

Holocaust Distortion in Europe: Documentation and Analysis from Five Countries

Towards a
common framework

ENMA

European Network on
Monitoring Antisemitism

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Katharina von Schnurbein

European Commission Coordinator on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life

The European Commission has placed the fight against antisemitism at the heart of its priorities and we have equipped the Commission to be able to act.

Since 7 October 2023 we have witnessed an unprecedented explosion of antisemitism in Europe and worldwide. It is intolerable that Jews in Europe, 80 years after the end of the Shoah, live in fear or feel they need to hide their identity.

The European Commission's aim is to ensure that Jewish life in Europe can flourish.

Antisemitism is incompatible with the core values and principles on which the EU is founded. It divides, polarises and incites violence. The Commission stands firmly against all forms of antisemitism, including when it hides behind anti-Zionism and hatred of Israel. It is a threat above all to Jews (and that alone would be a sufficient reason to fight it), but it also undermines democracy and security in Europe.

President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen stated at the memorial ceremony commemorating the one-year anniversary of the 7 October terrorist attacks at the Brussels Synagogue of Europe: 'I will spare no effort to make sure that Jews can live and thrive in Europe. It is not only a moral duty but also a prerequisite for Europe.' To do so, the EU, together with the Member States, will accelerate the implementation of the EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life (2021–2030), and update it.

In October 2024, we published the first Progress Report on the EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish life. It also shows a change in the EU Member States' commitment and determination to act:

- 24 EU Member States have developed national strategies against antisemitism;
- 20 Member States have appointed a special envoy on combating antisemitism.

They are improving training on antisemitism, prosecution of antisemitic hate crimes, upscaling security and are revising school curricula. In addition, more than 90 EU initiatives are being implemented, many of them with a Europe-wide dimension such as

- a Network of Places Where the Holocaust Happened;
- a Network of Young EU Ambassadors to promote Holocaust remembrance;
- a Network of trusted-flaggers and fact-checkers on antisemitism;
- a Network on Monitoring Antisemitism.

In this vein, I am proud that the Commission supports this important project by the European Network on Monitoring Antisemitism (ENMA), aimed to create transnational comparable data on the recording of antisemitic incidents containing manifestations of Holocaust denial and distortion, and awareness-raising actions. I look forward to seeing ENMA fully developing its potential and become a major international actor in combating antisemitism at EU level.

Benjamin Steinitz

Executive Director of Bundesverband RIAS

Eighty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, antisemitism and particularly Shoah¹ distortion are on the rise worldwide. The gruesome violence of Hamas terrorists on 7 October 2023— who murdered, kidnapped and raped more than 1,200 people in the western Negev Desert—awakened the trans-generational trauma of the Holocaust. The first images and videos of these atrocities from the perspective of the perpetrators went viral far beyond Israel and led to the first antisemitic reactions while the massacre was still unfolding. For Jewish communities worldwide there is life before and life after 7 October 2023.

The surge of antisemitic incidents documented by the member organisations of the European Network on Monitoring Antisemitism (ENMA) unveiled an increasingly aggressive, pro-violent expression of antisemitism, directed at Jews and anybody who showed sympathy for killed and kidnapped Israelis. The global surge of antisemitism has led to an objective worsening of the security and well-being of many Jews and continues to do so more than a year thereafter. In protests and assemblies, on university campuses and in everyday situations, the massacres of that day are celebrated as successful resistance and the perpetrators are praised as heroes. Simultaneously, the number of victims is minimized, specific aspects of the massacre—such as acts of sexual violence—are repudiated, responsibility for the attack is shifted to the Israeli side, and the antisemitic character of the attack is ignored. To this day, Hamas holds Israeli hostages in the Gaza Strip, including many who have already died as a result of inhumane treatment. Public commemorations of the victims and hostages are under attack, which makes individual mourning and processing all the more challenging. Thus, for many relatives and friends, as well as for survivors themselves, 7 October is far from over.

While most public antisemitism after 7 October features references to Israel, forms of Holocaust denial and distortion remain very relevant and are deeply intertwined. Acts and manifestations of Holocaust denial and distortion appear in various forms and are adopted by different milieus and groups to serve their own political or religious agenda, regardless of societal and country-specific context. These are often an instrument to strengthen a group identity, for instance in cases in which their own historic guilt or complicity is denied or when a group compares or equates its own situation to that of European Jewry under the Nazi regime. The trivialisation of the Holocaust also serves as a means to justify violence against Jews.

The persisting visibility of various forms of Holocaust denial and distortion is deeply connected to a worrisome ignorance about the historical facts of the Nazis' singular crimes against humanity. According to the recent "8-Country Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Index"² by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany (Claims Conference), of the respondents from Poland, Austria and Germany, 18-21 % believe that two million or fewer Jews were killed in the Holocaust, and one quarter does not believe that the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust has been accurately reported. About half of the respondents in Germany and Austria, and about a third of the respondents in Poland noticed various forms of Holocaust distortion on the internet. Two thirds of respondents in Germany and Austria and more than half of those in Poland believe that something like the Holocaust can happen again today.

Countering distortion has been a priority of the European Commission for many years. According to a Council Framework Decision from 2008, member states should penalize public incitement to violence or hatred directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin, as well as public condoning of gross trivialisation or denial of the Holocaust.³ Many EU Member States have transposed the Framework Decision into their legal codes by penalizing the public denial of the Holocaust.

The EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life 2021-2030 states that "Holocaust denial, distortion and trivialisation are often used to feed hatred against Jewish people and an attempt to rewrite European and Jewish history. Their corrosive effects for

¹ In this publication, the terms Shoah and Holocaust are used synonymously, respecting the preferences of the organizations and authors that contributed to this publication. This report was created in collaboration with Jewish and non-Jewish institutions from five European countries.

² Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Study. Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany 2025. <https://www.claimscon.org/our-work/allocations/red/holocaust-study/>

³ Council of the European Union, Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA, 2008, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32008F0913>.

collective historic memory and for the resilience and cohesion of our democratic societies should not be underestimated and need to be specifically addressed".⁴

In response to the growing antisemitism across Europe and the need for a transnational methodology to document it, ENMA was launched publicly on 16 April 2024. ENMA is an international consortium of Jewish and non-Jewish civil society organisations that monitor antisemitic incidents and support victims in their countries. The overarching goal of ENMA is to build sustainable reporting infrastructures that will serve Jewish communities and affected persons across Europe. Furthermore, ENMA aims to provide comparable data on antisemitism for Jewish communities, decision makers, law-enforcement agencies, scholars and journalists.

ENMA member organisations document antisemitic incidents under scientifically sound guidelines and categories developed with reference to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism and the IHRA Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion, raising awareness of all forms of antisemitism.

The project "Standardised Recording of Holocaust Denial and Distortion Incidents in Five European Countries" is funded by the Claims Conference and has developed a methodology to comparatively record antisemitic incidents that contain forms of Holocaust denial and distortion. The basis for comparison is the ENMA definition of antisemitic incidents.

Founding ENMA and maintaining it requires not only the expertise of antisemitism researchers and close connections with Jewish community organisations across Europe in times of rising antisemitism, but also a commitment from each member organisation to engage beyond their own backyard. The extra work done by the teams of the member organisations, as well as the counselling efforts by the members of the Expert Advisory Board and the team of the World Jewish Congress, can't be honoured enough. Last but not least, I'm grateful for the trust placed in us by the Jewish Claims Conference and the European Commission as funding institutions. This publication examines the alarming prevalence of Holocaust denial and distortion in Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, and Poland, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated action. By analysing contemporary manifestations and their impact on Jewish communities, we aim to reinforce historical truth, counter hate-driven narratives, and uphold the memory of the Holocaust.

⁴ European Commission, EU Strategy on Combating Antisemitism and Fostering Jewish Life (2021–2030), 2021, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/d6cc6024-6f90-4b6a-8216-fd940407e55f_en?filename=cajfl_antisemitism-strategy-doc-en.pdf.

ENMA Working Principles and Methodological Approach

ENMA has developed a common methodological approach for the low-threshold, victim-oriented, and scientifically standardized recording of antisemitism. This approach enables a comprehensive, comparable, and scientifically sound recording of antisemitic incidents in Europe, taking into account the needs of those affected. This includes the understanding of antisemitism, a low threshold and victim-oriented reporting of antisemitic incidents, the documentation of incidents and quality assurance measures.

Scientifically Sound Documentation of Antisemitic Incidents

First of all, ENMA categorizes antisemitism according to the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism, supplemented by the IHRA Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion and the triad of demonisation, delegitimation and double standards in Israel-related antisemitism. In the course of the work, all forms of antisemitism are documented, regardless of the political background of the perpetrators. On this basis, the network distinguishes five 'types of antisemitism' on a categorical level: antisemitic othering, Israel-related antisemitism, conspiracy myths, Holocaust denial and distortion and anti-Judaic antisemitism. Additionally to the classification as antisemitic, the criteria for one of the defined 'types of incidents' has to be met: extreme violence, physical attack, threats, property damage, desecration and abusive behaviour. Furthermore, the criteria can be broken down by entanglement with racism, sexism and LGBTQI-enmity as well as by categories of affected persons.

For the standardised recording based on the IHRA Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion the following sub-categories have been adopted: Holocaust trivialisation / revisionism,

distortion or exaggeration of the number of victims from a certain nation, blaming the Jews / perpetrator-victim reversal, Holocaust affirmation, externalising responsibility for the Holocaust, Jews profiting from the Holocaust / perpetrator-victim reversal, Holocaust trivialisation by comparison, Holocaust trivialisation by using its imagery

The network aims to provide a comprehensive and inclusive platform for monitoring antisemitic incidents across Europe, ensuring that the data collected represents the diverse experiences of Jewish communities.

Antisemitic incidents are systematically documented using a uniform methodology according to a common codebook of categories to facilitate the comparative analysis and interpretation of collected data from the different countries. This standardised approach ensures consistency in data collection, thereby improving the reliability and validity of subsequent statistical analyses and trend assessments.

Low-Threshold and Victim-Oriented Reporting of Antisemitic Incidents to Member Organisations

ENMA member organisations are approachable to Jews of all backgrounds. This approach considers the plurality of reporting communities and individuals in their respective countries. The reporting process for antisemitic incidents should be designed to be accessible and ensure confidentiality. ENMA member organisations are advised to implement a range of reporting options to accommodate diverse preferences and needs. These options may include online submission forms, e-mail communication channels, telephone hotlines and in-person counselling services. To enhance accessibility, member organisations should strive to provide multilingual reporting capabilities. The online reporting platform should feature a user-friendly interface with intuitive design and clear, concise language.

At the centre of ENMA member organisations stands not only the documentation of antisemitic incidents but also the attendance to the needs of those affected by antisemitism. Therefore, the documentation of antisemitic incidents is done through a victim-oriented approach, which takes the perspective of those affected into account. Reporting staff are sensitised to the traumatising effects incidents may have and communicate with the victims with empathy, as ENMA is committed primarily to them. Reporting persons also receive information about any community psycho-social and legal support available and, if necessary and possible, assistance in filing a police report.

When it comes to data protection and anonymity, reports should be handled with the utmost regard for privacy. Best practices include maximising anonymity in report submissions and additionally the

erasure of private information and contact details collected for the verification process of incidents right after a case is closed.

It is recommended that initial contact with affected parties be established promptly, ideally within 72 hours of receiving a report notification. By implementing these measures, organisations can foster a supportive environment that encourages the reporting of antisemitic incidents while prioritising the safety and trust of those affected.

On the technical side, the documentation and categorisation of verified incidents is carried out using a GDPR-compliant database software, developed and provided by the Bundesverband RIAS. The software was rigorously audited by security experts and is installed separately in the local IT-environment of each member organisation. This allows for each member organisation to record antisemitic incidents both according to ENMA and country-specific categorisation.

Quality Assurance Measures

ENMA records antisemitic incidents according to a common codebook of categories. The member organisations ensure that only professionally qualified staff will use the database, in accordance with the designated agreement. To enhance data accuracy, the member organisations are encouraged to implement a dual control principle, according to which at least two field experts verify collected data. Once a year all member organisations participate in a reliability check, with the goal of maintaining unity in recording incidents.

