

Countering Holocaust Distortion in Italy: Education in the Age of Social Media and AI

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Introduction

In this contribution, I argue that Holocaust distortion in Italy should not be understood merely as misinformation about the past, but as a socially and technologically mediated form of memory politics: a way in which Holocaust memory is selectively mobilized, reframed, appropriated, and weaponized in contemporary public discourse ([Hoskins, 2018](#); [Kansteiner, 2017](#); [Rothberg, 2009](#); [Walden, 2021](#)). In Italy, this process is especially revealing because distortion emerges at the intersection of unresolved memories of Fascism and the Shoah, contemporary antisemitism, platformed communication, and educational efforts to counter the misuse of Holocaust memory ([CDEC, 2024](#); [Gordon, 2012](#); [Manca et al., 2022](#); [Sarfatti, 2017](#)).

Unlike outright Holocaust denial, distortion works indirectly, acknowledging the genocide while minimizing its specificity, relativizing its meaning, banalizing its symbols, or mobilizing Holocaust memory to produce false equivalences and moral inversions ([Gerstenfeld, 2007](#)). In Italy, these forms are shaped by a public memory that has long privileged anti-Nazi resistance, rescue narratives and German guilt, while only unevenly confronting Italian responsibility for antisemitic persecution, deportation and Fascist racial policies ([Fogu, 2006](#); [Foot, 2009](#); [Gordon, 2012](#); [Sarfatti, 2006](#); [Sierp, 2012](#)). Contemporary distortion therefore draws on older patterns of selective remembrance, displacement of responsibility, and national self-absolution.

The Italian case is analytically significant because secondary antisemitism and attitudes linked to Holocaust distortion appear more widespread than overt or primary antisemitic prejudice among the

adult population ([Kovács & Fischer, 2021](#)). Recent reports also show that distortion frequently takes symbolic and comparative forms, including minimization, trivialization, victim-perpetrator reversal, and the equation of Jews, Israel, or Zionism with Nazism, and now circulates across political rhetoric, commemorative discourse, media commentary, protest cultures, and social media platforms ([CDEC, 2024, 2025, 2026](#); [Chapelan & Becker, 2024](#)).

In this Perspective, I suggest that countering Holocaust distortion in Italy requires more than correcting historical inaccuracies. It calls for educational approaches that engage with the civic, digital, and reflexive conditions under which Holocaust memory is produced, circulated, and misused, while also considering how AI-assisted analysis can help identify the forms this distortion takes in digital environments.

Holocaust Distortion as Memory Politics

To approach Holocaust distortion as memory politics is to shift the focus from historical inaccuracy alone to the social uses of Holocaust memory in the present. The key question is not only what people know or do not know about the Holocaust, but also how Holocaust memory is mobilized in contemporary moral and political conflicts: to claim victimhood, assign guilt, construct analogies, legitimise outrage, or reverse the positions of victim and perpetrator ([Assmann, 2010](#); [Chapelan & Becker, 2024](#); [Levy & Sznajder, 2002](#); [Rothberg, 2009](#)). In this sense, distortion is not simply a failure of knowledge. It is a practice through which the past is made usable for present purposes.

This is especially important because Holocaust memory has acquired a powerful moral status in European and transnational public culture, functioning as a reference point for moral judgement, victimhood, and political comparison, even as its globalization remains uneven and contested ([Sierp, 2014](#); [Subotić, 2023](#)). It can be invoked to educate, commemorate, and warn, but also to accuse, relativise, appropriate or compete over suffering. Some comparisons may open historically meaningful reflection; others collapse historical specificity and use the symbolic authority of the Shoah to delegitimise Jews, survivors, Israel or institutions of remembrance ([Novis-Deutsch et al., 2023](#)).

Digital environments intensify these dynamics by making Holocaust references more visible, repeatable, and affectively charged. Through slogans, memes, images, comments, and hashtags, complex histories can be detached from context and

recoded as moral shorthand ([Becker et al., 2024](#)). For education, this means that correction and factual accuracy remain essential, but insufficient: if distortion operates through the social and digital circulation of Holocaust memory, countering it also requires attention to how historical references are selected, framed, circulated, and interpreted in public and digital cultures.

