



## Finnish Reactions to the Holocaust

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Contemporary reactions to the topic of the Holocaust may provide a researcher of antisemitism with material of interest and importance on many levels. This is naturally the case regarding problematic responses of various kinds. The best-known assault on the history and memory of the Holocaust has been Holocaust denial. Alongside straightforward denial, however, there have appeared in recent years different types of more sophisticated and less easily definable forms and trends of misuse and distortion of the Holocaust. Due to their certain vagueness, they are also generally more accepted—hence the frequent challenge in pointing to their problematic dimensions. One of the most conveniently accessible arenas today for observing reactions and responses originating from the general public is the feature of comments written in response to online news articles. When tapping into this type of research material, one can expect to find out something about current public sentiments, moods, and attitudes, as well as about larger trends developing from these factors.

When it comes to public discussion on the Holocaust in the Finnish context, there was a lively exchange of opinions that took place online in Finland in August 2010. The discussion arose in response to a news item reporting that, due to Finland's aspirations to become a member of the ITF (The Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research), the Finnish National Board of Education had given specific instructions that Holocaust teaching would be introduced into the national elementary and high school curricula. The news was published in *Helsingin Sanomat (HS)*, the largest newspaper in Finland, on August 14, 2010, under the headline "*Holokaustin opetuksesta tuli määräys opetus-suunnitelmiin*" (Instruction was given to include Holocaust teaching in the

school curricula).<sup>1</sup> It drew a barrage of 550 comments on the newspaper's Web site; 400 comments also appeared on the Web site of another popular Finnish newspaper, *Iltalehti (IL)*. The online responders expressed both irritation and opposition to this news.

For my thesis, I studied these discussions with a twofold objective: First, by looking into this Finnish public discussion on an issue inherently related to the Holocaust, my aim was to observe what types of reactions and opinions this news event prompted in general, as well as what kinds of sentiments and attitudes were discernible. My second and subsequent goal was to view the more problematic reactions and attitudes within a broader framework of abuse of Holocaust history and memory, and to consider them in the light of contemporary manifestations of antisemitism.

What emerged most strikingly from the comments was the overall negative response that the news aroused in the general public throughout the comment chains. Roughly, out of *IL*'s total of 400 comments, only 35 or so could be regarded as clearly positive toward this news or in some manner providing factual information about the Holocaust and related matters to other discussion participants. Responses to *HS* were even more negative: out of the total of 550 comments, approximately 70 could be regarded as exhibiting a positive attitude toward the news and/or bringing in accurate and factual information on matters related to the Holocaust. This small number of positive responses was in itself noteworthy. There were inevitably a number of comments that could not be categorized—i.e., strayed from the topic—but it became clear nonetheless that the prevailing sentiment throughout the discussions was that of negativity and opposition.

From within the negative responses, four categories of themes emerged. Because, however, a good deal of these negative comments contained elements common in all these themes, an attempt to provide accurate percentages for the categories cannot be completely successful. Nevertheless, the most easily observable themes can be grouped and summarized, along with some of the pertinent and typical responses, as follows:

- *General negativity toward the news* (approximately 29%): “Why should Finland become a member of this organization [ITF]? This is an outside intrusion into our national matters as well as a politically driven enterprise. The Holocaust has been and is already being taught enough in our schools; consequently, there is no need to introduce it separately into the curriculum.”

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1. HS.fi: <http://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/artikkeli/Holokaustin+opetuksesta+tuli+m%C3%A4%C3%A4r%C3%A4ys+opetussuunnitelmiin/1135259324418>; <http://www.hs.fi/english/article/Holocaust+to+be+included+in+national+core+curriculum+for+basic+education++/1135259413393>.

- *Theme of Israel: Irritation against Israel's assumed role in the matter* ( $\approx 25\%$ ): "Israel is behind this enterprise. Why should we care about what Israel thinks of our curriculum, and why do we let Israel dictate our schoolbooks? It is quite a bit of Finlandization from us to bow to the pressure from the criminal and racist State of Israel."
- *Theme of Jewish suffering and victimhood in relation to other victim groups and genocides: Resentment over the perceived injustice that the Holocaust and Jewish victims should receive such singular and special emphasis to the exclusion of other victims and other genocides* ( $\approx 20\%$ ): "Why is it always only the Jews that are being remembered and mentioned? Everyone surely knows enough about Jewish suffering. Why are other victims not mentioned—are they somehow less valuable and less important than Jews? Other genocides should be included in the curriculum, too, not just the Jewish Holocaust. The Jewish lobby has money and power—that is why their issue is kept on the agenda."
- *Theme of Stalin versus Hitler: Demands for more emphasis on Stalin's crimes* ( $\approx 7\%$ ): "Why are Stalin and his crimes not given any attention? He was as bad as Hitler, if not even worse in terms of numbers of victims."