Sensitisation and Education about Antisemitism

The network as a whole—and member organisations individually—aspire to be in constant exchange with European and national authorities, with the goal of educating and sensitising them, and encouraging law enforcement agencies to prosecute antisemitic hate crimes.

The IHRA Working Definition on Holocaust Denial and Distortion

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This section introduces the IHRA Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion and its guiding examples, which also manifested as recorded antisemitic incidents and crimes by ENMA member organisations.

In 2013, the IHRA Plenary in Toronto adopted the non-legally binding Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion as its working tool. It notes that Holocaust denial and distortion are a form of antisemitism. The recording of incidents of Holocaust denial and distortion by ENMA member organisations occurs within the overall context of reported antisemitic incidents.

Holocaust denial is discourse and propaganda that deny the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices during the Second World War, known as the Holocaust or the Shoah. Holocaust denial is an attempt to claim that the Holocaust did not take place. Other forms of denial call into question principal facts of the Holocaust, such as mechanisms of extermination (for example, gas chambers, mass shootings) or blame Jews for exaggerating or creating their own genocide, thus attempting to exonerate National Socialism. Holocaust denial aims to promote explicit antisemitism and political ideologies “suitable for the advent of the very type of event it denies.”⁵

In 2021, the IHRA published a guideline for policy and decision makers on recognizing and countering Holocaust distortion, which outlines the differences between denial and distortion and presents how

these phenomena manifest themselves.⁶ Whereas Holocaust denial is an explicit form of antisemitism, Holocaust distortion is more difficult to identify. Holocaust distortion often avoids denying the Holocaust as a fact, but “excuses, minimizes, or misrepresents the Holocaust in a variety of ways and through various media.”⁷ While outright denial of the Holocaust is ostracised and illegal in many countries, Holocaust distortion is often more complex and subtle, which makes it harder for policy-makers to criminalise, since the very fact that the Holocaust transpired is not called into question. It is not always clear whether the motivation behind manifestations of Holocaust distortion originates in bad faith or in hate.⁸

In order to identify trends in recorded cases of Holocaust denial and distortion, ENMA developed eleven codes from ten examples given by the IHRA guideline for Holocaust distortion and two examples for Holocaust denial. Each of the following eleven examples represents a different manifestation of distortion. One example given by the IHRA, namely “state-sponsored distortion”, was not included in the process, since it is the only example that refers to an actor and not to the content of the distortion. Some of the examples that follow in the next chapter do not represent cases recorded by ENMA member organisations.

For ENMA member organisations to record an antisemitic incident and add the code “Holocaust denial and distortion”, a reported case should firstly entail the corresponding antisemitic content and secondly meet the criteria of ‘type of incident’. Recording these incidents is a first step toward assessing the overall predominance of distortion in the context of antisemitic incidents. It will also serve as a meaningful contribution to the development of strategies to counter distortion.

⁵ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). IHRA non-legally binding Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion, issued October 10, 2013

⁶ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance. Recognizing and Countering Holocaust Distortion. Recommendations for Policy and Decision Makers. IHRA 2021. <https://holocaustremembrance.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Recognizing-and-Countering-Holocaust-Distortion-Recommendations---IHRA.pdf>

⁷ Ibid. p. 17

⁸ Ibid. p. 10

The IHRA Working Definition on Holocaust Denial and Distortion: Examples and Incidents

1. 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.

As described in the core definition, Holocaust denial serves to deflect blame for the Holocaust for strategic reasons, sometimes only individual aspects of the Holocaust are disputed, even though they have been well researched, in order to cast doubt on the extent of the Nazi mass murders as a whole. This may concern murder techniques, but also the intentions of the perpetrators. However, the Holocaust is a very well-researched historical event. The antisemitic motivation of the perpetrators is not least evident from their own statements: The perpetrators wanted to kill the Jews because they were Jews. An academic, e.g. source-critical examination of the Holocaust or its remembrance after 1945 does not fall under this point.

Incident: Italy, Online, 3 April, 2023

In an incident in Italy, an university professor for contemporary history received an email from a known US Holocaust denier who referred to “so-called’ gas chambers” in Auschwitz and falsely claimed they were actually used as air raid shelters to protect against US bombings.

Incident: Austria, Vienna, 23 March 2021

During an anti-Israel rally in the centre of Vienna that was held as part of the “Israeli Apartheid Week” an activist denied the Holocaust.

A few metres away, a number of protesters, including members of a Jewish student group, demonstrated

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against this anti-Israel rally, a participant of which then began to loudly insult the counter-protesters as Nazis. When told it was perfidious to call Jews Nazis, he loudly proclaimed that the Nazis had “not murdered the Jews.” He claimed that the Nazis had only murdered anti-Zionists and that the Zionist Jews had co-operated with the Nazis for the longest time. The statements were not contradicted by the other participants of the anti-Israel rally.

Claiming that the Nazis only killed anti-Zionists and denying the fact that they indiscriminately attempted to murder all Jews regardless of their political views or level of Zionist commitment is a form of Holocaust denial.

It is a conspiracy myth that ignores the antisemitic nature of the Nazi ideology. It grossly minimizes the impact of the Holocaust and contradicts the historical evidence about the Nazis’ intention to exterminate the entire Jewish people.

2. Blaming the Jews for either exaggerating or creating the Holocaust for political or financial gain as if the Holocaust itself was the result of a conspiracy plotted by the Jews.

Holocaust denial establishes a conspiracy narrative according to which the Jews invented the Holocaust in order to profit from it. This is antisemitic because Jews are ascribed a global power that they supposedly use for their own benefit. In a weakened version, Jews are accused of exploiting the Holocaust for political or financial purposes without denying the crimes of the Nazis themselves. This is also antisemitic, as here, for example, reparations — an established legal and moral response to historical injustice — are framed as illegitimate when claimed by Jews. The state of Israel is also fre-

quently accused of instrumentalizing the Holocaust for its own purposes when it pursues diplomacy and historical policy like all other states. All these accusations ignore the suffering that Nazi Germany and its collaborators brought upon the Jews, a suffering that is still relevant for the descendants of the victims and Jews worldwide.

Incident: Germany, Berlin, 20 January, 2024

During a taxi-ride a driver told his passengers multiple conspiracy myths, including that the Jews are aiming for world domination and that a supposed maximum of 6,000 people were killed in the Holocaust.

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

It is antisemitic to excuse or justify fundamental elements of the Holocaust or to minimise their impact. This is done in a similar way to that mentioned in example 1 in order to raise doubts about the Holocaust as a whole. Sometimes, however, the reason for the murder of Jews is assumed to be their behaviour, e.g. their supposedly special social status, and thus the acts are excused. This is an antisemitic perpetrator-victim reversal, in which the victims are blamed for the crimes committed against them. It can ultimately legitimise similar crimes again (see example 5). Important forms of minimization are claims that the perpetrators of the Holocaust were only a very small group of people or that they were not responsible for their actions because they only murdered on orders.

In countries invaded by Nazi Germany during the Second World War, the denial of the

crimes of collaborators can fulfill a similar function. Here, distorting narratives tend to exonerate individuals or nations from guilt or responsibility for the Holocaust and often overlook complexities in which some were collaborators while others were victims of the Nazi invaders.

Incident: Poland, Jedwabne, 10 July, 2022

On the 81st anniversary of the Jedwabne pogrom, right-wing nationalists protested the official commemoration ceremony and denied the Polish involvement in the murder of Jews during the Jedwabne pogrom. The protestors demanded a new exhumation and the acknowledgment that the Germans were solely responsible for the massacre. The crowd chanted: "We demand the truth about Jedwabne. Apologize for the crimes against the Polish nation!"

Denying that local Poles abused and killed their Jewish neighbours in collaboration with the Nazi occupiers and shifting the blame solely to the Nazis represents a clear attempt to deny the well-documented historical facts. The chants show that remembering Jedwabne and examining Polish involvement in the massacre is regarded as an insult to national pride, imposing a sense of unjustified collective guilt. This approach echoes the broader pattern of distorting historical narratives to minimize or even deny one's own nation's complicity and collaboration with the Nazi regime in order to defend it from guilt and responsibility.

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

Minimising the number of victims of the Hol-

ocaust is also a means of deflecting or diminishing (collective) guilt and historical responsibility for the genocide. It sometimes also helps to sow doubt about the Holocaust as a whole and establishes antisemitic conspiracy narratives (similar to example 1 or 3).

Incident: Italy, Milan, 31 January, 2022

During a student-led theatre performance of "Herr Doktor," a play delving into the role of Joseph Goebbels and Nazi propaganda during the Holocaust, a teacher disrupted the actress, who was enumerating the individuals who were murdered: "This is your truth, you don't tell the truth, you only say what suits you, and you completely exaggerate the numbers. This is not history, this is ideology!"

The incident triggered condemnation from colleagues and authorities, who distanced themselves from the teacher's stance. The teacher was suspended from teaching duties for a specified period.

5. Attempts to blame the Jews for causing their own genocide.

An extreme form of guilt defence is to blame Jews for the Holocaust. This is openly antisemitic because (similar to example 3) the genocide of Jews is justified by the behaviour of 'the Jews' before the Holocaust. The homogenization of Jews and holding them responsible for the behaviour of individuals is itself already antisemitic. Blaming Jews for the Holocaust is antisemitic by portraying it as something they orchestrated themselves. Not only is historical guilt externalized here, but Jews are also assumed to have an extremely evil will and great power. This is a form of perpetrator-victim reversal that distorts the Holocaust.

16 17 This antisemitic narrative has been used to justify acts of violence throughout history.

Incident, Poland, 20 March, 2018

A former Polish politician and father of a recent Prime Minister of Poland stated in an interview that during the Holocaust, Jews moved to ghettos voluntarily to avoid interactions with non-Jewish Poles. He claimed that Jews believed ghettos would serve as enclaves where they wouldn't have to deal with "those nasty Poles."

6. 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.' Associated with certain forms of legitimisation of the Holocaust is the open affirmation of the mass murder of six million Jews. This affirmation is usually linked to the legitimisation of extreme violence against Jews today, for example when it is claimed that not enough Jews have been murdered with regard to the state of Israel.

Incident: Germany, Freiburg, 10 November, 2023

In the days following 7 October 2023, the Jewish community in Freiburg received an anonymous letter saying: "Soon will the Reichskristalnacht happen again. Also in Freiburg we will continue the job of extermination of the Jewry. Death to Israel"

7. Attempts to blur Nazi Germany's responsibility for establishment and operation of concentration and death camps by putting blame on other nations or ethnic groups.

Historical research has shown that many Germans knew about the deportation and extermination of their Jewish neighbours, supported it and profited from it. It is an antisemitic form of guilt defence to deny this complicity and to hold other nations or groups solely responsible for the Holocaust, e.g. on whose territories extermination camps were built or mass shootings took place. This form of Holocaust distortion stands in a tense relationship to example three, the denial of any historical guilt on the part of European collaborators with the Nazis, i.e. such as Romania, Hungary or the Independent State of Croatia.

Incident: Germany, Weimar, 11 August, 2023

„A convicted Holocaust denier denied the Holocaust at the Buchenwald Memorial and claimed that the Nazi concentration camps were the work of the 'Zionists.' The police issued the Holocaust denier with a ban from the premises, and legal proceedings were initiated against him“

8. Accusing Jews of 'using' the Holocaust for some manner of gain.

Similarly to example two, it is antisemitic to accuse Jews of using the Holocaust to their own advantage. In addition to the antisemitic personalisation of social forms of mediation, such as criminal prosecution, reparations and financial compensation, this can be part of an antisemitic conspiracy narrative. However, it can also negate the suffering of Holocaust survivors and their descendants on an individual level, for example when descendants

of perpetrators and bystanders accuse survivors or their descendants of talking about the Holocaust too often and for their own profit. In this way, the accusation can also be an expression of a defence against guilt.

Another common manifestation of this distortion is the labelling of Jewish organisation—which are dedicated to rebuilding Jewish life, provide support to local Jewish community, including Holocaust survivors and their descendant—as part of a ‘Holocaust Industry’. This is a form of a victim-perpetrator reversal which perpetuates the antisemitic stereotype about Jews as greedy and deceitful, exploiting the Holocaust for profit, suggesting that a Jewish institution is dishonestly ‘using’ it rather than carrying out genuine educational and humanitarian work.

