed in the years after the end of the Second World War and the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel. In many ways, such forms of denial were built on the belief that Israel owed its existence to western guilt over the Holocaust, and so delegitimizing the Holocaust became an essential element of attempts to damage support for the new country.⁴

In the 1990s supposedly scientific reports were widely circulated. Holocaust deniers and Nazi apologists sought to develop a veneer of serious scholarship. To that end, they adorned their publications with what seem at first glance to be impressively extensive annotations, some of which referenced statements by respected historians. The authors of these denial tracts tried to "counter" these statements with references to authors who wrote within the milieu of denial, while often engaging in circular reasoning. Holocaust deniers like David Irving also utilized some archival collections, but used these sources in selective ways, picking and choosing records that bolstered his pre-determined prejudices.⁵

**1990s:
Pseudo-
scientific
literature**

As publishing moved online, such "reports" began to appear on the Internet.⁶ The so-called Leuchter Report, published first in Canada, was among the first of these alleged expert opinions to be distributed on an international scale. German-Canadian Holocaust denier Ernst Zündel had commissioned Fred Leuchter, a US-American and self-appointed engineer without technical training,⁷ to prepare a report about the alleged impossibility of killing people using poison gas in the Auschwitz and Majdanek extermination camps. By now a plethora of literature clearly refutes the Leuchter Report, not to mention Leuchter's subsequent elaborations on the topic, relegating them to the category of neo-Nazi propaganda.⁸ Still, Leuchter soon found followers who tried to react to these refutations. Most noteworthy is the German chemist Germar Rudolf,⁹ also publishing under the name Ernst Gauss, whose "investigations" into the use of Zyklon B to kill people in the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp are available in various so-called improved editions, which Rudolf disseminates on his website¹⁰ along with the Leuchter Report. Sometimes, outright denial of the Holocaust abandoned any pretense of research, and such works can be found in a number of online venues. These include the works of Gerd Honsik (Austria), David Duke (US), and Thies Christophersen (Germany).

**Fake
academic
standards:
Forging
documents
and misusing
science**

This argumentation method is characterized by the selection of unclear or allegedly false details in an attempt to undermine an entire area of research or question the reliability of a witness or scientist. Often, this accompanies a reductive argument that the reality of the Holocaust is reducible to the authenticity of a single, often

**Misrepre-
senting
details**

marginal detail. All serious information beyond this detail is omitted or ignored in an attempt to convince the reader that one bit of dubious evidence is the only proof of the Holocaust.

Questioning
witnesses
and
scientists

For example, the Canadian denier John Clive Ball claims that the CIA doctored aerial photos of Auschwitz-Birkenau to prove the Holocaust happened. He claims that the National Archives in Washington, D.C. bars access to these photos because he proved the forgery. He fails to mention that these very photos are in the Auschwitz State Museum and that a multitude of other photos prove what happened at Auschwitz-Birkenau.¹¹

Any inaccuracies, even those found in serious historical publications or on memorials, can thus be used to allege that the Holocaust did not happen, or to trivialize/distort it. For example, in order to distort the dimension of mass murder, deniers frequently refer to the Auschwitz Memorial's decision to adjust the number of victims who died at the camp from 4 million (a communist-era estimate) to the more accurate number of close to 1.5 million victims, a figure arrived at through legitimate historical research.¹² Unintentional mistakes or simple errors in survivor testimonies are also abused in this way.

2000s: Irving
v. Lipstadt,
and other
trials discredit
denialist
movement

The self-appointed historian David Irving is best known for having sued Professor Deborah Lipstadt for calling him a Holocaust denier. In his 2002 verdict, based on scathing expert testimony, a judge found for Lipstadt, ruling that Irving was an active Holocaust denier, antisemite and racist and thus effectively ruining any claims Irving had of scholarly legitimacy.¹³ Other trials were held in Canada, Germany, Belgium, France, Austria and elsewhere and resulted in further discrediting of the movement.

Holocaust denial continues to surface in various forms. For instance, the German Ursula Haverbeck, born in 1928 and a member of several rightwing groups, has a long record of denying the Holocaust. As a result, she has been subjected to several trials in German courts, beginning in 2004, the latest in 2020.¹⁴ Others, like Richard Williamson, a British bishop of the Roman Catholic Society of Pius X, was even banned from entering Australia in 2014 because of his denying the Holocaust.¹⁵ Similarly, György Nagy was tried in Hungary, in 2011 for showing a banner that declared "The Shoah did not happen" during a rally in Budapest. The court decided that he needed to visit a Holocaust memorial and write about his experiences there.¹⁶

It is important to remember that the European Court of Human Rights has determined in several cases that Holocaust denial is not a protected form of speech under the terms of the European Convention on Human Rights.¹⁷ Therefore, there are mechanisms by which many European states can try to limit Holocaust denial and certain forms of distortion from a legal perspective.

“Distortion of the past rests on a combination of truth and invention. [...] The essential background to this phenomenon is the rise of authoritarianism, populism, dictatorial regimes, nationalism, and anti-liberalism that has been sweeping the world for the past two decades or so.”

Yehuda Bauer, Creating a “Usable” Past¹⁸

Distortion

Although Holocaust denial remains a significant problem in many countries both within and outside of the IHRA, the growth of Holocaust distortion is a growing and perhaps more significant challenge today. This is in part due to the fact that Holocaust distortion surfaces in different contexts, and often in ways that are not punishable by law or other measures. It is also challenging because many forms of distortion overlap with one another, or moreover may be the result of unintentional ignorance of the subject and specificity of the Holocaust. Regardless, distortion is a growing challenge because its presence lends legitimacy to more dangerous forms of denial and antisemitism.

Over the course of the past decade, Holocaust distortion has grown in intensity. Geographical aspects and regional historical context play important roles in the countries dealing with the Holocaust.

In certain western countries, the early postwar era was characterized by broad silence on the crimes that the Nazis and their collaborators committed. This dynamic began to shift in the 1960s and 1970s, when, after a few high-profile legal trials and cultural engagement with the Holocaust in various media, public debate began to focus almost exclusively on crimes perpetrated by Nazi Germany as opposed to local collaborators. In time, this also changed. Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, intense public and political discussions focused on criminality and guilt for the crimes of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

From
post-war
silence to
guilt-relief
strategies

Today, in some sectors of countries that were directly involved in the Holocaust, a sense of collective guilt has been displaced onto the state of Israel. This takes place through a form of perpetrator-victim reversal in which ultimately “the Jews” are collectively vilified. In Germany and Austria such guilt-relief strategies dominate the discourse. Similar patterns of expression can be observed in many other countries, mostly Western European, even when the question of guilt and shame is not the dominant feature. Nonetheless, the content and objectives are similar.

Prior to the fall of communism in Eastern and Central Europe, many communist countries promoted state-mandated norms that neglected the specificity of the Holocaust in favor of remembrance of crimes against all “victims of fascism.” Oftentimes, this was framed in ways that suggested communists were principal victims of the Nazis and their collaborators. This narrative began to change in the 1990s, after the fall of communism. Sometimes these post-communist debates led to positive developments, including the framework of robust Holocaust education and commemoration efforts in key Eastern European countries.

From
post-war
neglect to
displacement
strategies

Today, in the countries of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, displacement strategies are *en vogue*. One can identify cases of persons or organizations

accusing Jews of enforcing memory of the Holocaust in order to overshadow consideration of other victims or those persons and groups who resisted the Nazis and the Communists.