In addition to these themes, there was also a longer discussion held on the less glorious Finnish wartime history (Finnish-German cooperation, Finnish volunteer SS men, etc.), including demands that these aspects should also receive more emphasis within the curriculum.

To begin with, a general observation that one was able to make from these discussions was the level of ignorance as well as the lack of any deeper understanding when it came to the fundamentals, particulars, and immensity of the Holocaust. The "but" in the oft-heard comment, "Yeah, the Holocaust was quite awful but . . .," was a sufficient indicator of some level of ignorance. The claim that "We know enough about the Holocaust" likewise popped up repeatedly, yet the widespread diminishment of the Holocaust indicated the opposite. Moreover, the role of the Holocaust as a watershed event in modern European and world history was clearly not perceived that way by the bulk of the responders. As a consequence, many voiced their opposition to the assumed exclusive teaching of Jewish/Zionist history that was now about to make its way into the Finnish school curricula, as children and young people were soon to be "force-fed" the Holocaust and learn about the Jews as the principal victims. Quite understandably, as a result of this line of thinking, it was beyond comprehension to many why the Holocaust should be taught in any special fashion in Finnish schools.

Aside from the general opposition to the proposed amendment of the curriculum and to Finland's joining the ITF, one can also discuss the responses in terms of their more problematic dimensions, related to wider trends of contemporary distortions and misuse of Holocaust history and memory. To begin with, there were some clear instances (around 20 comments or so) of either straightforward or slightly indirect and implied Holocaust denial, particularly on the *IL* Web site, where it typically appeared as the questioning of the number of victims and hinting at the alleged lack of proof concerning killing methods. More important, however, the larger themes that emerged from the responses seemed in the end to point to some other, in some ways vaguer but no less disturbing, trends also taking place in the Finnish context. One can argue, first of all, that the clearest larger trend seemed to be Holocaust relativism, resulting in a considerable downplaying and minimizing of the Holocaust on the whole. This became apparent first and foremost by the repeated demands that the Holocaust should not receive any special emphasis in relation to other genocides, neither as part of the school curriculum nor in general. Alternatively, one could also refer here to the trend of Holocaust equivalence, in that the major part of the comments clearly hammered home the notion that there was nothing unique about the Holocaust and hence it should be seen in equal terms with any other mass atrocity, be it that of Stalin's or any other genocide. Furthermore, there was also quite a bit of "Holocaust fatigue" in the air, which is a rather curious phenomenon considering that the Holocaust has never loomed large in the Finnish public consciousness or assumed a disproportionate part of the school curricula.

Third, in many ways related to Holocaust relativism and equivalence, was an apparent trend of de-Judaization of the Holocaust. The Jewish element of the Holocaust and its victims seemed to cause considerable resentment, an irritation brought up by numerous responses along the lines of "the Jews were not the only victims and yet their suffering is the sole thing we hear about," or "this endless fuss over the Holocaust must stop—other victims in the world deserve our compassion, too." It became clear that the bulk of the responders simply preferred to hear less about the Jews in connection with the Holocaust; furthermore, some commenters voiced their indignation that the term "Holocaust" was being applied only to Jewish victims. All of the above indicated that the core antisemitic dimension of the Holocaust did not really register with most of the discussion participants, let alone the long tradition of European antisemitism leading up to it. And fourth, with regard to Israel, there were some clear instances of Holocaust inversion, whereby the commenters implied that actions of the State of Israel today were not at all so different from those of the Nazis in the past. This message was brought home with such comments as "just look at

‘the chosen people’ and their genocidal activities today—that’s what should be in the curriculum,” or by referring to “Israel’s ‘final solution’ to the ‘Palestinian question,’ ” among other opinions. In sum, it emerged from these larger themes that the Holocaust as a particularly Jewish catastrophe was resented; instead, more emphasis on other genocides and atrocities was called for, and the general preference was to hear more about other victims and less about the Jews. And, finally, the discussions were also illustrative of the inflated role that the State of Israel often receives in contemporary Holocaust discourse on the one hand, as well as of the hateful tones of that rhetoric on the other.