Why Italy Matters

Italy provides a revealing context for examining Holocaust distortion because contemporary forms of distortion are entangled with unresolved memories of Fascism, the Second World War, and the persecution of Jews. Italian public memory has long been shaped by fragmented and competing narratives that often emphasise anti-Nazi resistance, rescue, and German guilt over Italian collaboration, fascist antisemitism, and local participation in persecution and deportation ([Foot, 2009](#); [Sierp, 2012](#)). This selective memory has been reinforced by the myth of the *Bravo Italiano*, which portrays Italians as fundamentally humane or reluctant persecutors, displacing attention from the racial laws of 1938, state-sponsored antisemitism and the role of fascist institutions, civilians, police, and military forces in the persecution of Jews ([Bentrovato & Bentrovato, 2025](#); [Fogu, 2006](#)). Rescue narratives,

including those centred on Catholic clergy and religious institutions, have further contributed to this self-exculpatory memory culture, although recent historiography has increasingly foregrounded Italian responsibility ([Sarfatti, 2006](#); [Zuccotti, 2002](#)).

The Italian commemorative calendar also reflects these tensions: the Festa della Liberazione (25 April), the Giorno della Memoria (27 January), and the Giorno del Ricordo (10 February) organise public memory around different narratives of resistance, victimhood, responsibility, and national identity ([Sarfatti, 2017](#)). Yet the institutionalization of Holocaust remembrance has not always produced a full confrontation with fascist responsibility, as the emphasis on Auschwitz and German Nazism can coexist with weaker recognition of Italian antisemitic policy and participation in deportation ([Gordon, 2012](#)).

From Public Memory to Digital Distortion

These memory dynamics help explain why Holocaust distortion in Italy often takes indirect forms: minimization, relativization, false analogy, symbolic appropriation, and victim-perpetrator reversal rather than explicit denial. Comparative data support this interpretation: although Italy does not rank among the countries with the highest levels of primary antisemitism ([Kovács & Fischer, 2021](#)), attitudes associated with secondary antisemitism and Holocaust distortion are socially significant, suggesting that resentment toward Holocaust memory has become an important component of contemporary antisemitic discourse.

Recent reports by the CDEC Observatory on Antisemitism show a clear intensification of Holocaust distortion in Italy, especially after 7 October 2023. The 2023 report documents a sharp increase in antisemitic incidents following the Hamas attacks and the outbreak of the war in Gaza, with online spaces playing a central role in the circulation of hostility, conspiracy narratives, and Holocaust related distortions ([CDEC, 2024](#)). In this context, Holocaust memory became one of the symbolic languages through which contemporary conflict was articulated.

Across the 2023, 2024 and 2025 reports, distortion appears less as an isolated misuse of historical memory than as a recurrent repertoire of antisemitic communication. In 2023, the CDEC report identifies the trivialization of the Shoah, the use of Nazi imagery for unrelated political issues, and comparisons between Israel and Nazi Germany as significant patterns (CDEC, 2024). In 2024, these dynamics became more embedded in commemorative and public discourse, including debates around 27 January and examples in which Holocaust symbols, figures, and language were reappropriated for contemporary political causes (CDEC, 2025). By 2025, Holocaust distortion is presented as a central mechanism of anti-Jewish hostility, marked by victim-perpetrator reversal, the delegitimization of survivors, and accusations that Jews or Israel reproduce Nazi violence (CDEC, 2026).

Several recurring forms can be identified across these reports: trivialization, as in comparisons between COVID-19 public health measures and Nazi persecution; relativization, where the specificity of the Shoah is diminished; symbolic appropriation, as in the resignification of figures such as Anne Frank or symbols such as the Stolpersteine; and victim-perpetrator reversal, where Jews, Israel or Zionism are equated with Nazism (CDEC, 2024, 2025, 2026). These forms often overlap. In debates around Israel and Gaza, for instance, Holocaust memory is mobilized through claims that Israel is carrying out a “new Holocaust” against Palestinians, accusations that Jews use the Shoah as a political shield, or attacks on Holocaust survivors, including Liliana Segre, for alleged silence, complicity or instrumentalization of memory (CDEC, 2025, 2026).

The post-7 October context has intensified these dynamics by linking Holocaust memory to what Chapelan and Becker (2024) describe as “competitive martyrology”: the construction of competing hierarchies of suffering in which Holocaust memory is not simply compared with present violence, but used to displace, reverse or delegitimise Jewish victimhood. In the Italian context, this helps explain why Holocaust distortion is frequently intertwined with forms of anti-Zionist rhetoric that draw on antisemitic tropes, conspiracy narratives, and accusations that Jews instrumentalize remembrance for political purposes.