This is a pattern that in some cases dates back to the immediate post-war period. A 2011 study on “group focused enmity” in several European countries illustrates this point. When asked to respond to the statement, “Jews try to take advantage of having been victims during the Nazi era,” significant numbers of respondents agreed. The highest rates of agreement were in Poland (72.2%) and Hungary (68.1%), followed by Portugal (52.2%) and Germany (48%). The Netherlands (17.2%), followed by Britain (21.8%), stood at the lower end of the scale.¹⁹ Similarly, a 2018 CNN poll determined that a third of Europeans feel that Jews use the Holocaust to advance their own positions or goals. The same number disagreed and nearly a third of respondents expressed no opinion.²⁰ Based on these responses, one might conclude that some segments of European society project blame on Jews and reject attempts to be reminded of the Holocaust and its significance.

Blaming
Jews as a
European
phenomenon

In the Arab world as well as in Iran, European patterns of demonizing Israel are common.²¹ Forms of belittling and trivializing the Holocaust, even Holocaust denial itself, are used in this part of the world to suggest that Israel’s right to exist was deviously acquired by the “Holocaust lie”/“Auschwitz lie.”

At times, within the context of the Middle East conflict, one encounters the argument of the Jews supposedly using the Holocaust as a “founding myth” of the state of Israel and as a means to suppress Palestinians and their right of freedom. As early as 1945, some Arab groups paved the way for Holocaust distortion by comparing the Holocaust to the alleged repression of Arabs by Zionists or by accusing Zionists of instrumentalizing the Holocaust for their own political aims.²² Soon after such rhetoric appeared, the Holocaust became framed in discourse not as a political fact but as an emotionally loaded subject, that is, a political weapon and “founding myth” of the state of Israel.

Context
Middle East
Conflict

Over the following decades, Arab and Iranian perceptions of the Holocaust changed in accordance with historical events, such as the indemnification agreement with the Federal Republic of Germany in 1952 or the war of 1967. The World Holocaust Forum—held in Jerusalem January 20, 2020—evoked particularly strong reactions on the Palestinian side. One member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council positively reflected in a newspaper article of January 23 on Mahmoud Abbas’ 1984 book, “The other side: the secret connection between the Nazis and the Zionist leadership.” In it, Abbas doubted the number of victims of the Holocaust and claimed that the Zionist movement collaborated with the National Socialists to instigate mass emigration to Palestine and therefore turned the Palestinians into victims of these crimes for 70 years.²³ Many similar statements can be found going back years and continuing to this day.

The problems of the Middle East found international resonance. In Europe, especially among some segments of the far left, Holocaust distortion has appeared within the context of statements made in solidarity with the Palestinian people.

Holocaust distortion received a new push during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly through the misuse of Holocaust imagery at demonstrations against various responses to the pandemic, as well as through the generation of new conspiracy myths. Comparisons were drawn between coronavirus restrictions and the Nazi 1933 Enabling Act, today's social distancing guidelines and the horrors experienced by Anne Frank, and protestors used Nazi symbols to compare themselves to the victims of the National Socialist regime.

By twisting the understanding of what led to the Holocaust, this form of distortion engages strongly with other forms of denialism, such as anti-science movements or anti-vaccine movements, as well as conspiracy myths in general.

Although the EU passed its 2008 framework decision on combating racism and xenophobia, a document that calls for criminal punishment of "publicly condoning, denying or grossly trivializing" crimes such as the Holocaust, the problem seems to keep on growing.²⁴ At times, it appears in changes to national constitutions that seemingly absolve nations for crimes committed on their territory from the Second World War through the fall of communism; at other times, it appears in the form of legal maneuvers to overturn the criminal convictions of persons who had collaborated with the Nazis.

3

Political **Influences**

Rightwing Extremism

In various European countries rightwing extremist groups arose out of and in parallel with the postwar activities of some former collaborators and sympathizers of National Socialism. Today most of these groups are defined by antisemitism and racism generally, authoritarian and nationalistic ideology, anti-feminist ideas and outspoken or latent positive reference to National Socialism.²⁵

Sympathizing
with the
NS-regime

This specific view on the past informs a drive to glorify the Nazi regime, to point out its alleged “positive” features, and/or to trivialize its crimes. Some adherents to this belief might think this is a strategy to obtain greater acceptance for their ideas or a useful tool to win over likeminded supporters. But, in recent years, such arguments have become largely restricted to older generations of the extreme right. Younger members of these movements seem to want to “modernize” by relying less on outright glorification of Nazism, at least in public.

Consider the case of Rassemblement National (RN), formerly Front Nationale, of France. While the founder of this movement, Jean Marie Le Pen, was infamous for trivializing the Holocaust, his daughter and now chairwoman of the RN has sought to cleanse the party’s image in order to improve its chances of electoral success. This has led to a noticeable decline in rhetoric that amounts to Holocaust denial and distortion, although there still remains a noticeable level of nationalistic and racist rhetoric in the party’s campaigns.²⁶ Conversely, some newer far-right parties, such as the rightwing populist German party Alternative for Germany (AfD) embrace forms of Holocaust trivialization. One of AfD’s members in German Parliament has called the Holocaust a “myth” created to “criminalize the Germans and their history,”²⁷ and its former chairman Alexander Gauland has trivialized Germany’s National Socialist past as “bird shit in the successful German history.”²⁸

Downplaying
the Holocaust
to create a
positive view
of history

In any case, in these groups the distorting or denying of the Holocaust is strongly connected to antisemitism. The Holocaust has become a synonym for the persecution of the Jews therefore its distortion or denial can be used as a weapon against Jews, a tool to undermine their credibility and to fight their alleged worldwide influence. All of this is akin to an older antisemitic myth of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy, which dates back to at least the 19th century.²⁹

Nationalist groups without direct links to Nazism also engage in distortion and denial. This is clear in the case of certain members of at least two British political parties, namely the British National Party (BNP)³⁰ and the UK Independence Party (UKIP),³¹ as well as in the Greek Golden Dawn party. In the case of Golden Dawn, its leader, Nikolaos Michaloliakos, stated during a TV interview that he had “read many books that question the number of the 6 million Jews, and they say that it is an overestimation which was made up.”³²

Questioning
historical
facts and
numbers

Similar forms can also be seen in larger world powers, such as in Russia or the United States.

Rightwing extremist groups have also proven to be quite adept in using technology to encourage Holocaust denial and distortion. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, many Holocaust memorial events or conferences were “zoom bombed” by rightwing extremists. That is, these extremists and Holocaust deniers were able to remotely sign in to these events and confronted other participants with antisemitic and Holocaust denying or distorting content. In Germany, a Holocaust memorial event organized by the Israeli embassy in Berlin had to be suspended because it was flooded with antisemitic and pro-Hitler propaganda; in Italy the online launch of a new book on the Holocaust was crashed in a similar way. In the United States and Canada the Anti-Defamation League recorded at least 11 antisemitic Zoom bombings in March and April 2020.³³

Left and Far-Left Environment

Antisemitic resentments, prejudices and stereotypes of the left political spectrum have their origins in antisemitic ideas of the early socialists of the 19th century and in certain Enlightenment era thinking of the 18th century. Oftentimes, these forms consist of claims that assert a close relationship between capitalism and Judaism, and the need to fight both forms of social “parasitism.”