Incident: Poland, online, 1 October, 2022

Under a Facebook post of a Jewish institution, inviting people to become involved with the local Jewish community, meet Holocaust survivors and organize events, a user accused the organisation of promoting “Holocaust Industry.”

9. 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. It can be antisemitic to describe historical events other than the murder of European and African Jews as the Holocaust, if they cannot be meaningfully related to the Holocaust. To intentionally instrumentalise the term “Holocaust” for ones own political/ideological agendas, relativises the suffering of the victims and the guilt of the perpetrators.

Incident: Germany, Dresden, 13 February, 2022

In a neo-Nazi demonstration commemorating the bombing of the city of Dresden in 1945 by the western allies, demonstrators held up a sign that read: “You call it liberation, we call it mass murder! // Bombs-Holocaust Dresden: 13.02.1945 [...]”

Here the term “Holocaust” is not only relativizing the suffering of the victims and the guilt of the perpetrators, it also engages in victim-perpetrator reversal, as the Germans are portrayed as victims of the same industrial murder the Jews were subjected to during this period.

10. Trivialising or honouring the historical legacies of persons or organisations that were complicit in the crimes of the Holocaust.

It is antisemitic if the role that historical figures played in the murder of European and North African Jews is not taken into account and these people are nevertheless honoured or their crimes relativized. This can be an expression of an antisemitic defence against guilt, but also the legitimisation of the deeds of these people, i.e. the murder of Jews.

Incident: Hungary, Budapest

In Hungary, thousands of right-wing extremists and neo-Nazis gather each year in February to commemorate the “Day of Honour”, a failed attempt of the Nazi German Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS as well as the Hungarian allied forces to break through the Soviet siege over Budapest in 1945. During the gatherings, participants display Nazi uniform, banners, slogans and openly revere the Waffen-SS.

18

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

It is antisemitic when images and language associated with the Holocaust are used to describe other political events, be they social crises or certain practices. This was often the case during the COVID-19 pandemic but also continues to play a role in protests against abortion. Such comparisons relativise the crimes of the Nazis and their accomplices, are hurtful to the survivors and their descendants and are often an expression of the attempt to put oneself in the place of the Jews and to relativise one’s own, family or national guilt and responsibility.

Incident: Italy, Padova, December 18, 2023

In an incident in Padova, the far-right group “CasaPound Italia” sets up mock stumbling-stone memorials “for Palestine and its children.”

Misusing the memorial tradition that commemorates victims of the Holocaust by setting up “stumbling stones” for war victims in Gaza and equating them with victims of the Holocaust is a form of Holocaust distortion. It trivializes the systematic and industrial genocide of the Jewish people.

Falsely accusing Jews or the Jewish State of treating Palestinians as the Nazis treated the Jews, depicting Palestinians as the “new Jews” and equating Israel with the Nazis, is an antisemitic victim-perpetrator reversal, which demonizes the Jewish state.

The Polish Context of Holocaust Denial and Distortion

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The phenomenon of Holocaust denial and distortion in Poland persists in a uniquely localized manner, shaped by political, social, and legal factors that influence the national discourse. While this represents just one form of Holocaust denial and distortion, its resonance in Poland makes it a focal point for this paper. While Holocaust denial is explicitly outlawed,⁹ forms of distortion remain prevalent and often intersect with nationalist narratives. Jewish Association Czulent's research offers a nuanced understanding of how these distortions impact Jewish communities and are influenced by broader political dynamics.

Forms of Holocaust Distortion

In terms of types of antisemitism the forms of Holocaust distortion in Poland described in this text span several forms. These include minimizing the Holocaust's significance, suggesting Polish victimhood supersedes that of Jews, and advancing revisionist interpretations of historical events, such as portraying the ghettos established by the Nazis

⁹ Article 55 of the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance—Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (IPN Act)—prohibits denying crimes committed by the Nazi regime, specifically in the context of the Holocaust.

Penal Code—Article 256—addresses public propagation of fascist or totalitarian ideologies and other forms of hate speech, including Holocaust denial. Article 256(2) extends this to include the production, recording, and dissemination of such content.

Penal Code—Article 257—also addresses public insults to individuals or groups based on national, ethnic, racial, or religious affiliation. While not exclusively focused on Holocaust denial, it can be applied in cases where Holocaust denial is accompanied by such insults.

as “autonomous provinces”¹⁰ where conditions were allegedly favourable. This narrative attempts to obscure the reality of the ghettos as sites of oppression and suffering, instead portraying them as institutions welcomed by Polish Jews. Such distortions reflect what scholars term secondary antisemitism, in which the suffering of Jewish people is minimized or recontextualized to absolve perpetrators and, by extension, elements of Polish society.

Politics Behind Historical Distortion

The political underpinnings of Holocaust distortion are closely tied to particular nationalist agendas. Right-wing factions often utilize these narratives to promote an image of Poland as a nation of heroes or victims, sidestepping any acknowledgment of Polish complicity. Terms like ‘Polonophobia’ have emerged within public discourse to suggest that criticisms of Poland’s wartime actions are exaggerated or unfairly malign the Polish nation. Legislative attempts, such as the 2018 amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance,^{11,12} sought to criminalize assertions of Polish complicity in Nazi crimes, underscoring an ongoing effort by certain political actors to enshrine a version of history that emphasizes Polish innocence and heroism.

¹⁰ As claimed by right-wing historian Ewa Kurek: See: “Polski punkt widzenia za pieniądze z ministerstwa Ziobry. Wystąpi badaczka, która nie wierzy w fakty o pogromie w Jedwabnem.” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 21, 2020. <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,26531886,polski-punt-widzenia-za-pieniadze-z-ministerstwa-ziobry-wystapi.html>.

¹¹ See: The Official Website of the President of the Republic of Poland (2018, February 6). President signed the amendment of the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. <https://www.president.pl/news/the-president-signed-the-amendment-of-the-act-on-the-institute-of-national-remembrance,36635>

¹² On June 27, 2018, the Senate adopted an amendment to the IPN Act. The amendment provides for a departure from criminal provisions for attributing responsibility for the crimes of the Third Reich to Poles. It repeals Article 55a, which threatens, among other things, imprisonment for publicly and, contrary to fact, attributing to the Polish people or the Polish state responsibility or co-responsibility for, among other things, crimes committed by Nazi Germany. Ustawa z dnia 27 czerwca 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucji Pamięci Narodowej - Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary. *Dziennik Ustaw* 2018, poz. 1277. <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20180001277>.



Figure 1: Screenshot from X of clothing ads with the slogan: "I DON'T APOLOGIZE FOR JEDWABNE"¹³

Holocaust Distortion vs. Legal Accountability

Legally, while Holocaust denial is punishable, Holocaust distortion remains complex to address in the Polish legal system. The Lex Super Omnia association has highlighted how politicization can impede the prosecution of such cases as sensitive issues are often prolonged or halted in court.¹⁴ Additionally, political figures have applied pressure on the judicial process, resulting in cases that can appear to target scholars and journalists engaged in Holocaust research. An example of this is the attempted prosecution of journalist Katarzyna Markusz, who faced accusations of defaming the Polish nation due to her writings on Polish antisemitism.¹⁵ This incident illustrates a broader trend of state-influenced legal actions to curb historical discourse contradicting the nationalist narrative. "The proceedings in which Katarzyna Markusz was questioned coincided with the civil trial against Holocaust researchers Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, in which the plaintiff was supported by the Reduta Good Name Redoubt organization, financed by the government Patriotic Fund and promoting a vision of the past in line with the historical policy of the ruling party."¹⁶

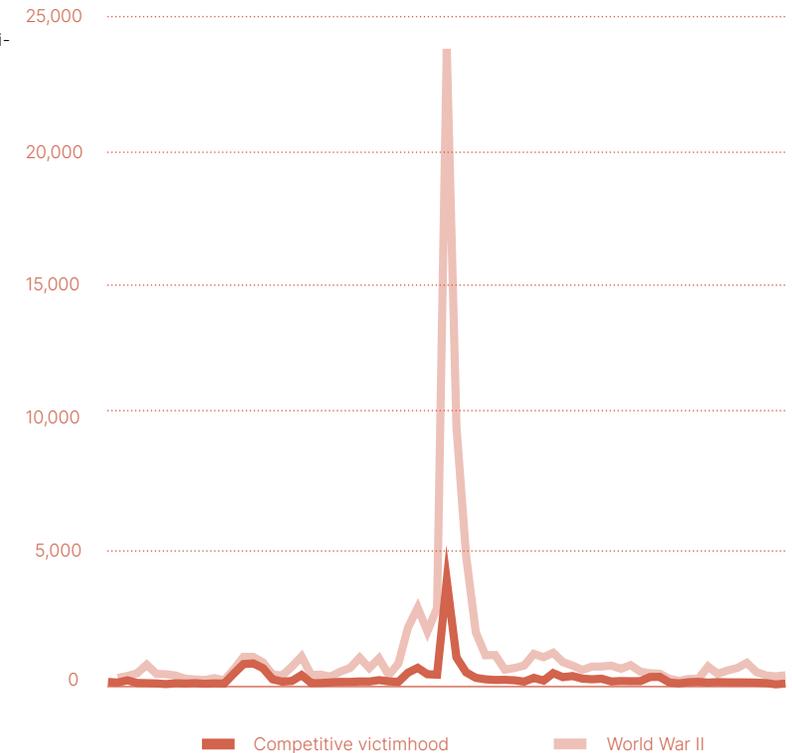
¹³ The slogan became part of the so-called "Jedwabne lie," or the denial of Polish responsibility for the murder of their Jewish neighbours. In 2013, the District Court in Białystok found the slogan to constitute incitement to hatred. The ruling of the District Court in Białystok dated September 19, 2013 (Case No. VIII Ka 422/13).

¹⁴ "Lex super omnia" Association of Prosecutors. Prosecution of hate crime in practice of the Polish prosecutor's office in the years 2016-2022—manifestations of the erosion of law enforcement system. Warsaw, March 2022.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Figure 2: Chart showing the number of antisemitic posts recorded as part of the monitoring of the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland, conducted by the Jewish Association Czulent.



The increasingly politicised climate surrounding historical memory is also reflected in the online sphere. According to monitoring conducted by the Jewish Association Czulent during the 2023 parliamentary elections, antisemitic narratives were particularly prominent in two thematic categories: The Second World War and competitive victimhood. A noticeable spike in antisemitic content occurred on 10 September 2023—the day of the beatification ceremony of the Ulma family—indicating how moments of state-sanctioned commemoration can coincide with intensified hate speech online.

Polish Media and the Victimhood Discourse

The narrative of Polish victimhood also plays out in public opinion and media. Czulent's report on antisemitic incidents¹⁷ highlights how this

¹⁷ Jewish Association Czulent: Study of Antisemitic Incidents in 2023. Study of the Experiences of the Jewish Community. Krakow 2024. <https://czulent.pl/antysemickie-incydenty-w-roku-2023-badanie-doswiadczenia-spolecznosci-zydowskiej/>

competitive victimhood is amplified in digital spaces, where inflammatory headlines and clickbait trivialise Jewish suffering. In extreme cases, online platforms have flagged posts from the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial as offensive content, revealing the inadequacies of digital content moderation in appropriately handling Holocaust remembrance efforts.

The Dual Role of Distortion

The role of Holocaust distortion in Polish society functions as both a political tool and a cultural phenomenon. The shift from a “Pedagogy of Shame,” which acknowledged painful aspects of Polish wartime actions, to a “Pedagogy of Pride” exemplifies a defensive stance, where critiques of Polish conduct are treated as attacks on national identity. Within this framework, Holocaust distortion redirects collective memory to serve political goals. A notable example was a 2020 presidential campaign segment aired on Polish Public Television (TVP), claiming that, under opposition rule, funds for Polish families could be redirected to Jewish organizations. Accompanied by images of cash, George Soros, Israeli streets, and Auschwitz, the footage evoked the narrative of a so-called “Holocaust industry”, fueling nationalist resentment and antisemitic sentiment.



Figure 3: Screenshot of four frames from a segment aired by Polish Public Television (TVP) in 2020, during the presidential election campaign.