Digital platforms play a decisive role in this shift. The CDEC reports (CDEC, 2024, 2025, 2026) repeatedly show that online environments are central to the circulation of contemporary antisemitism, including Holocaust distortion. Social media allow distorted references to the Shoah to circulate through memes, slogans, comments, images, videos, and emotionally charged accusations, often detached from historical context and reinserted into new controversies. The reports thus point to the consolidation of Holocaust distortion as a recognizable repertoire through which the past is simplified and weaponized in Italian public and digital communication.

Educational Responses and Their Limits

Italy has developed a relatively structured ecosystem for Holocaust remembrance and education. This framework is rooted in Law 211/2000, which established the *Giorno della Memoria* on 27 January and assigned schools a central role in transmitting the memory of the Shoah to younger generations (Manca & Guetta, 2023; Sarfatti, 2017). It includes the national competition *I giovani ricordano la Shoah*, organized by the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Union of Italian Jewish Communities (UCEI), as well as the work of UCEI, CDEC, the *Associazione Figli della Shoah*, memorial institutions, universities, and international partners such as Yad Vashem, the *Mémorial de la Shoah* and the *Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum* (Manca & Guetta, 2023; Santerini, 2003). University programmes, including the Master in *Didattica della Shoah* at Roma Tre University and the advanced course in Holocaust education at the University of Florence, have further contributed to the professionalization of the field.

This infrastructure has been strengthened by key policy documents. The 2018 *Linee guida nazionali per una didattica della Shoah a scuola*, developed by the Italian International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) delegation with the Ministry of Education, provide a framework for historically accurate and pedagogically responsible teaching. The subsequent *Linee guida sul contrasto all’antisemitismo nella scuola*, published in 2021/2022 within Italy’s National Strategy for Combating Antisemitism, explicitly connect Holocaust

education with the need to address contemporary antisemitism, including Holocaust denial, distortion, and hostility towards the State of Israel.

Yet this infrastructure does not automatically prevent distortion. Implementation remains uneven across regions, schools and teachers, depending on local resources, proximity to memorial sites, institutional priorities and access to professional development (Manca & Guetta, 2023; Santerini, 2003). Moreover, the institutionalization of Holocaust remembrance may produce visibility without necessarily ensuring critical understanding. If Holocaust education is reduced to ritualized commemoration, moral exhortation or decontextualized narratives of suffering, it may fail to equip learners to recognise false analogy, symbolic appropriation or victim-perpetrator reversal (Foster et al., 2020; Manca & Guetta, 2023).

A further limitation concerns the relationship between formal education and digital media. Young people encounter Holocaust memory not only in classrooms, textbooks, museums or memorial ceremonies, but also through social media fragments, videos, memes, comments, influencers, hashtags, and algorithmically amplified controversies (Manca, 2022; Manca & Passarelli, 2023; Walden, 2021). Educational responses therefore need to move beyond transmission and correction alone. They should help learners understand how historical references are produced, framed, circulated, and interpreted across media environments, drawing on historical, media, civic, and reflexive literacies. Some recent initiatives point in this direction. The UCEI platform *Gli ebrei, questi (s)conosciuti / Progetto Deja* provides materials on Jewish history, culture, and life in Italy, addressing broader stereotypes and prejudices that form the background against which Holocaust distortion can emerge.

The Italian case therefore shows both the importance and the limits of educational infrastructure. Schools, universities, memorial institutions and Jewish organizations provide essential resources for historical knowledge and civic education. Yet Holocaust distortion circulates across media ecologies that exceed the classroom and challenge conventional pedagogical models (Manca et al., 2023). Education against distortion must therefore prepare learners to under-

stand how Holocaust memory is produced, circulated, contested, and instrumentalized across both public memory and digital platforms.

The Proteggi I Fatti Campaign and AI-Assisted Analysis

The Proteggi i Fatti campaign offers an illustrative case for examining how educational interventions against Holocaust distortion circulate in contested digital environments. Developed within the European [DECONSTRUCT project](#) by ITD-CNR and the University of Florence, the campaign disseminated historically accurate information and critical tools for recognizing Holocaust denial and distortion on social media. Its relevance lies in moving Holocaust education into the same platformed spaces in which distortion, trivialization, and victim-perpetrator reversal increasingly circulate (Manca, 2022; Manca et al., 2022).

Dionesalvi's analysis of 10,178 Facebook comments posted in response to the campaign provides an exploratory lens onto the reception of such interventions in Italian digital publics (Dionesalvi, 2025). Users tended to reframe the campaign through contemporary conflicts around Israel, Gaza and antisemitism, including accusations that Holocaust memory is instrumentalized, that Jews or Israel monopolise victimhood, or that present violence should be read through inverted Holocaust analogies. These responses resonate with broader patterns identified in CDEC reports (CDEC, 2024, 2025, 2026) and with a "competitive martyrology" approach (Chapelan & Becker, 2024).