Although the main part of the left spectrum is strongly engaged in the fight against antisemitism, there are certain strains of leftist thought that encourage or engage in particular forms of antisemitism. However, discourses—particularly regarding the Middle East conflict or financial and interest rate policy—can convey antisemitic content and can also lead to Holocaust distortion.

Reinforcing
antisemitic
stereotypes

A 2018 Community Security Trust report found that the UK Labour Party’s pro-Palestine campaigners often engaged in antisemitic stereotypes. For example, in March 2018, an independent blogger named David Collier revealed that well-known members of the Labour Party, including some in the leadership, as well as prominent pro-Palestinian campaigners had all been members of a Facebook group called “Palestine Live.” It “featured Holocaust denial, conspiracy theories and other antisemitic content.”³⁴

The French film “Hold up,” which presents itself as a documentary, describes the COVID-19 pandemic as the product of machinations by dark powers that sought to exterminate mankind. It includes a statement by Monique Pinçon-Charlot, a well-known sociologist and holder of a *legion d’honneur* medal, who declared that the COVID-19 virus is part of a “war of the social classes” (*Klassenkrieg*), a “Holocaust”

Using
the term
“Holocaust”
for unrelated
events

organized to exterminate the poorest of the world. The film was based in the “Gilets jaunes” movement, and Pinçon-Charlot has since distanced herself from it.

In January 2020, an 18-year-old candidate for the German left-wing party *Die Linke* compared the climate crisis with the Shoah: “75 years ago today, Auschwitz was liberated. The Holocaust was one of the biggest crimes in World War II.” he wrote. “The Nazis are also among the biggest climate sinners, as their war of extermination and their tanks produced huge amounts of CO₂. True, many politicians said such things should not be repeated. But what are they doing about the climate holocaust that is killing millions of people and animals as we speak?” he asked. Shortly after his posts appeared on social media the young boy posed in a photo with the flag from the identitarian movement (“Identitäre Bewegung”).³⁵

He is not the first climate activist to relativize the Holocaust. In an interview with the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, the co-founder of Extinction Rebellion (XR), Roger Hallam, described the Holocaust as an “almost normal event” which for him was “just another piece of shit in human history.”³⁶

In 2012, Romanian Senator Dan Sova raised concerns when in the course of a television interview he stated that Romanians had not participated in crimes against Jews. The following year he apologized for this statement after having visited Holocaust related institutions like the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.³⁷

Convergence Between Left and Right

Distortion can be found on the right and the left but also when rightwing and leftwing extremists converge in shared discursive spaces. Rightwing and leftwing activists and groups can occasionally ally to achieve certain aims or to share antisemitic and populist topoi, including claims that so-called elites constantly withhold information from the public.

Britain’s Community Security Trust analyzed: “Our investigation shows what the politics of some of the far left and the far right have in common—antisemitism. It’s important that these groups are not just seen as eccentric or harmless; they give conspiracies a space to survive and grow and they encourage people to keep disseminating falsehoods.”³⁸

One typical example is the former lawyer of the left-wing radical terror group Rote Armee Fraktion, Horst Mahler, who has become a rightwing extremist and radical Holocaust denier.

Within the French ultra-left activist scene there are those who support the extreme rightwing Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson in the name of a misguided anti-capitalism. The infamous left-leaning antisemitic French comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala has cooperated with Faurisson. Dieudonné has also become close with Jean-Marie Le Pen and invented the *quenelle*, resembling the Hitler salute. He had been pushing his jokes about Jews to an extreme. When hearing the television presenter Patrick Cohen talking, Dieudonné had jested, “Me, you see, when I hear Patrick Cohen speak, I think to myself: ‘Gas chambers’ ... too bad (they no longer exist).”³⁹ When it comes to the Holocaust, Dieudonné has noted that he has his “doubts,” but nevertheless shows his true disposition through his close association with Alain Soral, a right-extremist essayist and Holocaust denier. Finally, his circle has also included the graphic artist Zéon, who won the first prize in the 2016 Iranian Holocaust Denial cartoon competition 2016.

Political Mainstream

While explicit Holocaust denial is rarely found in the middle of the political spectrum, trivialization and distortion of the Holocaust are easy to identify there. The components of Holocaust distortion are virulent across the political spectrum, including—in more subtle modes—in the mainstream.

To agree with the statement that “what the State of Israel is doing today with the Palestinians is basically no different from what the Nazis did with the Jews” is essentially to trivialize the Holocaust by equating the situation of the Palestinians with the mass murder of Jews under National Socialism. When this item appears in surveys of Germans, about 40 percent of respondents agree either in part or fully.⁴⁰ As described earlier, this reverses perpetrator-victim roles, thereby relieving Germans of guilt feelings over the Holocaust because the former victims are now portrayed as perpetrators.

This case of so-called secondary antisemitism is not unique to Germans. It plays a role in the narratives of many other countries that have a history of collaboration with Nazi Germany; in short, these trivializing distortions are found not only in the land of the perpetrators but also in other European countries.

For example, in 2013, the UK's the Liberal Democrat MP for Bradford East, David Ward, after signing the Book of Remembrance in the Houses of Parliament on Holocaust Memorial Day, noted the following on his website: “Having visited Auschwitz twice—once with my family and once with local schools—I am saddened that the Jews, who suffered unbelievable levels of persecution during the Holocaust, could within a few years of liberation from the death camps be inflicting atrocities on Palestinians in the new state of Israel and continue to do so on a daily basis

in the West Bank and Gaza.” In his view the Israelis are the “new” Nazis and the Palestinians the “new” Jews. This is what some scholars call Holocaust inversion.⁴¹

Just one year later another British politician, this time from the rightwing UKIP party, made antisemitic and Holocaust justifying remarks on Twitter in the context of an Israeli conflict with Gaza. His statements included things like, “At times I ask myself were the Nazis right in herding the Jews into concentration camps.”⁴² In 2018, Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas declared that the cause for the Holocaust was to be found in the “financial activities” of Jews. He apologized for these remarks after an international outcry.⁴³ In June 2021 it became known in the US that the Republican Representative Paul Gosar deliberately engaged with rightwing extremists and Holocaust deniers for the purposes of fundraising.⁴⁴

A survey of Millennials and Gen Z in all 50 US states revealed...

September 2020: A survey of Millennials and Gen Z in all 50 US states by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference)

A significant number... cannot name one concentration camp or ghetto and believe that two million or fewer Jews were killed.

Approximately half (49 percent)... said they had seen Holocaust denial or distortion posts online.

A “concerning percentage”... believe that Jews caused the Holocaust.

The Claims Conference Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Survey of Austrian citizens (Feb–March 2019) found...

56% over all, and 58% of Millennials and Gen Z, did not know that six million Jews were killed during the Holocaust.

The frequency of hearing or seeing the statement...

“The Holocaust is a myth or has been exaggerated”

was **5%** for “all the time”, **19%** for “frequently” and **38%** for “occasionally”

According to the survey by the EU’s Fundamental Rights Agency on experiences and perceptions of antisemitism, December 2018

In Europe poll showed that:

**One third of European respondents...
said they knew little or nothing about the Holocaust.**

**Four out of 10 Austrian adults...
said they knew “just a little.”**

**20% of French respondents aged 18–34 and
12% of Austrians in that age group...
said they’d never heard of the Holocaust.**

According to the CNN – Anti-Semitism in Europe Poll (carried out by ComRes) September 2018

A survey of French citizens revealed that...