Shaping Memory Through the Educational System

The policy of glorifying national heroism has permeated the Polish education system under the rule of the United Right, led by Minister of Education and Science Przemysław Czarnek.¹⁸ This trend is particularly evident in school textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education and Science. The most recent analyses from 2024 indicate that the way topics related to the Holocaust and contemporary antisemitism are pre-

sented in Poland not only shapes the historical identity of the majority population but also significantly distorts it.

The national curriculum and educational materials systematically marginalize the roles of Poles as perpetrators, witnesses, or beneficiaries of the persecution of Jews, focusing almost exclusively on individuals recognized as Righteous Among the Nations. As a result, the history of the Holocaust is no longer portrayed as the tragedy of European Jews, but rather as another chapter in the narrative of Polish suffering and heroism. This narrative reflects the broader strategy of the so-called ‘politics of glory’, which aims to foster national pride through education by emphasizing heroic episodes in Polish history while downplaying or omitting difficult and controversial aspects—such as the involvement of segments of Polish society in the Holocaust. Consequently, textbooks often include inflated figures for both the number of Poles who rescued Jews and the number of Jews saved by them, while simultaneously constructing a narrative of competitive victimhood in which Polish victims of Nazism take center stage, pushing the Jewish experience to the margins.¹⁹

This phenomenon affects more than just historical memory—it shapes contemporary debates, from property restitution to ongoing issues of antisemitism. By framing the Holocaust as a “sensitive” or “controversial” issue, this defensive narrative hinders Poland’s ability to confront its past fully.

In sum, Holocaust distortion in Poland reflects a struggle over national narrative and identity, with significant implications for how the Holocaust is remembered and how the Jewish community is perceived. While Poland continues to uphold Holocaust education, the concurrent efforts to sanitise or obscure aspects of its own history present a challenge to authentic historical reckoning. This ongoing tension between remembrance and denial underscores the importance of continued vigilance and research into Holocaust distortion, as documented by Czulent and other organizations working to protect the integrity of historical memory.

18 Core Curriculum for General Education with Commentary: Primary School: History (Warsaw: Centre for Education Development, 2017), 21. <https://ore.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/historia.-pp-z-komentarzem.-szkola-podstawowa-1.pdf>

19 Makówka-Kwapisiewicz, Anna. *European Textbooks Poland Review, 2024*, Impact.se. <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/EU-Textbooks-Poland-Review.pdf>

Holocaust Distortion in Austria after 7 October

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Shoah distortion is one of the types of antisemitism in Austria that has undergone substantial developments over the past four years. Even though there are always idiosyncrasies in different countries, the Austrian situation was and is very similar to that of Germany. That applies both to the case of Shoah distortion in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and especially so after 7 October 2023 and the ensuing war.

The following text presents the Austrian perspective, observations and experiences regarding Shoah distortion, pointing out elements that are highly specific to this country.

Firstly, the recorded data allows one to quantify causal relationships between certain events (whether they are sociopolitical, geopolitical, health policy-related in nature) and the way antisemitism manifests itself. Both during the COVID-19 pandemic and after 7 October 2023 we could see that specific developments or occurrences lend themselves to the use of Shoah distortion in order to amplify an antisemitic message.

For instance, while the COVID-19 pandemic is well known today for spurring Shoah distortion overall, it didn't do so right away, not even during the first lockdown in April 2020. It took more than half a year for distortion to really show up on the radar, right after vaccines emerged, and with them the highly emotional discussions about vaccine mandates and restrictions for the unvaccinated.

We noticed how varying stages of the pandemic led to highly varying manifestations of Shoah distortion. Here, we were reminded of the striking ability of antisemitism to rapidly adapt to new circumstances, adjusting and recalibrating according to the needs of the intended message in a specific stage of the pandemic. There was virtually no limit to the "creativity" and diversity of the themes used.

Same goes for the current crisis: While Shoah distortion is a standard instrument in the large toolkit of Israel-related antisemitism, one could clearly see its explosive abuse at certain moments, for

instance in May 2024, when the utterly devastating "All Eyes on Rafah" campaign and the bombshell announcement of the International Criminal Court seeking arrest warrants against Israeli politicians led to a wave of brutish equations of the Shoah and Israeli military actions. Same goes for the month of December 2023 in the lead-up to South Africa's genocide case against Israel.

Brief Overview of Forms and Sources of Shoah Distortion in Two Key Periods

Common forms of Shoah distortion during the COVID-19 pandemic included:

- Comparing politicians to representatives of the National-Socialist regime (like Hitler, Goebbels, Mengele).
- Equating restrictions and mandates to Nazi persecution of Jews.
- Comparing vaccine passports to symbols of stigmatization of Jews, for example "Yellow Badge".

While the people reproducing these contents (both at rallies and online) formed a very heterogeneous group, the main activists and instigators could be attributed in the vast majority to the ideological right. This includes the political right, right-wing extremist and—in many cases—neo-Nazi-actors. That also extends to almost all conspiracy movements of that time.

Although the right was largely responsible for providing the organisational and infrastructure background for rallies and extensive social media efforts, a large part of those participating in these activities did not necessarily share the same political affiliation; in many cases they were even attributable to the ideological Left. They were still susceptible to reproducing the different forms of antisemitism, including Shoah distortion, which in countries like Austria also serves an important function in deflection of guilt, the major aspect of post-Shoah antisemitism.

That shows the insidious character of antisemitism. Not only is Shoah distortion deeply offensive to and potentially retraumatizing for Shoah survivors and their descendants; the goal is also to desensitize society to the crimes committed by the Nazis and attack decades of achievements in terms of commemorative work.

The most typical form of Shoah distortion, which was also the one that drew the highest level of media attention, was the 'Yellow Badge'. Its inflationary and highly hurtful—as well as dangerous—use was one of the drivers behind the amendment to the Austrian Prohibition Act announced in November 2022 by the Ministry of Justice; it would not

only make “gross” trivialization of the Shoah a punishable offence, but also lower the threshold of the law by removing the term “gross” to allow legal action against any kind of trivialization.

The IKG Vienna was part of the working group of the Ministry of Justice that developed the proposals for the changes that came into force on 1 January, 2024.

Even before this announcement and the amendment of the law, the first court sentence for the wearing of a yellow badge, that read ‘unvaccinated’ at a protest was handed down in March 2022.²⁰ In September 2021, two Austrian men—whose ideological background couldn’t be determined—wore those badges with the word ‘unvaccinated’ during a protest against COVID-19 containment measures in Vienna. They were sentenced to 15 months of suspended imprisonment (with a probationary period of three years) for downplaying Nazi crimes by equating their situation to that of Jews during the Shoah. One defendant said to a police officer at the protest that as an unvaccinated person he felt “like the Jews back in the Second World War.” Despite expressing regret, the court found their actions a gross trivialization of the Holocaust.

During the ongoing war between Israel and terrorist groups in the region, we observed the following forms of Shoah distortion:

- Equation of Israel with the Nazi regime;
- labelling of Israeli military action as the “Holocaust”;
- equation of Gaza with Nazi concentration camps or the Warsaw Ghetto;
- equation of Israeli (but also Western) politicians with Nazi leaders;
- equation of Palestinians with concentration camp inmates;
- equation or replacement of the Star of David with the Swastika.

The ideological background of the anti-Israel activists propagating this type of antisemitism are Islamic and left-wing. While the left-wing is more reluctant to use crude Shoah equations, we have seen massive numbers of vicious juxtapositions of the Shoah and different aspects of the current war by members of the Muslim community.

²⁰ Zwei Männer wegen Davidstern bei Corona-Demo nach Verbotsgesetz verurteilt. Die Presse. 10 March 2022, <https://www.diepresse.com/6109985/zwei-maenner-wegen-davidstern-bei-corona-demo-nach-verbots-gesetz-verurteilt> (Last visit 31.12.24)

As can be seen, Shoah distortion in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict often contains another gruesome mechanism: Perpetrator-victim reversal not only tries to distort the Shoah but turns the victim into the perpetrator.

To add another layer to this already atrocious inversion: While the Jews and their state are being portrayed as the new Nazis, the supposed victim of a genocide has been announcing and trying—unsuccessfully—for decades to execute the very genocide it is accusing the Jewish state of perpetrating.

For instance, the aforementioned “All Eyes on Rafah” campaign, the most successful viral campaign based on an image generated by artificial intelligence,²¹ was accompanied by a flurry of social media-related antisemitic incidents, in which Shoah distortion/inversion played a major role. What follows is a small selection of examples, mainly but not only from the month of May 2024, all from social media-accounts based in Austria. All images are screenshots of openly accessible Instagram accounts. They were posted as 24-hour stories, which makes reporting them difficult, because their ephemeral nature makes them disappear quite fast before any potential action can be taken. All these users are members of the Muslim community; one has been convicted in the past for incitement and calls to terrorist acts, among other things.

Figure 1: Screenshot from Instagram, 28 May 2024.



²¹ Bobby Allyn, “All Eyes on Rafah’ Is the Internet’s Most Viral AI Image. Two Artists Are Claiming Credit,” NPR, 3 June 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/06/02/g-s1-2455/all-eyes-on-rafah-most-viral-ai-meme-malaysia-artists-claim-credit>.

The Israeli military incursion in Rafah is literally described in Figure 1 as a new Holocaust, with (refugee) tents burning and smoke rising to the sky. The image includes a text, calling for “global resistance”, followed by the inverted Red Triangle, a symbol associated with Hamas and its way of depicting the targeting of enemies.



Figure 2: Screenshot from Instagram, 27 May 2024.

In the next image (Figure 2), the same refugee tents are also being set ablaze, but this time within a cremator, which, given its style, is an obvious reference to the crematories in extermination camps, where the Nazis would burn the corpses of their victims. In addition, the word “genocide” is inscribed on the cremator.



Figure 3: Screenshot from Instagram, 9 February 2024.

Another social media post (Figure 3) juxtaposes Gazans in bunk beds in a refugee camp in Rafah to bunk beds in the German concentration camp of Buchenwald in 1945. The photo collage is “titled” with a reference to the famous slogan “Never again”, historically associated with the Shoah. Its use in the present context is not only meant to reinforce the accusation of genocide, but to add to the Shoah inversion that is so ingrained in many aspects of anti-Israel activism.

While hundreds of charges have been filed against activists for incitement and approval of terrorist offences at rallies and on social media, the IKG Vienna only became aware of a couple of charges and convictions for violation of the Prohibition Act. The latter represents an “official offense”, which means it must be prosecuted “ex officio”, without somebody filing a complaint with the police. Also, there are low-threshold reporting mechanisms offered by the Ministry of the Interior for violations of the Prohibition Act.

Obviously, the anti-Israel scene was up in arms about the amendment to the Prohibition Act. The antiimperialist “Palestine Solidarity Austria,” an association of mainly left-extremist groups congruent with the BDS movement as well as some Islamic actors, raged against it on a regular basis. They see the law as a symbol of „unconditional loyalty to Zionist settler colonialism“ used against those „advocating for the cause of Palestine.“ The “Palestine Solidarity” group also proclaims that the Prohibition Act “has long been controversial, with good reason.”

This has so far mostly been heard from neo-Nazis and Shoah deniers. Still, as recently as early September 2024, Herbert Kickl, the leader of the Freedom Party, which won the Austrian parliamentary elections one month later, more or less explicitly called for a replacement of the Prohibition Act with a law against what he calls “political Islamism.” It is the first time since 2010 that a major figure of the Freedom Party declared that the law should be abolished.

This shows, in our opinion, how the developments discussed in this paper lead to an erosion of societal guardrails, desensitize society to the crimes committed by the Nazis and thus endanger decades of achievements in terms of commemorative work.

Frameworks for Holocaust Denial and Distortion in Germany: 7 October, 2023 and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Bundesverband RIAS

Holocaust denial and distortion still play a major role in antisemitic incidents in Germany almost 80 years after the end of the Shoah. A closer look shows that Holocaust distortion in particular takes numerous different forms. The following text describes how Holocaust denial and distortion in Germany are currently observed at the Bundesverband RIAS. RIAS understands Holocaust denial, in keeping with the IHRA definition, as implicit and explicit statements 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. And in keeping with the IHRA definition of Holocaust distortion, RIAS understands this to mean, among other things, the trivialisation or relativisation of the horrors of the Shoah; attempts to blame Jews for the crimes committed against them; the affirmation of the Shoah; and the rejection of German responsibility for the extermination of the Jews.