When looking for possible explanations for the overwhelmingly negative reaction by the Finnish public, it was relevant to first pay attention to the construction of the news article itself. The article left a slightly negative aftertaste, most likely due to its emphasis on the reactions of Finnish teachers, who were mentioned to have been astonished by this new amendment (teachers’ critical response being a matter of interest and significance as such). Another, a smaller but no less significant detail, seemed to have been the article’s brief reference to the critical word “Israel.” This was picked up by the readers, and—not very surprisingly—in a negative way. People interpreted it to mean that it was first and foremost Israel that was pressuring and pushing Finland to join the ITF, which was not the case. It was thus quite evident that editorial choices in this specific news item ended up being rather crucial, determining to a certain extent the ways in which the readers interpreted and (mis)understood the news. Hence, one can in this particular case as well point to the key role of mainstream media in creating certain sentiments and sometimes misguided conceptions in mind of the general public.

Aside from media influence and the misguided sentiment that our national sovereignty had been encroached, however, there remained some peculiar attitudinal and emotional dimensions within the responses that could not simply be explained away with media-initiated sentiments. First and foremost, the vehemently opposed and annoyed attitude toward the Jewish character of the Holocaust and its victims, as well as against Holocaust education as such, cannot be traced to the news article. Why should the teaching of the Holocaust, an indisputable historical event, prompt so much opposition in the first place? Moreover, the prominent position that Israel ended up having within the discussions was something that also requires a second thought, considering the fact that the news was not related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Therefore, when it came to looking for some further explanation, one had to take into account possible antisemitic dimensions since the comments proved to offer some food for thought in that regard as well. One of the initial hypotheses of my thesis was that often

public reactions and responses to the Holocaust in contemporary discourse on the topic may in one way or another reveal something about deeper anti-Jewish sentiments and undercurrents currently evolving. On the basis of this case study, the following argument could be made: that there were some clearly noticeable anti-Jewish/anti-Israel sentiments intertwined in this contemporary Finnish public discourse on the Holocaust; and that there seems to be a somewhat predisposed, reflex-type of readiness to draw the State of Israel into the picture by the smallest hint and in a negative way.

Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to point out that some traces of the old European deep culture of anti-Jewish prejudice and animus seemed to linger over this Finnish public discussion as a whole. As one of the commenters, representing minority voices, noted:

When reading the crude distortion of history by these “diplomats” and other closet Nazis, accompanied by a big choir of ignorant people, one cannot but come to one, grave conclusion: in the future, once again, *anything is possible* [emphasis in the original]. Sure enough, not by these people themselves, but their kindred spirits existing all around the world, also in leading political positions. In a word: the writing on the wall is scary.

Or, as another commenter pointed out, also testifying to the general mood of the discussions:

By way of summary, after a quick and even cursory reading of the contents of this response chain, one could draw a conclusion that yet another calamity, equal to the Holocaust, will happen to the Jews. Such was the amount of hatred and ignorance of various degrees—also lies—that was targeted against the Jews in this chain, though there are some civilized comments as well. Some “vent out” their feelings uninhibited, whereas others are capable of expressing their antipathy toward Jews in a more “civilized” manner. The same ingredients existed also prior to the previous Holocaust, so history seems to be repeating itself. The secular media, unfortunately, has been probably the most effective opinion former as regards anti-Israel sentiment.

In many respects, it was indeed surprising to come across, in these kinds of prominent Web sites, such unmistakably antisemitic ideas and tropes (“force-Judaized history teaching,” “the Jewish lobby,” “the Jews, money and power,” etc.), coupled with a heavy anti-Israel mood, manifested in such high volumes and in such an outspoken manner.

As for the anti-Israel sentiment, the virulence with which Israel was being referred to in a host of comments was noteworthy. This sentiment exposed the unique loathing and animosity that one particular country in the