The Claims Conference Holocaust
Awareness Survey of French citizens
November 2019:

**Only 56% of Millennials and Gen Z
knew about the Vel d’Hiv’ Roundup
of Jews in 1942, compared to 74% of
French respondents overall.**

**Only 2% of all respondents knew
about the Drancy internment camp,
located in a suburb of Paris.**

An Infratest survey of Germans for the Deutsche Welle news agency
(November 2019) suggested that...

The number of those who think it’s time to put the Nazi past behind them is slowly climbing.

While 37% overall agreed, 56% of those with at most 8 to 10 years of
schooling wanted “to close this chapter.” The survey also found that 72%
of supporters of the right-populist party Alternative for Germany agreed
that Germans should not spend so much time dealing with the Nazi period.

4

Narratives

and

Examples

Intentional efforts to excuse or minimize the impact of the Holocaust or its principal elements, including collaborators and allies of Nazi Germany.

It Was the Germans, Not Us

Excusing one's co-nationals for complicity in National Socialist crimes and the Holocaust by focusing on the guilt of the German occupiers was a common form of distortion in the early postwar era, particularly in Austria, France and the Netherlands. While the dynamics have changed and this form of displaced guilt can be more easily recognized, it has nevertheless expanded in scope and can be seen now in Eastern Europe, as well.

In Hungary, for example, the mantra that "it was the Germans, not us" still finds some resonance. An official monument erected in Budapest in 2014 noting the German occupation of Hungary makes no clear distinction between the persecution, deportation, and murder of Jews and the fate of Hungarian civilians who died during or after Germany's occupation of Hungary. Nor does the monument note that Hungary had been a member of the Axis prior to the German invasion.

Similarly, problematic public and political memory of the Hungarian ruler and later Nazi-ally Admiral Miklos Horthy continues in Hungary today. There are monuments in his honor in Budapest, for example, and there are persons from across the political spectrum who honor his legacy, despite his known actions and inactions that contributed to the murder of Hungarian Jewry. In 2018, for example, during a memorial service in a Budapest church, a politician of the ruling Fidesz party had been slated to speak. This prompted protests from the Jewish community and World Jewish Congress; protests that ultimately led the church to cancel the event.⁴⁵

Leveling of Victims

A well-known example of leveling of victims concerns the Allied bombing of the German city of Dresden in February 1945. When rightwing extremists call this a “bombing Holocaust,” they are not merely trying to awaken sympathies for their concerns; they are also deliberately distorting the facts, equating Holocaust victims with Dresden bombings victims so as to deflect blame from Germany and hold the Allies equally responsible for atrocities. Ultimately, such ahistorical equations lead, at the very least, to denial of the dimensions of the genocide against the Jews.

The Search for Patriotic Heroes

Especially in post-communist countries, there is an ongoing search for heroes who struggled to achieve national independence and renewal. More than a handful of those put forth as heroes, however, also played a role in the persecution and even murder of their Jewish neighbors.

Some—like Admiral Miklos Horthy in Hungary, Father Jozef Tiso in Slovakia, Ante Pavelić in Croatia—bore responsibility as leaders during the period of the Holocaust. Others, like Herbert Cukurs from Latvia, engaged in outright murder.⁴⁶

Similar cases appear in other countries: Consider the controversy over commemorations of the Nazi collaborator and anti-Soviet national hero Jonas Noreika in Lithuania.⁴⁷ His granddaughter, the US-American journalist Silvia Foti, reported that she was vilified when she started to publicly ask questions about Noreika’s past, not only by people in Lithuania but even by people of Lithuanian background in her home town of Chicago. He still is seen as a hero and “has streets, plaques and a school named after him. He was awarded the Cross of the Vytis, Lithuania’s highest posthumous honor.”⁴⁸

Perhaps the most challenging cases can be seen in Ukraine, where members of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN and OUN (b)) and its paramilitary wing, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) have been lauded as heroes of Ukraine, despite their known participation in crimes against Jews and other ethnic minorities during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine. No case illustrates this better than that of Roman Shukevych who, in 2007, received a posthumous medal from Ukrainian president Viktor Iushenko as a member of the Order of Hero of Ukraine. Shukevych had been, among other things, a member of military units established by Germany prior to the invasion of the Soviet Union (units that engaged in direct crimes against Jews), a captain in a German *Schutzmannschaft* battalion in Belarus, and a military leader of units that engaged in the murders of tens of thousands of ethnic Poles.⁴⁹ In early 2021, the city of Ternopil renamed its football stadium in honor of Shukevych.⁵⁰

Protecting National Honor

In addition to laws protecting the memory of and the historical truth about the Holocaust, recent years have seen countries of Central and Eastern Europe adopt laws with the intent of protecting national honor, a heroic past, and nurturing an idealized narrative of the war years. These laws in some cases strictly protect particular historical interpretations and/or national and cultural mythologies, and in so doing serve the distortion of the history of the Holocaust.

This trend began with the 2014 passage of the so-called Yarovaya Law (aka, the Law against the Rehabilitation of Nazism) in the Russian Federation. Now codified under Russian criminal code 354.1, this law criminalizes the “dissemination of knowingly false information on the activities of the USSR during the Second World War.” Unlike earlier European laws, which reference the charter of the Nuremberg trial, the Russian law criminalized denying the “facts recognized by the Nuremberg Tribunal” in its final decisions. This is an important distinction because the decisions of the trial were subject in part to the interpretation and politics of the era. So, for example, it would be criminal to note the fact of Soviet-Nazi cooperation before 1941, or for that matter the fact that the Soviets were responsible for the murders at Katyn (and not the Nazis, as the Nuremberg court decided).

As do many myths, this one incorporates a self-evident element of truth at play. The Soviet war effort was incredibly significant and decisive in the defeat of Nazism. At enormous sacrifice, the Red Army liberated all the Nazi death camps in German-occupied Poland and recaptured huge swathes of Nazi-occupied territory. The Soviet peoples also suffered incomprehensible losses, including the deaths of around 26 million civilians and soldiers. By focusing only on these aspects of the past, something encouraged by Russian history policy, there is no room or tolerance for discussion of the grey zones that existed during the conflict, such as the Soviet pact with Nazi Germany that led to the partition of Poland between 1939 and 1941, the roles of Soviet collaborators, or other inconvenient aspects of the past.

In Poland the 2018 Amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance penalizes public speech that attributes responsibility for the Holocaust to Poland or the Polish nation. The “Holocaust bill” allowed for a criminal lawsuit against those who claimed “publicly or contrary to the facts, that the Polish Nation or the Republic of Poland is responsible or co-responsible for Nazi crimes committed by the Third Reich.” While this clause was omitted, partly due to international criticism, legal proceedings against historians researching the Holocaust still remain.

The “Double Genocide”

In many countries, attempts to grasp the legacies of multiple occupation experiences or life under multiple totalitarian regimes often lead to a competition for memory, a competition that often leads to rejection of the Holocaust as not in keeping with national history or as an imposition brought by an outside occupier.

According to the “double genocide” debate, which has gained popularity mostly in Baltic states, some countries faced a Nazi and a Soviet genocide of the same extent.