The Bundesverband RIAS is the umbrella organization of currently 12 regional, civil society offices monitoring antisemitism. Victims and witnesses of antisemitic incidents can report them to RIAS. If necessary, those affected are referred to counselling services. They receive a professional assessment of the facts they have reported. RIAS documents the antisemitic incidents according to social science standards and communicates the results of this documentation to the general public, to politicians, but also to specific areas of society, such as academia, the judiciary or the police.

The results of this documentation are regularly published in annual reports. The data collected by RIAS also provides new insights

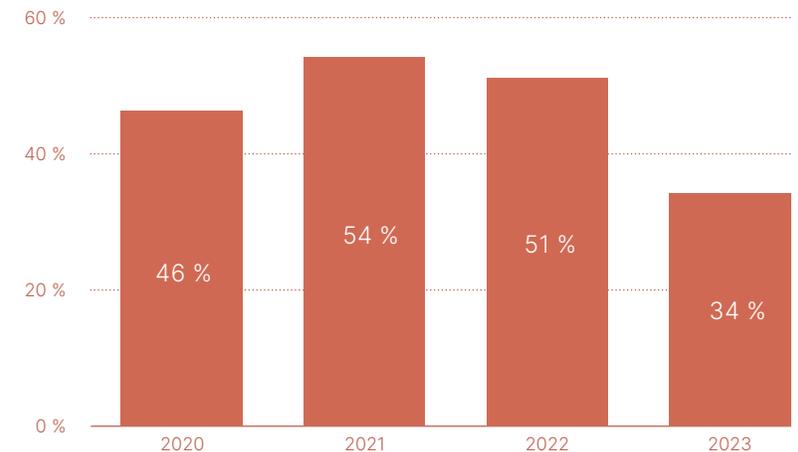
into Holocaust denial and distortion, which are presented below. The analysis of the RIAS data shows that Holocaust distortion in particular continues to play a major role in antisemitic incidents in Germany as a whole. The example of the extreme increase in antisemitic incidents after 7 October 2023, and the example of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards show that widespread forms of Holocaust distortion are being updated in view of such occasions as social crises. At the same time, however, it is clear that behind the phenomenon of Holocaust distortion lies a frightening diversity of antisemitic phenomena: This diversity arises from different types of incidents, from the political spectrums for which Holocaust distortion plays a role, but also in terms of its entanglement with other ideologies of inequality.

The Role of Post-Shoah Antisemitism in Germany

First of all, it is obvious that the rejection of the memory of the Shoah, and thus also Holocaust denial and distortion in the sense described, are particularly widespread in Germany, the country in which the murder of European Jewry was intended, planned and implemented.

In fact, RIAS considers both phenomena, Holocaust denial and distortion, as forms of post-Shoah antisemitism. The proportion of incidents involving these forms of antisemitism was generally around 50 per cent from 2019 to 2022. This means that post-Shoah antisemitism is the most common form of antisemitism that RIAS documents across Germany.

Figure 1: Proportion of post-Shoah incidents relative to the total number of incidents per year (2020–2023)



This is the first important point that our work shows: post-Shoah anti-semitism, or forms of Holocaust denial and distortion, are still reflected in numerous antisemitic acts and statements. However, even with regard to this post-Shoah antisemitism, we must speak of a caesura with regard to the Hamas massacres of 7 October and the events that ensued in Germany: 2023 was the first year since RIAS began its documentation in which post-Shoah antisemitism was not the most frequently documented form of antisemitism.

Occasions for Holocaust Denial and Distortion: 7 October and the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the context of the genocidal violence by Hamas on 7 October an opportunity structure established itself in Germany. An opportunity structure in this context is a large quantity of structural, individual and situational occasions for antisemitism. Within this opportunity structure, Israel-related antisemitism became the dominant form of antisemitism in the incidents documented by RIAS after 7 October. Nevertheless, the significance of post-Shoah antisemitism and thus of Holocaust denial and distortion for the incidents as a whole remained very high: For the year 2023, RIAS documented stereotypes of post-Shoah antisemitism in one out of every three incidents across Germany.

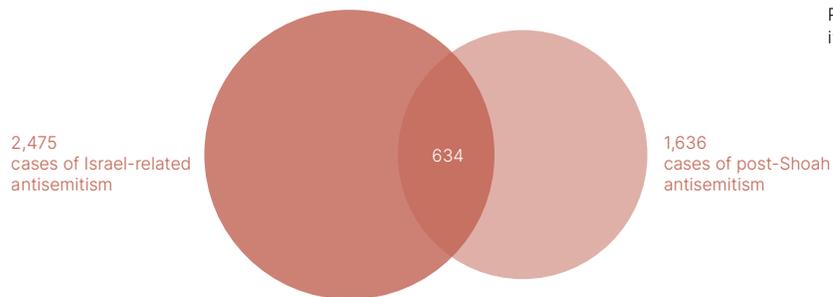
Figure 3: Demonstration in Düsseldorf, November 2023. Source: Antifa Infoportal Düsseldorf.



There are many examples of such overlaps. At a demonstration in Düsseldorf in November 2023 under the slogan “Human Rights Demo,” banners with similar motifs were displayed (see Figure 3): bomb with the year 2023 and the inscription “Stop the Crime,” next to the depiction of a shower inscribed with the number 1933. Below this, the question is asked: “What’s the difference?” From the context, it is clear that the shower is intended to represent a gas chamber. Aspects of the Holocaust are taken up here in order to accuse the Jewish state of crimes just as terrible as those committed by the Nazis against the Jews. In this way, Israel is demonised and delegitimised—and at the same time, the Holocaust is relativised.

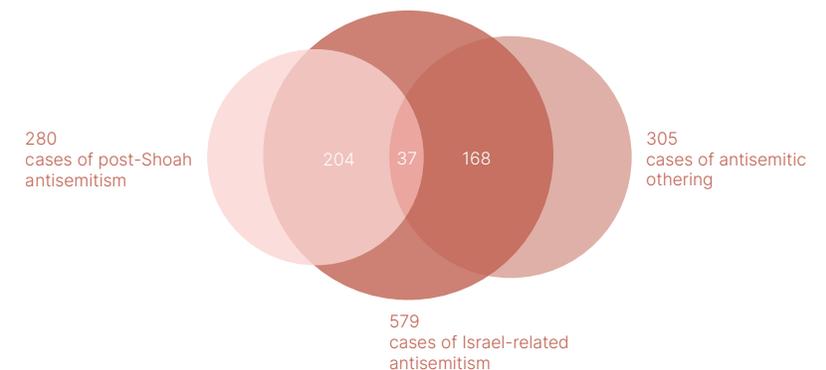
This overlapping becomes even clearer if we consider the incidents that RIAS Berlin, for example, documented between 7 October and the end of 2023. (See Figure 4)

Figure 2: Overlaps between Israel-related Antisemitism and Post-Shoah Antisemitism



As the graphic above (Figure 2) shows, one quarter of the incidents of Israel-related antisemitism in 2023 were accompanied by post-Shoah antisemitism—thus also by cases of Holocaust denial and distortion.

Figure 4: Overlaps between antisemitic Incidents with Israel-related Antisemitism, antisemitic othering and post-Shoah antisemitism in Berlin, 7.10.2023 to 31.12.2023. Source: RIAS Berlin.



As many as one in three incidents of Israel-related antisemitism in the three months since 7 October also included stereotypes of post-Shoah antisemitism. At the same time, forms of post-Shoah antisemitism after 7 October 2023, at least in Berlin, almost always included Israel-related antisemitism.

It will be important to observe how the combination of these different forms of antisemitism continues to develop in the context of the Hamas massacres. Because in the course of the coronavirus pandemic, RIAS has observed the following development:

As the pandemic began, RIAS documented a large number of antisemitic incidents directly related to the pandemic. In 2020, these were initially primarily antisemitic conspiracy myths, which RIAS records as 'modern antisemitism': More than 60 per cent of incidents related to the pandemic involved conspiracy myths and other antisemitic ideas about Jewish power. In 2021, however, this trend reversed: In that year, the pandemic still played a crucial role for antisemitic expression, but it was overwhelmingly incidents of post-Shoah antisemitism, including many cases of Holocaust denial and distortion. Between August and December 2021, almost 90 per cent of all incidents directly related to the coronavirus pandemic were classified as post-Shoah antisemitism by RIAS, but only one in four—26 per cent—still contained ideas of Jewish power or Jewish conspiracies. In 2021, the pandemic changed from an occasion for the expression of antisemitic conspiracy myths to an occasion for, in particular, Holocaust distortion. Thus, while at the beginning of the pandemic perceived feelings of powerlessness led to increased expression of conspiracy myths, the debate about government measures to contain the pandemic led to increased self-presentation as victims of an extermination policy like that of the National Socialists.

Figure 5: Proportion of incidents relative to the total number of incidents per year (2020 and 2021): Post-Shoa Antisemitism

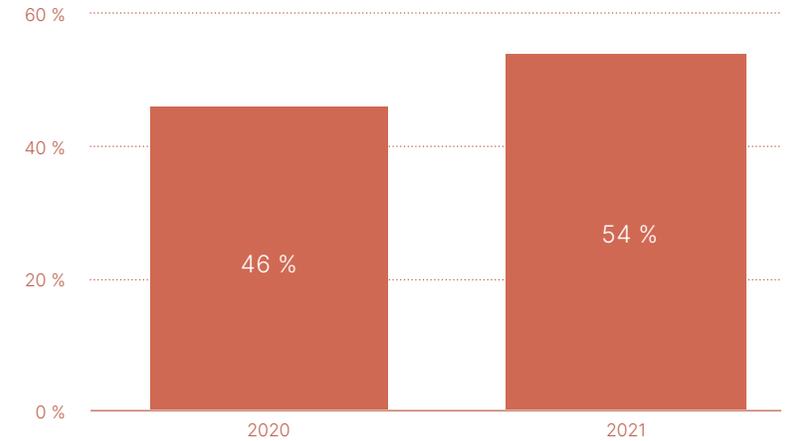
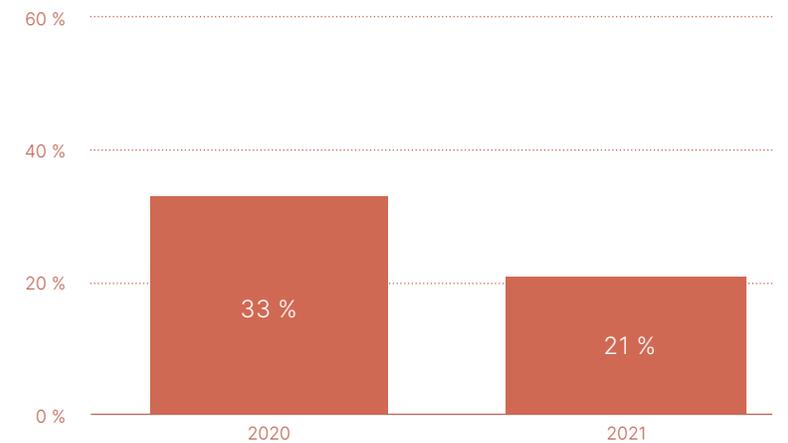


Figure 6: Proportion of incidents relative to the total number of incidents per year (2020 and 2021): Modern Antisemitism



Two typical forms of Holocaust distortion in connection to the COVID-19 pandemic are illustrated by the following examples: A banner with the slogan "Vaccination sets you free," which was discovered on a busy Rhine Bridge in Cologne in February 2022. An allusion to the cynical slogan Arbeit macht Frei (Work sets you free), which could be read on the gates of several Nazi concentration and extermination camps. (See: Figure 7)

Figure 7: Banner on the Hohenzollern-Bridge reading “Impfen macht frei” in Cologne, February 2022. Source: RIAS NRW.



Besides the slogan “Impfen macht frei”, showing the so-called Jewish badge or yellow badge which the Nazis used to forcibly mark Jews from 1941 onwards, became popular in the protest movement against the pandemic measures. Instead of the actual inscription “Jew”, however, the star reads “Unvaccinated”—even the original font of the Nazi Jewish star, which was intended to mock Hebrew, is imitated here.