Since Dionesalvi's analysis is based on a single case study and a Master's thesis, it should not be treated as generalizable evidence: it shows the discursive frictions that arise when historically grounded educational messages enter polarized platform environments. The case therefore points less to the failure of digital Holocaust education than to the need to design interventions for contested publics. Social media audiences are not neutral recipients of historical information: they may negotiate, oppose or reframe intended messages according to their own interpretive positions and social contexts (Hall, 1999). Factual correction alone may not prevent reframing, resistance or

symbolic inversion. Educational campaigns must therefore anticipate how messages can be appropriated, contested or redirected within platformed communication, paying attention to framing, audience interpretation, moderation, platform affordances and the affective dynamics of online debate.

The case is also methodologically significant because it points to the potential and limits of qualitative-computational approaches. Online antisemitism and Holocaust distortion often operate through implicit, coded and context-dependent forms that are difficult to capture through keyword-based detection alone (Becker et al., 2024; Becker et al., 2026). AI-assisted analysis can help identify recurring patterns across large volumes of social media data, including trivialization, relativization, symbolic appropriation, victim-perpetrator reversal and accusations of Holocaust instrumentalization. Used critically, such tools can make certain patterns visible and researchable, helping scholars and educators understand how distortion circulates, which tropes recur, and where communicative resistance emerges.

At the same time, computational methods cannot replace historically informed qualitative interpretation. AI-assisted analysis may help identify where distortion appears and how frequently certain patterns recur, but it cannot determine by itself what those patterns mean within a specific memory culture. In the Italian context, references to Fascism, the racial laws, the Resistance, Israel/Palestine, anti-Zionist rhetoric, colonial memory or the myth of the *Bravo Italiano* may function differently depending on irony, provocation, political analogy, antisemitic accusation or historically informed comparison. For this reason, the study of Holocaust distortion requires hybrid methods that combine computational tools with close reading, expert annotation and historical contextualization (Becker et al., 2024; Kansteiner, 2022).

Conclusion

The Italian case suggests that countering Holocaust distortion requires moving beyond a corrective model of education. Historical accuracy remains indispensable, but distortion does not arise only from lack of knowledge. It also emerges from the ways in which societies remember themselves, assign responsibility,

construct victimhood and translate the past into the moral language of the present. For this reason, education against distortion must address not only what is known about the Shoah, but how Holocaust memory is used, circulated, compared, and contested.

This is particularly urgent in digital environments, where historical references can be detached from context, compressed into affective and polarizing forms, and reinserted into contemporary conflicts. Digital and media literacy is therefore not an optional add-on to Holocaust education, but a central condition for understanding how memory circulates today. It should enable learners not only to evaluate sources, but also to analyse how platforms, audiences, algorithms, images, comments, and participatory cultures shape the meanings attached to the past (Buckingham, 2022; Walden, 2021).

At the same time, countering distortion requires more explicit educational work on historical analogy. Learners need tools to distinguish between comparisons that illuminate historical and ethical questions and analogies that collapse context, erase specificity or produce victim-perpetrator reversal. This is particularly important when Holocaust references are used to interpret contemporary violence, injustice or political conflict. Teaching how to compare responsibly should therefore become part of education against distortion, rather than being treated as a marginal or specialist concern.

An effective response must be historical, civic, digital, and reflexive. It must be historical because learners need accurate knowledge of the Shoah, fascist antisemitism, the racial laws, and Italian responsibility; civic, because distortion operates through contemporary conflicts over antisemitism, Israel, victimhood, and democratic values; digital, because Holocaust memory increasingly circulates through platformed communication and requires critical digital and media literacy; and reflexive because countering distortion also requires confronting the selective memories and self-exculpatory narratives through which societies understand their own past.

Finally, this work should be understood as a shared responsibility. Schools and universities remain central, but they cannot carry this task alone. Teachers need

more sustained training on Holocaust distortion and contemporary antisemitism, while journalists, cultural workers, public communicators, policymakers, and platform moderators also require tools to recognise how antisemitic tropes, false analogies, and symbolic inversions circulate in public discourse. Education against Holocaust distortion is therefore not only a matter of preserving memory, but of cultivating the critical capacities and collective commitments needed to recognise how memory is made, mobilized, and misused in the present.

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