Within reasonable margins, of course, one can discuss different crimes that occurred in the same geographical area in more or less the same period of time. It is clear that there are certain similarities between Soviet and Nazi crimes, yet the differences are profound. These crimes happened for entirely different reasons and played out in a variety of ways. Moreover, the historical record shows that a great many citizens and institutions in the former communist countries were complicit in the murder of their Jewish neighbors in the Holocaust, whereas the claim that the reverse is equally true for communist era crimes is often couched in antisemitic rhetoric and beliefs.

Moreover, between the lines, the assertion that there was a “double genocide” can limit meaningful engagement with the Holocaust because it could lead some to conclude that the crimes of one regime cancel out the crimes of the other. In other words, it becomes an excuse to avoid addressing the responsibility of local people in the persecution and murder of their Jewish neighbors.

Equalization of National Socialist and Stalinist Terror— Memorial Day August 23rd

As early as 2009, the Honorary Chair of the IHRA, Professor Yehuda Bauer, and other historians commented on the matter and expressed their concern about the equation of National Socialist crimes with those of Stalinism.

Nevertheless, recent years have seen a tendency in the public discourse in many countries to equate the National Socialist and Stalinist terror regimes, thereby abandoning a legitimate scientific approach of comparison at the expense of differentiation. From the victim’s standpoint, the political background of their persecution was relatively unimportant. But for the historical narrative, and for the confrontation with Stalinism and National Socialism in later generations, it is wrong to equate the two dictatorships, as it leads to trivialization of the Holocaust.

On April 2, 2009, the EU Parliament adopted a motion for a resolution on “European conscience and totalitarianism,” promoting the “proclamation of 23 August as a Europe-wide Day of Remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, to be commemorated with dignity and impartiality.”

Although reference was made to the “uniqueness of the Holocaust,” there remain concerns that this memorial day could push the Holocaust into the background, particularly since its date is 23 August, the anniversary of the 1939 signing of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact by Foreign Ministers Molotov and Ribbentrop. A secret additional protocol to the pact had stipulated that the Baltic States, Poland and parts of Finland and Romania would be divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. This date is often referenced in some of those countries to allow for almost exclusive focus on non-Jewish suffering under the Soviets.

In October 2011, the “Platform of European Memory and Conscience” was established in the presence of several Eastern European prime ministers, and was headquartered in Prague.⁵¹ The platform counts more than 60 member organizations and institutions, virtually all of which deal with the communist terror. Even in 2020 none of the new candidates of the platform deal with the Holocaust.

Gross minimization of the number of victims of the Holocaust in contradiction to reliable sources.

Those seeking to whitewash Nazi crimes have often focused on the number of victims of the Holocaust. By reducing this number, apologists have sought to equate the National Socialist regime and its crimes with those of other dictatorships, thus stripping the Holocaust of its unprecedented character. Exaggerating the numbers of victims of Allied warfare in 1945, such as during the bombing of German cities or the expulsions of German nationals, while at the same time minimizing the number of Holocaust victims, has given distorters an opportunity to claim that all war fatalities were comparable.

Most arguments that aim to minimize the number of victims claim to be based on documents. This line of argument resembles other forms of Holocaust distortion—its propagators ignore the thousands of documents and related research clearly showing the number of victims, including the listing of names by researchers and by Holocaust-related institutions.

Alleged Statements of International Organizations

In the early 1950s, citations from an alleged letter of the International Committee of the Red Cross surfaced in Swiss newspapers. The citations were picked up by rightwing extremists in Germany and then Austria. According to these quotes, the International Committee of the Red Cross supposedly stated that only 300,000 Jews had perished in the Holocaust. Responding to inquiries from the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich, the International Committee of the Red Cross stated in 1955 that it had never given any estimate or total number of victims of the Holocaust. In 1976 the Documentation Center of Austrian Resistance in Vienna sent the same question to the Red Cross and got the same answer. Nevertheless, the claim still circulates in rightwing extremist and neo-Nazi texts.

Similarly, an alleged statement by the United Nations referring to only 200,000 Jews murdered in the Holocaust was circulated by a neo-Nazi; in 1976, responding to a question from the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich, the General Secretary of the UN stated that the United Nations never had made such an assertion.⁵²

But the quotation of alleged or misinterpreted statements of well-known institutions did not stop. In 2019 a website specializing in correcting fake statements in the Internet pointed out that the Red Cross never named a figure of 271,301 as a total death toll in German concentration camps. The website managers were reacting to an antisemitic posting on Facebook referring to the supposed Red Cross statement.⁵³

Referencing the Readjustment in the Number of Known Victims at Auschwitz

Until the early 1990s, a plaque at the Auschwitz memorial site referenced four million victims at the extermination camp. This number was drawn from estimates by the Soviet and Polish commissions for investigating the crimes of the German occupiers in Poland, although Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höss had attributed to Adolph Eichmann a total of up to 2.5 million people killed in Auschwitz, and himself estimated a total of not more than 1.5 million.⁵⁴

Following research by Holocaust scholars, many of whom had long questioned the number of four million,⁵⁵ the memorial changed the plaque in 1990. The Auschwitz Memorial now references the number of murdered Jews as approximately one million.

Nevertheless, Holocaust deniers and rightwing extremists use this discussion about the number of victims to cast doubt on the total number of five to six million victims of the Holocaust.

Doubting the Technical Capacity to Murder and Burn the Bodies of So Many Victims in the Nazi Camps

This line of argument usually is linked to complete denial of the Holocaust and is based on the historically incorrect assumption that all victims of the Holocaust were murdered in extermination camps; in fact, historical research on mass shootings at killing sites in occupied Eastern Europe shows that more than two million Jews died that way.⁵⁶

Exaggerating the Number of Victims

This specific type of distortion of historical facts does not deny the crime; on the contrary, it exaggerates it. This may be done because of a lack of historical knowledge, as in the above-mentioned case of the Auschwitz memorial plaque, or with the intention to place greater emphasis on the crimes perpetrated by the National Socialist regime. This was the case when in the 1970s Simon Wiesenthal stated that 11 million people were murdered—six million Jews and five million others. This number is not correct.

Later, Wiesenthal admitted to having made up the figure to generate more interest in the Holocaust and crimes against other groups of victims. But the figure once published remains in circulation, and is occasion seized upon by groups claiming Holocaust victimhood, a consequence that Wiesenthal would have regretted.⁵⁷

Attempts to Blame the Jews for Causing their Own Genocide.

This narrative aims to shift the responsibility for the Holocaust and sometimes even World War II to “the Jews,” tapping into the conspiracy myth of an alleged world organization of all Jews influencing politics and society. This antisemitic stereotype is used to reverse the role of perpetrators and victims—the Jews are named and blamed as perpetrators and the National Socialists as their victims; the latter had to defend themselves against the supposed crimes or evil intentions of the Jews.⁵⁸

Some related lines of argument date back several decades, while others are quite new. Oftentimes, they relate to older antisemitic canards.