Both stereotypes have been found in numerous variations in recent years, on items of clothing, as online memes, in caricatures, stickers and graffiti. Such depictions equated the state measures to contain the coronavirus pandemic with the persecution and extermination of Jews, with opponents of the measures portraying themselves as the Jews of today. This trivialisation of the Shoah can often be very hurtful for survivors of the Shoah and their descendants. It often went hand in hand with direct aggression against Jews, especially when such statements were criticized.

The developments after 7 October 2023, but especially in the course of the coronavirus pandemic since 2020, already point to a second key finding from the work of RIAS: very different occasions for antisemitic incidents, very different frameworks for antisemitic dynamics, are associated with forms of Holocaust denial and distortion in Germany.

Varieties of Holocaust Distortion—Varieties of Antisemitic Incidents

A third important finding: Holocaust denial and distortion includes very different phenomena. This diversity encompasses several dimensions. First of all, RIAS observes forms of Holocaust denial and distortion in very different types of incidents. Some of these are very violent. In recent years, RIAS has documented cases of extreme violence in which the right-wing extremist perpetrators wanted to repeat the Shoah or, for example, the November pogroms of 1938. But Holocaust denial and distortion also occurs in lower-threshold attacks, as the following example shows: In

July 2020, a man was riding the subway in Stuttgart. His temple curls, kippah and tzitzit made him recognizable as a Jew. On the subway, two young people suddenly insulted him with the words: “Heil Hitler”, “Arbeit macht frei, How many children did you murder?” and “Zionist.” The youths tried to take away the man’s prayerbook and hit him, but the man fought back. Eventually the youths let go of him and got out of the subway train. The victim told a man who had rushed over to help that he does not want the police to be informed: It wouldn’t do any good, he said. The incident is also an example of how Jews or Jewish institutions are often directly affected by such violent manifestations of Holocaust denial and distortion. One in four incidents of post-Shoah antisemitism between 2019 and 2023 had an immediate impact on Jews or Jewish institutions. Damages to synagogues, to monuments to the victims of the Shoah, and also to property that is Jewish or perceived as such plays a special role for Holocaust denial and distortion.

Figure 8: Graffiti on the memorial for the Rosenstraße Protest in 1943 reading “Jews are committing genocide” and “Free Palestine” in Berlin, August 2024. Source: T. Tarach.



For example, in August 2024 a monument in Berlin’s Rosenstraße was damaged in a case of Holocaust distortion. The monument is dedicated to non-Jewish women who demonstrated against the imprisonment of their Jewish husbands in front of a Gestapo prison located there in 1943. The building was later demolished. At the end of August, the words “Jews committing Genocide” were discovered spraypainted on the sculptures of the memorial and “Free Palestine” together with a drawn Palestinian flag on the ground in front of the memorial. (See Figure 8)

RIAS also observes forms of Holocaust denial and distortion in the context of antisemitic threats, in the context of gatherings and demonstrations or in other forms of abusive behaviour. One third of the incidents involving stereotypes of post-Shoah antisemitism recorded by RIAS occur online.

Entanglements

But post-Shoah antisemitism and thus Holocaust denial and distortion are not only intertwined with other forms of antisemitism, as we have seen with Israel-related antisemitism, but also with other ideologies of inequality such as racism and sexism. For example, RIAS repeatedly documents incidents in which previously racially insulted victims are threatened with references to the extermination practices of the Holocaust.

Another case is a sticker motif from the far-right youth organization “Junge Nationalisten” (Young Nationalists), which RIAS documented in Bavaria, Brandenburg, Berlin, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony and Schleswig Holstein.

Figure 9: Sticker Motif of the extreme right “Young Nationalists” (Junge Nationalisten).



As can be seen in figure 9, the sticker shows the drawing of a family with a father and mother protecting themselves from the rainbow flag with an umbrella, it reads: “Anne becomes Frank, that’s sick.” ‘Anne’, ‘Frank’ and ‘Krank’ are highlighted in colour. The mockery of the victims of the Shoah is not made explicit here, it functions purely associatively through the coded reference to Anne Frank. The large quantity of cases in which we have documented this sticker shows that this associative invocation of mockery of the victims of the Shoah works very well in right-wing extremist circles.

Political Backgrounds

But do the cases of Holocaust denial and distortion that RIAS documents as post-Shoah antisemitism originate from a specific political spectrum? Almost half of the incidents documented by RIAS cannot

be clearly attributed to any political background. For those affected, this means above all that antisemitic incidents with forms of post-Shoah antisemitism, with forms of Holocaust denial and distortion, can in principle occur at any time and can come from any source. Like other forms of antisemitism, they cannot be limited or externalized to certain extremist spectrums. They also come from the middle of society and arise in everyday situations. Apart from these unknown spectrums, it is striking that we can detect forms of post-Shoah antisemitism in all political spectrums, and that right-wing extremism—perhaps unsurprisingly—also dominates.

However, also in regard to the political background from which they originate, antisemitic incidents with forms of Holocaust denial and distortion differ greatly, as underscored by an incident that RIAS has assigned to the left-wing anti-imperialist spectrum.

Figure 10: Graffiti in Berlin, June 2021. Source: RIAS Berlin.



The graffiti seen in figure 10 was discovered in Berlin in May 2021, at a time when there were numerous antisemitic demonstrations throughout Germany due to an escalation of tensions between Israel and the Palestinian territories. You can see there a depiction of the national flag used by the National Socialists, in which the swastika at the centre has been replaced by a Star of David. It is linked to the description “cultural appropriation”, a concept that in post-colonial theory refers to exploitative appropriation of cultural elements of a minority by the majority. In view of the armed conflicts between Israel and Hamas, it is claimed here that the Jews, as a powerful group, are appropriating the cultural practices of Nazi Germany. In its ironic exaggeration, the depiction is reminiscent of elements of online meme culture.

Conclusion

To understand Holocaust denial and distortion in Germany today, several points must be emphasised: Post-Shoah antisemitism and thus Holocaust denial and distortion were the most common forms of antisem-

itism documented by RIAS nationwide, at least until 7 October. Holocaust denial and distortion are combined with other forms of antisemitism and can be linked to very different triggers for antisemitic acts and statements. Very different phenomena are concealed behind Holocaust denial and distortion: both—denial and distortion—can be very violent; they can be expressed on posters or stickers in a rather low-threshold manner; they are sometimes directly directed against Jews and Jewish institutions but also play an important role in online antisemitism. And finally, Holocaust denial and distortion are not exclusively phenomena of the extreme right: we find such stereotypes in very different political spectrums. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that Holocaust denial and distortion play a special role in the extreme right-wing spectrum. Against this backdrop, we must assume that in view of recent election results nationwide as well as in several German states, in which the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) achieved major successes, forms of Holocaust denial and distortion will become even more persistent in the near future. Because after all, in the statements of AfD party politicians, the rejection of the memory of the Shoah is a relevant aspect.

Distortion of the Holocaust in Italy

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The extermination of the Jews in Europe was, first and foremost, an event in history. This is not a trivial statement; it might seem so at first, but it is not.

This fact must be the starting point for reflecting on the growing weight that the distortion of the Holocaust is assuming in Italy. In fact, the ways in which this historical event is represented in the public space have taken a worrying turn in recent years, a turn that requires particular attention from those in public institutions who are responsible for overseeing the correct use of language, concepts, and images related to the spread of antisemitism.

I would like to suggest some reflections on issues that I believe are essential for framing the phenomenon of the distortion of the Holocaust in a coherent context. I refer to these three topics:

- The role of Holocaust Memorial Day in changing the perception of the Holocaust;
- the growing use and abuse of history in the public and political spheres in Italy;
- the paradox of simplification and the impoverishment of knowledge in the face of increasingly extensive and in-depth historical research.

At the end I will propose some working hypotheses and some examples of the current distortion of the Holocaust in Italy.

The Role of Holocaust Memorial Day in Changing the Perception of the Holocaust

Holocaust Memorial Day, established in Italy by law in 2000, marked a major turning point in the perception of the role that the persecution and extermination of the Jews held in the nation's consciousness. The

text of the law is the result of a political compromise, but the effect of its implementation has deeply impacted the realm of knowledge and, perhaps more importantly, the field that in recent years has been called 'active citizenship'. Younger generations of students have actively participated in thousands of events centred around key educational principles that have produced significant results. To simplify, I summarise them as follows:

- Acquisition of basic historical knowledge about the events that led to the denial of Jews' civil rights through fascist anti-Jewish laws, and the persecution, of Jews in Italy through deportation and extermination;
- connection of 'general' history with local historical events;
- knowledge of the sites of extermination (trips to memorial sites);
- identification of virtuous individuals (Righteous Among the Nations).

This complex of knowledge, which I have summarized in a few key points, has been communicated to students through lectures, seminars, and frontal teaching, as well as through the use of creative tools such as exhibitions, theatre performances, and film screenings. The film resources on the subject have expanded greatly over the years, offering both fictional and documentary works. The most widely used tool for transmitting knowledge of what happened during the years of persecution and deportation has certainly been direct testimony. Survivors of the camps and people who miraculously escaped deportation have generously shared their experiences with large groups of students, generating great emotion, empathy, and an important human connection with historical events.

Over the years, critical voices have raised various concerns about the ways in which Holocaust Memorial Day is 'celebrated', about the overemphasis on the concept of memory versus a more precise knowledge of historical events, and about the widespread presence of certain rhetorical dynamics that risk diluting the meaning of the event, turning it into a generic condemnation of the 'evil' of which humanity is capable. These are important observations, which however do not undermine the substantial and extraordinary impact that Holocaust Memorial Day has achieved over the past two decades.

Today's young people are familiar with the sites and symbols of extermination. Let me offer an example among many that could be mentioned. As director of the CDEC Foundation in Milan, I met two

workers from a moving company who were operating at the Shoah Memorial of Milan (located at the central train station). The foreman, a man in his 60s, was struck and surprised by the place (the tracks, the freight cars, the sound of trains) and said he would bring his family to visit. The young worker, a 20-year-old man from Senegal, offered to be a guide: "I visited here five years ago with my school," he said to the foreman: "Come here and I'll explain." And he spontaneously offered his direct superior a guided tour.

So we can say that the enormous work done over the years has generated good and layered knowledge. However, it has also generated something else. Precisely because the Holocaust has become an inescapable element of our education, the symbols of persecution have also become part of the 'common imagination'. If, in the 1960s or 1970s, Holocaust images had been shown to school students (at that time the word Shoah was only known in Israel), only a few would have been able to place them competently in time and space. I will go further: For many years, the extermination camp that was most associated with the Holocaust was Majdanek, near Lublin, and not Auschwitz, which later grew to become the symbolic site of memory in European history.

Today, the situation is very different. If you show photographs of Anne Frank, the image of the Auschwitz gate with the inscription "Arbeit macht frei", the striped prison pyjamas of the camp prisoners, the left forearm with a tattooed number, the yellow star with the inscription „Jude," the crematorium chimneys, the Zyklon B canister, the freight trains, etc., these images are immediately associated with the Holocaust.

However, the world of communication has also been given a symbolic toolkit of immediate effect, easily manipulable.

The model for transmitting knowledge about the history of extermination often starts with a description of the massacres, accompanied by numbers and powerful images. Sometimes, this has resulted in the creation of a very clear-cut victim/persecutor model, which is not always intentional but simplifying and thus easy to communicate. In this context, the victims are first and foremost part of marginalized groups: Jews, political opponents, Roma and Sinti, homosexuals, asocial individuals. The persecutors, in this same perspective, are the malignant expression of an extreme and immoral use of power: the Nazis and their collaborators. This model, which describes historical reality in stark black-and-white terms, has projected onto our contemporary reality and often created problems, including the distortion of the Holocaust.