The Alleged 1933 Jewish Declaration of War

Responding to attacks against Jews and to antisemitic articles in National Socialist media, Jewish organizations in Great Britain and the US initiated protests and asked for a boycott of German goods in 1933; it was a nearly futile effort. Nevertheless, the attempt made the news, with the British paper *Daily Express* reporting on it under the headline, “Judea Declares War on Germany.”⁵⁹

The Germans used this story to justify boycotts against Jewish shop owners on April 1, 1933. Antisemitic attacks and measures intensified in the following years, especially after the German annexation of Austria in March 1938 and the pan-Germanic anti-Jewish pogrom of November 1938 (“Reichskristallnacht”). On August 29, 1939, with the danger of a forthcoming war becoming increasingly visible, Chaim Weizmann, president of the World Zionist Organization and leader of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, sent a letter to the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain assuring him that in case of war the Jews would stand at the side of Great Britain and the other democratic countries and help to defend the “sacred values” of democracy against the attacks of National Socialist Germany.⁶⁰

Weizmann wrote on behalf of his organizations, which represented about six percent of the Jewish population in the world. Therefore the rightwing extremist allegation that “the Jews” would have declared war on Germany has no factual basis. And all conspiracy theories aside, a group of people cannot declare a formal war—that is an action restricted to states. This fact has not stopped rightwing extremist publications and websites from continuing to propagate this lie, however, and it still seems to influence some uninformed segments of the population, especially youth.

Jews / Zionists Financed Hitler and the Holocaust

A quite long-lasting antisemitic tradition that distorts or even denies the historical facts states that the Jews (or Zionists) supported and financed Hitler so they could profit from the war and the arms market. In another version, there are claims that this conspiracy sought to justify the foundation of the State of Israel.

While the first version is mainly spread by rightwing extremists, Holocaust deniers and adherents to antisemitic conspiracy theories,⁶¹ the second version can be found in connection to the Arab-Israeli conflict as an argument of Palestinian activists and leaders.⁶²

In classical antisemitic stereotypes, rich US-Americans like Henry Ford, Prescott Bush or the Rockefellers are named as Jews who allegedly profited from the Third Reich. None were Jewish. Indeed, Henry Ford was a well-known antisemite and

Nazi sympathizer. This is an example of assertions that build massive falsifications around a kernel of truth (like the selling of petrol by Standard Oil to Nazi Germany) to fabricate a totally wrong and distorted picture of the past.

Jews Were Involved in and thus Co-Responsible for Organizing the Holocaust

In imposed ghettos like those in Warsaw or Theresienstadt (Terezin) as well as in cities like Vienna, the organization of daily Jewish life was the responsibility of so-called Judenräte (councils of Jews set up by the Nazis) whose appointees were not only forced to collaborate with the National Socialist authorities but sometimes even had to participate in selecting and assembling Jews for deportation.⁶³ After liberation, these Jewish functionaries were confronted with serious accusations; some even were put on trial because of their ambivalent role.

These historical facts are often distorted in order to shift responsibility away from the Nazis, placing it instead on the victims. The notorious rightwing extremist website and online encyclopedia *Metapedia*, for instance, states that the Warsaw Ghetto was administered by a *Judenrat* and would have functioned like a small Jewish state—thus omitting the fact that the National Socialists had total control of the ghetto and were responsible for the terrible conditions people had to endure there. *Metapedia* blames the *Judenrat* for organizing partisan attacks against the German occupation forces and claims the National Socialists had no choice other than to dissolve the ghetto and send its inhabitants to extermination camps. This is another example of rightwing extremists and antisemites arguing outside the historical context and spinning a fictitious story around a few facts—like the existence of the *Judenrat*.⁶⁴

Another example is to be found in an article in a Greek publication of 2017, which attributes the “barbarities and the crimes against humanity committed in Auschwitz to a well orchestrated plan of the Jewish masons.”⁶⁵

A remark by Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki during an interview at a forum of world leaders in Munich in 2018 led to widespread criticism, when he alleged that—aside from other groups of perpetrators—there had been Jewish perpetrators as well. Some weeks later the Prime Minister’s father, Kornel Morawiecki, a senior lawmaker himself, stated that Jews went voluntarily to the ghettos to get away from their Polish neighbors, thus blaming Jews for their own suffering. The Polish government distanced itself from this remark.⁶⁶

Statements that Cast the Holocaust as a Positive Historical Event.

While most rightwing extremists deny or distort the Holocaust, there are small militant groups and supporters of rightwing populist or extremist parties like the Freedom Party in Austria, who make positive references to the Holocaust and the gas chambers in concentration and extermination camps.

Sometimes these references are clearly antisemitic and directed against Jews. Recently, they have been largely directed against migrants and asylum seekers. In summer 2009, the walls of the Mauthausen memorial in Austria were defaced with graffiti slogans including “What the Jews were to our fathers, the Muslim brood is for us—be aware!” (“Was unseren Vätern der Jud ist für uns die Moslembrot – seid auf der Hut!”) or “Turk and Jew—poisonous blood” (“Türk‘ und Jud‘ giftig’s Blut”).⁶⁷ Some adherents of the Austrian Freedom Party even asked on social media for the “reopening” of the gas chambers of Mauthausen for asylum seekers.⁶⁸

Attempts to Blur the Responsibility for Nazi Germany’s Establishment of Concentration and Death Camps by Blaming Other Nations or Ethnic Groups.

This form of distortion essentially suggests that Nazi Germany had little or nothing to do with the development of the formal mechanisms that led to the Holocaust. While it is clear that local collaborators in countries allied with the Nazi Germany or those occupied by the Axis played a role in the Holocaust, the responsibility for the Holocaust and the institutions that led to this genocide ultimately lie with Nazi Germany.

When terms like “Polish death camps” or “Polish concentration camps” may be simple references to the sites’ geographic location, the use of such terms blurs the distinctions of this history. These sites and these camps were established and run by Nazi Germany in German-occupied Poland.

Accusing Jews of “Using” the Holocaust for Some Manner of Gain.

These topics reach back into the very beginning of Holocaust distortion and are connected to the blaming of Jews for their own genocide. Nevertheless they surface in other contexts: Consider the debates about indemnification payments by Germany and other countries or restitution claims on looted property. In these debates old antisemitic stereotypes can be detected like that of the allegedly “greedy Jews.”

In 2016 the infamous Iranian cartoon contest was won by an illustration featuring a cash register in the form of a concentration camp gate. The drawer to the register is emblazoned with the words “Shoah Business,” while the key to the register has the name of the Jewish organization “B’nai B’rith” written on it. Finally, the figure on the register is six million.⁶⁹

Jews Allegedly Draw Profit Out Of The Holocaust

A German research team at Leipzig conducted several surveys between 2012 and 2020 on the issue of reparations. They asked respondents if they agreed with the statement that “reparation claims benefit a Holocaust industry.” About 40 percent of respondents agreed with this statement in 2012 and 2020, whereas in 2018 only 35 percent agreed.⁷⁰ Regardless, these significant levels of agreement show the power of the antisemitic stereotype that Jews are always after money.

In Austria and Germany the question is raised frequently as to whether Jews are free from paying taxes due to indemnification measures. Experts in the field are forced to refute this myth time and again.⁷¹ This legend is quite old but seems never to vanish and is used as an explanation for the alleged economic successes of Jews, in keeping with the old antisemitic stereotype of alleged Jewish economic skill. And at the same time this stereotype is linked to the notion that Jews would use the Holocaust to make profit.

Use of the Term “Holocaust” to Reference Events or Concepts that are Not Related in Any Meaningful Way to the Genocide of European and North African Jewry by Nazi Germany and its Accomplices Between 1941 and 1945.