Careful attention is needed at this point: If, in the process of education, human figures and socio-political situations are not questioned, the result of (all) history lessons is always the same: a description of a meta-historical reality populated by what I would call 'good-good'

versus 'bad-bad' figures. Naturally, history is not taught like this, but the risk of this drift is always lurking, and we see it in our contemporary society. The model of 'pure' victims versus 'pure' perpetrators is very popular and comes not from the world of education but from other information channels completely lacking control and scientific verification. In this model, the use and abuse of symbols of anti-Jewish persecution is more than alarming. Groups that today define themselves as 'victims' (for example, the so-called anti-vaxxers) claim to be persecuted 'like the Jews' and use Holocaust symbols to bolster this image. In this context, the representatives of 'power' (often described as „agents of a global conspiracy“) can only be compared to the Nazis, the quintessential persecutors. And thus the greatest distortion of the Holocaust is produced, a phenomenon that risks erasing historical knowledge of the extermination and paving the way for a dangerous abuse of history in the public sphere—with evident antisemitic repercussions.

The Use and Abuse of History in the Public and Political Spheres

The second element is related to a concept that is not new as a pure historiographical issue. I am talking about the danger of a distorted use of historical knowledge and narrative in the public and political spheres. Regarding the subject I am discussing, I believe the alarm should ring loud and clear in the ears of institutional representatives. Never in recent years has there been such an increase in the use of symbols and concepts connected to the Holocaust or persecutions (but also to antisemitism in a strict sense) in the public sphere and political debate at all levels. No political wing is exempt. There is antisemitism on the left just as there is antisemitism on the right or in moderate parties. It exists in both secular and religious environments. Unfortunately, this is not a marginal presence, as shown by the numbers from various surveys conducted in Italy over recent decades. There are political figures who openly and casually talk about conspiracy, Jewish lobbies, and the notorious hoax publication, like the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. But there are also statements where the political opponent is accused of acting 'like the Nazis'. Time and again, detention camps are compared to Nazi concentration camps, without considering the harm this does to both the knowledge and denunciation of the actual unacceptable characteristics of today's refugee camps and to the precise historical knowledge of what the Nazi camps were.

The alarming fact in these cases seems to be connected to a direct and unmediated attack on historical knowledge as such. As mentioned at the beginning: The Holocaust was, first and foremost, an event in history, and as such it must be known and evaluated. Using its symbolism for parodies and representations connected to everyday

political life constitutes a serious cultural harm, which often also leads to evident antisemitic implications.

The Paradox of Simplification and the Impoverishment of Knowledge in the Face of Increasingly Extensive and In-depth Historical Research

I come to the last point in my argument. In recent decades, historical research has made truly significant strides in discovering new documentation, as well as in analysing them, and producing high-level comparative studies. While the theoretical framework described in Raul Hilberg's monumental work *The Destruction of the Jews in Europe* (written in the early 1960s and translated into Italian—with an unforgivable delay—only in the mid-90s) remains an essential reference, the volume of work produced in the meantime is truly astonishing. This vast development has been driven by the establishment of research centres in the field of Holocaust studies, as well as the end of the Cold War, which granted access to archives kept in the former Soviet Union. Recently, new technologies have made a concrete contribution to the dissemination of increasingly precise historical data, producing, among other things, large-scale projects such as the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI), which connects dozens of Holocaust-related archives and research institutes across Europe (for Italy, the CDEC Foundation), and is transforming into a permanent European research infrastructure. As part of this project, for example, the Arolsen Archives in Germany has been digitising tens of millions of records on deportees, enriching our knowledge of the subject as never before.

Despite this extraordinary explosion of studies, research, documentation, dissemination, and awareness-building the paradox is that these very same knowledges are being vulgarized. While we can find some relief in the slow retreat of Holocaust denial—the movement that for decades tried to question the very existence of a Nazi extermination plan—how should we respond to the rising tide of distortions that—precisely because they are distortions—threaten history?

To be explicit, I will quote a statement recently made by one of the leaders of the anti-vaxxer movement in Turin, who wanted to illustrate his argument with an old photo of a family of deportees with yellow badges on their chests. His literal words were: "What differences are there between today and back then? Can politicians explain this, starting with Senator Liliana Segre [the best-known Holocaust survivor in Italy]"

His words contain everything I mentioned earlier: manipulation of history, impoverishment of knowledge, a personal attack on a political leader of Jewish descent, projecting a sort of reversal of the discourse, with clear antisemitic implications. Many examples can be given. Perhaps

the most striking example, due to its symbolic impact, is a TikTok video recently posted by an adolescent girl. In the clip, she briefly dances beneath a sign identifying her as a Jew, accompanied by a caption suggesting someone asked for her ‘number’ (presumably her phone number). She then silently responds by revealing her tattooed forearm. This is a very heavy gesture, but it encapsulates a symbolism upon which we are all called to reflect: the hundreds of thousands of followers of this girl know what a concentration camp was and what that number means. But they laugh about it, including it in the dynamic of bad taste or ‘black humour’, which at the same time demolishes historical knowledge and ‘challenges’ power. In this case, ‘power’ is represented by the world of public education and the state, which imposes the historical narrative of the Holocaust, and so any mockery or ridicule of it is also interpretable as a ‘protest’ against power.

I will conclude by briefly outlining some possible paths to remedy the distortion of the Holocaust in Italy, with the belief that this dynamic can be reversed. The spirit is that expressed in the words of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sachs z”l, who wrote in his Essay on Morality: “Health isn’t never being ill; it’s the ability to recover.”

- First and foremost, we must work hard at the leadership level to reverse the coarsening of political discourse and, above all, the cultural impoverishment of language—of all language, not just that related to the Holocaust—with ongoing training for political personnel at all levels, starting with the Italian Parliament. The same intervention must be made in the worlds of communication, sports, and entertainment.
- We need to create agile and effective educational tools that, using modern communication methods, emphasize the importance of historical knowledge and fact verification as the fundamental basis for cultural growth.
- Finally, the Day of Remembrance should be simplified by returning it to a single day instead of a “Month of Remembrance”, once again highlighting historical knowledge, which should be prioritized over emotional reasoning and paths that sometimes fail to align with “how history actually happened”—as Leopold von Ranke, the founder of German historicism, would say.

Addendum

Three recent examples of Holocaust distortion in Italy:

Incident: Online, 30 October 2023

On Facebook, trivialisation of the Holocaust describes “Gaza like Auschwitz”. This meme has been widely shared online. CDEC Foundation has collected many of these images, both online and offline (graffiti, vandalism, etc.).

Incident: Milan, 27 January 2024

In Milan, left-wing extremists place fake Stumbling Stone memorials: Activists from the Camera del Non Lavoro—ADL Cobas in Piazzale Baiamonti on the occasion of the Day of Remembrance place six mock Stumbling Stones to “remember another genocide, that of the 11,000 children who died in the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the conflict with Israel”. In February 2024 the stones were vandalized, leading the spokesperson for ADL Cobas to remark that “In this country there is a climate of denial against those who denounce the Palestinian genocide and fight against all wars”. After 7 October 2023 far-right and far-left organizations placed mock Stumbling Stones dedicated to the Palestinians in various parts of Italy.

Incident: Online, 26 February 2024

On TikTok, former M5S member of parliament (MP) compares Israelis to Nazis: Explaining the ongoing conflict in Gaza, a former M5S MP makes several very serious accusations against Israelis, including that of gratuitously killing prisoners and deliberately burying the patients of Palestinian hospitals alive. The politician ends his speech with these words: “In 2023, I was surprised to learn that the descendants of Holocaust survivors were capable of committing crimes against others; I had thought only the Nazis were capable of such actions”. Various Italian public figures, such as politicians, professors and journalists, have compared Israel to the Nazi regime.

Holocaust Denial and Distortion in the Czech Context

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Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic

Holocaust denial and distortion are specific phenomena that exist in the Czech Republic even 80 years after the end of World War II. The external form, content, method of dissemination, and ideological motivations of those who spread the narratives of Holocaust denial and distortion have changed over time. Nevertheless, the essence of the narrative remains the same: anti-Jewish hatred.

Unambiguous, explicit denial of the Holocaust is classified as a crime in the Czech Republic. The law enforcement authorities, i.e. the police, the prosecutor's office and the courts, are responsible for this area. However, there are no relevant official statistics available to formulate long-term conclusions and observations. On the other hand, distortion of the Holocaust is not codified in the Czech Criminal Code and thus not monitored by the state administration.

Isolated, individual incidents that attract media attention are usually the subject of interest for many state bodies, civil society organisations, academia, memory institutions and museums. However, none of these entities systematically addresses the phenomena of Holocaust denial and distortion.

The Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic (FJC)²² and the Jewish Community in Prague (JCP)²³ are the only Czech institutions monitoring and analysing these specific manifestations of anti-Jewish hatred in a holistic and long-term manner. The FJC serves as the umbrella organization of Czech Jewish communities and affiliated organisations and represents them by virtue of its legal status. Each year, it publishes an annual report on antisemitism in the Czech Republic,²⁴

²² See Homepage: <https://www.fzo.cz/en/>

²³ See Homepage: <https://www.kehilaprag.cz/en>

²⁴ For an overview of the reports: <https://www.fzo.cz/en/projects/forum-for-combating-antisemitism/annual-reports-on-manifestations-of-antisemitism-in-the-czech-republic/>

from which major academic, international and European institutions, such as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA),²⁵ draw their data.

The Legal Framework of Holocaust Denial in the Czech Republic

This study has been guided by the Working Definition of Antisemitism issued by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).²⁶ The Chamber of Deputies and the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic adopted a resolution agreeing to the IHRA definition in 2019.²⁷

However, the definition is not legally binding and the IHRA's Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion has not yet been introduced in the Czech context.²⁸ The fundamental legal regulation is thus enshrined in Section 405 of the Criminal Code (Act No. 40/2009), titled Denial, Questioning, Approval, and Justification of Genocide:

Whoever publicly denies, questions, approves, or seeks to justify Nazi or Communist genocide or other crimes against humanity shall be punished by imprisonment for up to three years.

Another legal norm is the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, which is part of the constitutional system of the Czech Republic. Article 17 defines freedom of expression:

- (1) Freedom of expression and the right to information shall be guaranteed.
- (2) Everyone shall have the right to express his opinions in words, writing, print, pictorial or other media and to seek, receive and impart ideas and information freely, regardless of frontiers.
- (3) Censorship shall not be permitted.
- (4) The freedom of expression and the right to seek and disseminate information may be restricted by law where such measures are necessary in a democratic society for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others, the security of the State, public safety, public health or morals.

²⁵ For example: European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. Antisemitism in 2022. Overview on Antisemitic Incidents Recorded in the EU. Luxembourg 2023. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2023-antisemitism-update-2012-2022_en.pdf

²⁶ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). IHRA non-legally binding Working Definition of Antisemitism, issued May 26, 2018

²⁷ For the Resolution in Czech: <https://www.senat.cz/xqw/webdav/pssenat/original/90463/75783>

²⁸ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA). IHRA non-legally binding Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion, issued October 10, 2013

The reference to Article 17 is a frequent argument of those who spread hatred and deny the Holocaust. However, freedom of speech is not absolute and has its limits when it comes to protecting other fundamental values such as human dignity or historical truth. The Constitutional Court of the Czech Republic has repeatedly affirmed that the legal regulation of Holocaust denial is legitimate and serves to protect democratic society.

State Authorities Data

The fundamental source of data is the Report on Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred in the Czech Republic, which is presented annually and compiled by the Ministry of the Interior. Supporting materials are contributed by the intelligence services, the police of the Czech Republic, the Ministries of Justice and Defense, the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, and the General Inspectorate of Security Forces. The 2023 report,²⁹ for instance, confirms that Holocaust denial remains a relevant issue, even though it is legally prosecuted in the Czech Republic. Czech society faces challenges associated with the spread of extremist ideas, particularly in the online environment, where attempts to deny the Holocaust through disinformation and pseudo-historical literature persist. Legal tools, such as Section 405 of the Criminal Code, prove to be key in protecting historical truth and the dignity of genocide victims.

Key Findings of the FJC

The FJC's mission as an umbrella organisation is to protect the interests of the Jewish community, support its religious, cultural, and social life, and contribute to public debates on tolerance and human rights. The FJC also actively combats antisemitism and hatred, which threaten not only the Jewish community but also the democratic values of society as a whole. A key tool in these efforts is the FJC's annual report on antisemitism,³⁰ which monitors, documents, and analyses antisemitic incidents. These reports serve as a vital resource for state institutions, non-profit organizations, and international partners in their efforts to effectively combat hate speech and discrimination.