The appropriation of the term “Holocaust” in order to draw attention to other unrelated issues has been common for many decades, and it happens in a variety of contexts. It is certainly possible that such distortion is not always intentional. It might result from a lack of knowledge, from indifference and from carelessness. When opponents of abortion use the term “Babycaust,” global warming activists warn of a “Climate Holocaust,” or animal rights campaigners use the slogan “the Holocaust on your plate,” they are all engaging in the trivialization of the Nazi-led mass murder of European Jewry.

This is because comparison if not equation between occurrences is notoriously tricky. Since the Holocaust is well known, attempts to draw intellectual links with it necessarily diminish the specificity of the Holocaust as the genocide of the Jews and moreover limit the ability of audiences to engage meaningfully with other phenomena, mass atrocities, or crises. Similarly, they take away from the specificity

of the phenomenon to which the Holocaust is being compared.

While this is not proof of antisemitism, it does prove at best ignorance, a lack of awareness or empathy, as well as indifference.

For example, in 2018 an online shop offered car stickers with a yellow star, with the inscription “Saxon” (Sachse) instead of “Jew.” On occasion, one can find counterfeit Jewish stars to raise awareness for the “fate” of smokers, welfare recipients and even Muslims and others who stylized themselves as victims.⁷² More recently, symbols of Nazi persecution have been used in protests in Europe and North America against the restrictions imposed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bombing Holocaust

The equation of the Allied bombing of Dresden in February 1945 with the Holocaust is another example. See more details under “Leveling of victims.”

Climate Holocaust

On January 27, 2020, Tom Radtke, a young “Left Party” candidate for the Hamburg state elections, tweeted—in an explicit reference to the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz—that “Greta Thunberg was right when she said in Davos that not enough has been done since the climate protests began. We must stop global warming now, to prevent another Holocaust.” Both the “Fridays-for-Futures” movement and the Left Party immediately distanced themselves from the statement, and vehemently denounced any comparison between the Holocaust and the climate crisis.

The “Expulsion Holocaust” / Foibe

The term “Vertreibungsholocaust” (expulsion Holocaust), which rightwing extremists in Germany use to equate the post-World War II expulsion of Germans from former German territories in Silesia, the Sudetenland and East Prussia with the Holocaust, is quite problematic. In 2011, author Rolf-Josef Eibicht, who writes for rightwing extremist publishers and functions as a liaison between far-right circles, published an article titled “The Expulsion Holocaust Against the German People—Crime of the Millennium! On the planned final solution of the German question in Eastern, South-Eastern and Central Eastern Europe.” With his use of the word “Holocaust” as well as the National Socialist euphemism “Endlösung” (final solution),⁷³ he explicitly equates the post-war expulsion of Germans with the Holocaust.

A member of the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) regularly shared writings from the extreme rightwing spectrum, including an entry in the Russian-language blog “LiveJournal” in March 2019: “The real Holocaust! An estimated 15+ million ethnic Germans were killed after World War II... This was the greatest ethnic cleansing in European history. All thanks to the Allies and their Zionist masters (bankers).”⁷⁴ The FPÖ ejected this person from the party in May 2019.

Distortion of the Holocaust also occurs around discussion of the so-called Foibe massacres in Istria and Dalmatia. Between 1943 and 1949, Yugoslav partisans murdered between 5,000 and 10,000 fascists (or those they considered as such) by throwing them into the deep sinkholes of the Karst region. Oftentimes, discussion of these actions is equated with the Holocaust, particularly in some rightwing extremist circles in Italy. In February 2011, for example, on the day former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi set aside for commemoration of the Foibe massacres, protesters carried placards with the words, “We will not forget the Holocaust of the Istrian people.”⁷⁵ That same month, the student group “Lotta Studentesca” (Student Combat), linked to the rightwing extremist party “Forza Nuova,” attached a banner with a similar slogan to the Holocaust Memorial “Binario 21,” the rail track in Milan Central Station from which the deportation trains departed with Jews from the area.⁷⁶

State-Sponsored Manipulation of Holocaust History in Order to Sow Political Discord Within or Outside A Nation’s Borders.

State-sponsored pronouncements against other countries’ actions during the course of the Holocaust were common to Cold War propaganda, and they have continued through the present day. Such pronouncements instill defensive responses and threaten honest engagement with this history.

Recently, for example, Russia has amended its laws and engaged in public rhetoric that try to gloss over the Soviet Union’s role in the invasion of Poland and Baltic countries between 1939 and 1940. At the same time, Russia emphasizes the Soviet Union’s historic role as a rescuer and liberator of European Jews during the course of the Second World War. While of course the Soviet army played an important role in defeating Nazi-Germany, the liberation of the Jews was in no way a clear aim of the Soviets; quite the contrary, considering the antisemitic policies of the following years (e.g. Stalin’s antisemitic campaign, known as the “doctors’ plot” 1951–1953⁷⁷).⁷⁸

Trivializing or Honoring the Historical Legacies of Persons or Organizations that were Complicit in the Crimes of the Holocaust.

The commemoration of the Waffen SS, a National Socialist unit responsible for war crimes and mass killings of Jews and enemies of the regime, marks a trivializing of these perpetrators and thus of their crimes. Memorial events have taken place and still do in some European countries whose nationals had served in the Waffen SS. Alongside German units the National Socialist regime integrated nationals of the occupied/affiliated countries like the Baltic territory, Hungary, Croatia, the Netherlands or France—especially when the need for soldiers grew during the course of the war.

Official support for such commemorative events has lessened or been withdrawn entirely in recent years, but those events still take place. They are attended by aged veterans, rightwing activists and neo-Nazis from all over Europe.

Memorial Events and Monuments Trivializing National Socialist Crimes and Perpetrators

Some of these events have lost importance over the last decade—like the annual meeting at the Carinthian Ulrichsberg in Austria, which houses a large memorial for the soldiers of World War II, including men of the Waffen SS on its hilltop. These meetings had included former Waffen SS members from across Europe, rightwing extremists, and some Austrian politicians. Only after 2009 did Austrian authorities begin withdrawing support for the event.

In May, an annual commemoration in the Austrian town of Bleiburg focuses on the fate of a Croatian Waffen SS unit that was captured along with Ustasha collaborators, and then handed over to the Yugoslavian forces, which killed thousands of these prisoners.

A memorial at the site shows the symbol of the 13th Waffen-SS unit “Handschar.” Due to public protests against this event in its session of July 9, 2020, the Austrian National Council voted with the majority for a decision against the annual meetings in Bleiburg. The members of parliament ask the minister of the interior to examine all possibilities to prohibit these events in the future.

Similar commemorations take place in Hungary each February. Various Hungarian extremist groups are joined by Nazi sympathizers from abroad in the city of Székesfehérvár to commemorate the fruitless efforts of German and Hungarian units to break out of Budapest, which had been encircled by Soviet troops in February 1945.

The demonstration and commemoration are not supported by the Hungarian State, although members of the rightwing party Jobbik attend in unofficial capacities.⁸⁰

In Riga, there has long been a problematic parade commemorating Latvian Waffen SS soldiers, as well as the Remembrance Day of the Latvian Legionnaires—soldiers from the 15th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS and the 19th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (the 1st and 2nd Latvian, respectively). Veterans of these divisions still attend, as do many supporters. Some participants even wear swastikas and other Nazi insignia.⁸¹

The Use of Imagery and Language Associated with The Holocaust for Political, Ideological, or Commercial Purposes Unrelated to this History in Online and Offline Forums.

Holocaust-Related Imagery and Language in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic Crisis

The crises of the COVID-19 pandemic seem to have inspired a significant increase in Holocaust distortion, particularly with the protesters against restriction measures and opponents of any vaccination. These protests further are instrumentalized by extremist groups who strive to use the anger of the protesters for their own political ends.

On social media, COVID-19 responses have been equated with National Socialist crimes. For example, some virologists have been named as the new Dr. Mengele, in reference to the infamous Nazi doctor. During demonstrations participants wore yellow stars equating the push for vaccinations with the persecution of Jews.⁸² Participants of some protests presented themselves as “Jews.” These include a young woman at a demonstration in Vienna who claimed she was suffering a fate akin to that of Anne Frank, while another in Germany saw herself as a new version of the German resistance activist Sophie Scholl.⁸³ During a protest rally in Leipzig, Germany, mainstream media were called Holocaust accomplices (*Holocaust Komplizen*).⁸⁴

In Britain, leaflets linked to the brother of former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn were distributed, in which an image of the gates of Auschwitz is inscribed with the words “Vaccines are safe path to freedom,” replacing the Nazi slogan, “Work sets you free” (*Arbeit macht frei*).⁸⁵ Separately, in April 2021, London protesters displayed yellow stars printed with the words “No Covid.”⁸⁶

In August 2020 the leading figure of the Dutch movement against Covid-19 measures compared the duty to cover one’s mouth with the Jews being forced to apply a Star of David on their clothes by the National Socialists.⁸⁷ About the same time, two children

appeared on the Malieveld in The Hague with a yellow Star of David on their chests, bearing the text “unvaccinated” (*ongevaccineerd*).

And in the United States, a similar statement was made by Marjorie Greene, a top Republican Party politician who equated vaccination proof with the yellow star when retweeting a story about a grocery store having its vaccinated employees wear a badge that released them from having to wear masks.⁸⁸

Holocaust-Related Imagery and Language in the Context of the Attack on the US Capitol, January 6, 2021

The January 6, 2021 attack on the Capitol in Washington D.C. clearly shows the strong connections between conspiracy theorists, namely QAnon, rightwing extremists like white supremacists and Holocaust distortion. Rioters wore shirts with the inscription “Camp Auschwitz” or the slogan “work sets you free,” mocking the well-known inscription on the gate to the Auschwitz concentration camp.

But reactions to that riot clarified the possibility of other forms of misuse of Holocaust imagery. As others have noted, a plethora of “analogies” have been drawn between the insurrection at the US Capitol and the burning of Germany’s Reichstag in 1933; Donald Trump’s pre-rally speech and Adolf Hitler’s firebrand speeches that frequently fueled his Nazi followers; and the role of partisan media outlets in fomenting lies in a similar fashion to Joseph Goebbels’ Nazi propaganda apparatus. Descriptions of the events at The Capitol as a pogrom have also appeared in many outlets.”⁸⁹



Appendix

The Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion

The present definition is an expression of the awareness that Holocaust denial and distortion have to be challenged and denounced nationally and internationally and need examination at a global level. IHRA hereby adopts the following legally non-binding working definition as its working tool.

Holocaust denial is discourse and propaganda that deny the historical reality and the extent of the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices during World War II, known as the Holocaust or the Shoah. Holocaust denial refers specifically to any attempt to claim that the Holocaust/Shoah did not take place.

Holocaust denial may include publicly denying or calling into doubt the use of principal mechanisms of destruction (such as gas chambers, mass shooting, starvation and torture) or the intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people.

Holocaust denial in its various forms is an expression of antisemitism. The attempt to deny the genocide of the Jews is an effort to exonerate National Socialism and antisemitism from guilt or responsibility in the genocide of the Jewish people. Forms of Holocaust denial also include blaming the Jews for either exaggerating or creating the Shoah for political or financial gain as if the Shoah itself was the result of a conspiracy plotted by the Jews. In this, the goal is to make the Jews culpable and antisemitism once again legitimate.

The goals of Holocaust denial often are the rehabilitation of an explicit antisemitism and the promotion of political ideologies and conditions suitable for the advent of the very type of event it denies.

Distortion of the Holocaust refers, *inter alia*, to:

- 1.** Intentional efforts to excuse or minimize the impact of the Holocaust or its principal elements, including collaborators and allies of Nazi Germany;
- 2.** Gross minimization of the number of the victims of the Holocaust in contradiction to reliable sources;
- 3.** Attempts to blame the Jews for causing their own genocide;
- 4.** Statements that cast the Holocaust as a positive historical event. Those statements are not Holocaust denial but are closely connected to it as a radical form of antisemitism. They may suggest that the Holocaust did not go far enough in accomplishing its goal of “the Final Solution of the Jewish Question”;
- 5.** Attempts to blur the responsibility for the establishment of concentration and death camps devised and operated by Nazi Germany by putting blame on other nations or ethnic groups.

Notes

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6. Reports from Fred Leuchter are available as books by and about Germar Rudolf; accessed April 25, 2020.
7. Leuchter admitted publicly that he had used the title of "engineer" illegally. He sold execution devices that he designed in the USA; the Illinois Department of Corrections terminated its contract with him in 1990. See also: Washington Post, June 18, 1991; Special Edition. A periodic update from the Anti-Defamation-League of B'nai B'rith—Civil Rights Division, January 1991.
8. Jean-Claude Pressac, "Auschwitz. Technique and Operations of the Gas Chambers," New York, 1989; Shelly Shapiro, "Truth Prevails. Demolishing Holocaust Denial: the End of 'The Leuchter Report,'" New York-Latham 1990.
9. At the time of his first publication Rudolf was working on his doctoral theses at the Max Planck-Institut für Festkörperforschung, Stuttgart, Germany. After this first appearance as a Holocaust denier he was dismissed from the institute.
10. <http://germarrudolf.com/>; accessed February 11, 2020.
11. John Clive Ball, Luftbild-Beweise, in: Ernst Gauss (ed.) [alias Germar Rudolf], Grundlagen zur Zeitgeschichte. Ein Handbuch über strittige Fragen des 20. Jahrhunderts, Tübingen 1994, pp. 235–248.
12. By the 1970s, historians already had named the correct number of Jewish victims in Auschwitz; see Ino Arndt/Wolfgang Scheffler, "Organisierter Massenmord an Juden in nationalsozialistischen Vernichtungslagern. Ein Beitrag zur Richtigstellung apologetischer Literatur," with an introduction by Martin Broszat, in: Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte vol. 24(1976) Heft 2, pp. 105–135, here p. 134.
13. There is a large amount of literature on Irving and the trial. For Deborah Lipstadt's account of the trial see her book, "History on trial: my day in court with David Irving," New York, Ecco, 2005. Also important is Richard Evans, "Lying about Hitler: history, Holocaust, and the David Irving trial," New York: Basic Books, 2001, which is based on Evan's expert testimony at the trial in which he thoroughly destroyed Irving's pretensions of being a legitimate historian.
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16. <https://news.sky.com/story/holocaust-denier-ordered-to-visit-memorial-10455906>; accessed July 5, 2021.
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INTERNATIONAL
**HOLOCAUST
REMEMBRANCE**
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