Based on the data gathered, several conclusions can be drawn.

Antisemitism on the Rise

In the period 2019–2023, the FJC, based on its own monitoring and observations, has noted a steady increase in the number of antisemitic expressions, especially online. The increase was clearly related to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021, the Russian military aggression against Ukraine in 2022 and the Hamas terrorist attack against Israel on 7 October 2023.

At the same time, it can be determined that the category of Holocaust denial and distortion has been relatively marginal in the context of antisemitism as a whole in recent years. Despite this fact, it is clear that the upward trend and the reasons for it in this specific category correlate with the general increase in anti-Jewish hatred.

All Extremist Ideologies Engaged

In terms of ideological background or motivation, it can be noted that until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Holocaust denial and distortion was almost exclusively associated with the activities of the extreme right. These were mainly incidents based on denial, approval, and mockery of the Holocaust. The use of references to the visual symbolism of Nazism was also frequent.

Figure 1: Social network VKontakte, 2022. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



29 Ministry of Interior. Report on Extremism and Prejudicial Hatred in the Czech Republic in 2023 (Czech). Prague 2024. Available here: <https://mv.gov.cz/clanek/extremismus-vyrocní-zpravy-o-extremismu-a-strategie-boje-proti-extremismu.aspx> (last visited: 31.12.2024)

30 Federation of Jewish Communities in the Czech Republic. The Annual Report on Antisemitism in the Czech Republic for 2023. Prague 2024. Available here: <https://www.fzo.cz/en/wp-content/uploads/AR-Antisemitism-in-Czechia-2023.pdf>

Figure 2: Social network Facebook, 2023. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



Figure 3: Social network VKontakte, 2023. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



Figure 4: Social network VKontakte, 2022. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



The COVID-19 pandemic has been associated, inter alia, with an explosive growth of misinformation and conspiracy myths, which have thematised, among other things, the Holocaust. Typical examples were incidents accusing the Jews of inventing and/or exaggerating the Holocaust for financial and political gain, or depicting the Holocaust as a conspiracy plotted by the Jews—as the next examples show.

Figure 5: Social network VKontakte, 2022. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



Figure 6: Social network VKontakte, 2022. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



A specific category of antisemitic incidents consisted of a narrative that created false and manipulative parallels between the Holocaust and anti-epidemic measures.

Figure 7: Social network Facebook, 2021. The inscription reads: 'Unvaccinated'. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



Figure 8: Social network Twitter, 2021. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



The disinformation scene is responsible for the spread of these conspiracies. Its influence and share in the dissemination of antisemitism in the Czech Republic is constantly growing. The peak of distortion of the Holocaust by referencing it in inappropriate contexts is without any doubt connected to the events following 7 October 2023. Israel-related antisemitism, which equates the State of Israel with Nazi Germany and labels the victim as the perpetrator, is spread primarily by the synergy of the extreme left and radical Islamism.

Figure 9: Social network Facebook, 2024. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



Figure 10: Social network Facebook, 2024. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



In terms of the spread of antisemitism, it is an extremely worrying finding that all major ideologies have become and remained active in recent years.

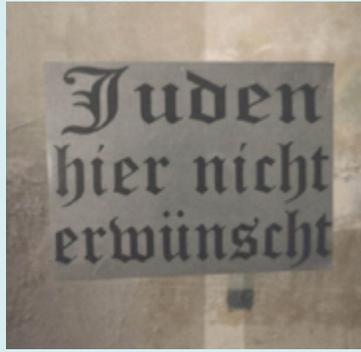
Online and Offline Dimensions

Holocaust denial and distortion, like all other manifestations of anti-semitism in the Czech Republic, are taking place predominantly in the virtual environment, especially on social media. However, in the context of normalization of anti-Jewish hatred, which became a socially accepted attitude, an increasing number of incidents are also occurring offline.

Figure 11: Destroyed Stolpersteine in Brno, 2022. An unidentified perpetrator poured an unknown substance. Source: FJC.



Figure 12: A sticker with the text “Jews not wanted here” was placed on the front door of a private home in Olomouc, 2023. Source of the screenshot: FJC.



Conclusion

The Czech Republic has established a legal framework to address Holocaust denial and distortion, recognizing the importance of protecting historical truth and human dignity. Despite legal measures, the spread of extremist views, particularly in the online space, remains a significant challenge. The rise in incidents of Holocaust denial and distortion, as documented by the FJC, highlights the persistence of these harmful ideologies.

Raising awareness for Holocaust Distortion

The creation of cohesion in recording incidents of Holocaust denial and distortion among the five participating countries was complemented in this project by a variety of awareness-raising events and workshops intended for the dissemination of findings to different audiences. Another overarching goal was to promote the IHRA Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion.

Public Events on the Standardised Recording of Holocaust Denial and Distortion

In keeping with the principle of incorporating perspectives from all project countries, each participating organisation hosted a public event which presented current manifestations and trends of Holocaust denial and distortion, recorded throughout 2023. The events focused on the situation in the hosting country, involved a victim-oriented perspective in most cases and allowed the audience to gain an understanding of the situation in the other countries as well. The aim of these events was to encourage Jewish communities and individuals to confront and report incidents of Holocaust distortion and denial and to raise awareness among non-Jewish participants of victims' perspectives on the phenomenon, including the perspectives of Holocaust survivors and their descendants.

The target audience was the general public, and more specifically addressed were Jewish and non-Jewish civil society representatives and community members, media representatives, students, political activists and educators. Holding the events in public also served as an opportunity for the members of the European Network on Monitoring Antisemitism to meet face-to-face and present recent challenges surrounding their work in their respective countries.

Online Trainings: Understanding Contemporary Forms of Holocaust Distortion

One aspect of the European Commissions and the national strategies on combatting antisemitism and fostering Jewish life is its focus on enhancing the capacity of law-enforcement agencies and judiciary to understand and therefore detect current forms of antisemitism and Holocaust denial and distortion.

This has led to the creation of five training workshops for participants in the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training

(CEPOL). In a series of five webinars the project organisations aimed to improve the knowledge about forms and legal threshold of Holocaust distortion in Poland, Austria, Germany, Italy and Czech Republic and about the perspectives of victims on this phenomenon among a large number of police officers. The partners presented a comparatist transnational perspective. The participants also encountered the perspective of Holocaust-Survivors reacting to Holocaust Denial and contemporary forms of antisemitism.

The webinar was technically facilitated by CEPOL and promoted among National Units for law enforcement and judicial staff.

Learning from the Past—Acting in the Present: Jewish Perspectives on Antisemitism

Education on antisemitism and the amplification of Jewish perspectives on antisemitism are more important today than ever. This webinar by the educational department of Bundesverband RIAS aimed to introduce educational staff with materials that focus on Jewish perspectives on antisemitism, both past and present. The materials provide crucial insights into how Holocaust survivors and their families navigate the enduring legacies of trauma and prejudice. The webinar also provided an insight into the testimonies of the Hamas massacres on 7 October 2023.

The event highlighted two interview projects, conducted in 2022 and 2023, that offer powerful testimonies from survivors and their descendants. The first project, 'Learning from the Past—Acting in the Present', features interviews with eight Holocaust survivors and some of their families, exploring how antisemitism has persisted over time and continues to impact Jewish communities. The interviewees discuss their survival during National Socialism, share personal experiences with antisemitism, and address the issue of transgenerational trauma. The second project, 'Continuities and Discontinuities', focuses on 2nd and 3rd generation descendants of Holocaust survivors. Through four interviews, it examines how transgenerational trauma shapes their identity and their ongoing struggle against contemporary antisemitism. The descendants reflected on how their family histories influenced their upbringing and the role those experiences play in their lives today. Personal encounters with current forms of antisemitism, as well as their dramatic rise, are central to the interviews — most of which were conducted shortly after the massacres of 7 October 2023.

Additionally, the USC Shoah Foundation introduced its interview project, which captures the testimonies of October 7th survivors and witnesses. Since the massacres in Israel, the USC Shoah Foundation has been conducting and collecting hundreds of interviews of survivors and witness as part of its initiative to document contemporary antisemitism.

#FACTSMATTER

Defend Truth, Defeat Distortion

The social media campaign “#FACTSMATTER Defend Truth, Defeat Distortion” on Instagram promoted sensitivity towards contemporary forms of Holocaust denial and distortion, in order to combat disinformation. Using reported real-world Holocaust distortion incidents from ENMA members, the campaign deconstructed common Holocaust denial and distortion strategies. Additionally, the social media campaign provided foundational information dedicated to combating Holocaust denial and distortion, such as key Holocaust remembrance dates.

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Use of Reported Incidents

One of the campaign’s core content formats was the utilization of real incidents reported by ENMA members. It countered the notion that Holocaust denial and distortion are issues of the past, making the problem more tangible for the audience. The use of reported incidents allowed for detailed deconstruction of denial and distortion strategies, educating the audience on how to recognize and counter such narratives.



Incident ENMA

Poland, 1.10.2022

Volunteer Recruitment for Jewish Institution disparaged as “Holocaust Industry”

Under a Facebook post of a Jewish Institution, inviting people to get involved with the local Jewish community, meet Holocaust survivors and organize events, a user accused the organisation of promoting “Holocaust Industry”.

Polskie tłumaczenie w podpisie pod postem



Incident ENMA

Cologne, Germany, 22.02.2022

Banner with the Nazi-referenced slogan “Impfen macht frei”

In February 2022 an antisemitic banner with the Nazi-referenced slogan “Impfen macht frei” (“Vaccination sets you free”) was placed at a bridge in Cologne.

Deutsche Übersetzung in der Caption



Incident ENMA

Milan, Italy, 31.01.2022

High school teacher downplays the dimension of the number of Holocaust victims

A high school teacher in Milan interrupts a student theater performance about the Holocaust by doubting and downplaying the numbers of the victims and claiming it as “ideology”.

Traduzione nella didascalia del post



Incident ENMA

Austria, 27.01.2021

Twitter users equate Palestine with Auschwitz

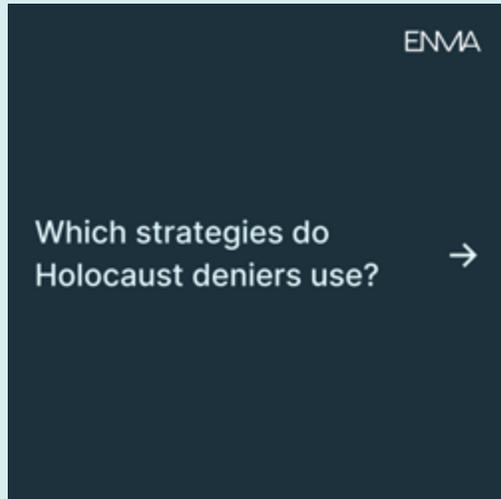
Under a Twitter post of the former President of the Jewish Austrian National Union of Students commemorating the liberation of his grandfather from Auschwitz on 27th January (International Holocaust Remembrance Date), users equate Palestine with Auschwitz.

Deutsche Übersetzung in der Caption des Posts.

Background Information & Holocaust Remembrance Days

The campaign also provided background information and context about the broader phenomena of Holocaust distortion and denial. It highlighted significant Holocaust and Jewish resistance related remembrance dates in the context of each ENMA member country, providing a more comprehensive historical narrative in order to foster ongoing remembrance and education.

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Report Antisemitism

To report an antisemitic incident please contact our local ENMA member organisation

-  **Antisemitismus melden!**
<https://www.antisemitismus-meldestelle.at/>
-  **Nahlaste antisemitismus!**
<https://www.fzo.cz/projekty-fzo/forum-proti-antisemitismu/formular-nahlaseni/>
-  **Antisemitismus melden!**
<https://www.report-antisemitism.de/en>
-  **Zgłoś antysemityzm!**
<https://zglosantysemityzm.pl/>
-  **Segnalazioni antisemitismo!**
<https://www.osservatorioantisemitismo.it/antenna-antisemitismo/>



Inform

The audience was also informed about upcoming events related to the "#FACTSMATTER" campaign

→ [instagram.com/enma.eu](https://www.instagram.com/enma.eu)

→ [enma.eu](https://www.enma.eu)



To learn more about
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