world can trigger in people, including Finland. This phenomenon was also telling about the extraordinary propensity by the public to buy into false interpretations and perceptions concerning Israel. A good illustration of this was the responders' readiness to believe that it was mainly due to pressure from Israel that Finland had made the decision to join the ITF, an idea bordering on the absurd. Furthermore, unsubstantiated accusations of Israel's genocidal activities against the Palestinians clearly are not constructive criticism of some specific Israeli policies; instead, they are meant to demonize Israel and by necessity Jewish Israelis. But in Finland, much like elsewhere, there seems to be plenty of room under the umbrella of "legitimate criticism" of Israel. It should be noted, moreover, that there appears to be a considerably higher toleration of slander and hateful rhetoric when it is directed against a state, that state being without exception Israel. For example, when a leftist politician in Finland made a comment some time ago on "the genocide that Israel perpetrated in Gaza," from the little that was reported on the incident afterward, one could walk away feeling that the question had only been about "criticism of Israel's policies," which can neither be hate speech nor antisemitism. So a question is when could it be, or is it altogether inconceivable, that a state—inevitably including its people—could be a target of antisemitic attitudes and hateful discourse? One cannot help but conclude that, in addition to the more traditional anti-Jewish tropes and resentful sentiments expressed in this public discussion, the vitriolic discourse on Israel exuded in many respects the "longest hatred" itself. But even if one is hesitant to touch the issue of contemporary antisemitism and especially that of the "new antisemitism" with respect to Israel, one can nevertheless summarize as follows: If nothing else, this particular discussion revealed that among Finnish public there exists, at least to some extent, an attitudinal inclination to react—knowingly or more unconsciously as a result of media influence and groupthink—in an emotionally charged and negative manner to issues having something to do with Jews—here, the Holocaust, its Jewish victims, and the State of Israel. In this connection, one must nonetheless clearly point out that there are still also sizable numbers of pro-Israel Finns, mostly Christians, who do not shy away from giving their open support to Israel, especially during the periods of heightened tension in the Middle East. Nevertheless, it is fair to assume that the level of awareness regarding contemporary antisemitism is generally rather low in Finland. Antisemitic sentiments intertwined in the Israelophobic discourse and in antagonistic attitudes toward the Jewish state are either unidentified or tolerated, while similar expressions about Muslims would raise charges of Islamophobia.

If one accepts FRA's working definition of antisemitism with reference to the State of Israel (<http://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2011/work->

ing-definition-antisemitism), one may raise the following questions: Where do we stand in Finland today when it comes to contemporary antisemitic manifestations related to Israel? Has the phenomenon of “being only critical of Israel” already reached such a politically correct and unquestioned status in Finland that any serious attempts to point out the extraordinary dimensions of this disproportionate “criticism” are dismissed and brushed aside as coming from uncritical and unintelligent “friends of Israel,” with their goal of preventing peace and suppressing any legitimate critique of Israeli policies by playing the “antisemitism card”? And yet, to state again the obvious, anyone is free to criticize Israel; that happens all the time—without anyone really having to demand permission to do so, or without having to fear for one’s life after doing so. In Finland, physical anti-Jewish incidents are very rare, but this online discussion served as a prime example of how contemporary antisemitism may today manifest itself in public discourse. It seems to be the case in Finland that antisemitic sentiments are sparked for the most part by the trigger word “Israel,” often followed by an instant and intense negative reflex—and yet any possible antisemitic dimensions of these reflexes are vehemently denied. Instead, one can often read between the lines that it is as if it took a good deal of courage and independent mind to criticize Israel. Obviously, much of this public sentiment can be traced back to Finnish mainstream media’s consistently negative portrayal of Israel as the principal aggressor—a premise that appears to be almost an unwritten rule. Therefore, in the face of this widespread ignorance as well as the denial of the “new antisemitism,” it is no easy task to point out that antisemitism as a “canary in the mine” could already indicate that other worrisome developments might also be in forming in society, perhaps concerning other groups of people as well. In Finland, that would quite clearly mean pro-Israel, confessing Christians, who have already been publicly accused of inciting hatred against the Palestinians inside the church. This kind of smearing of pro-Israel Christians seems to be one of the by-products of the contemporary antisemitic mindset.

When it comes to a more solid grasp of contemporary antisemitic developments in Finland, it seems that the following essentials must first be internalized—which clearly was not the case, as this public discourse on the Holocaust and related matters revealed. First and foremost, to get a grasp of the uniquely Jewish dimension of the Holocaust requires knowledge and a deeper understanding of the long history of European antisemitism prior to the Holocaust. And, as for today, if we hope to educate the wider public as well as the younger generation on the more contemporary developments of antisemitism, we would also need to touch on the issue of Israel as the face of the Jew of today, arousing deep feelings and inexplicable disdain and animosity. But if there already was among teachers considerable opposition



even to have the Holocaust—a historical event whose Jewish and antisemitic elements are well researched—included in the curriculum, how can we in that case expect that the “new antisemitism” as an even more politically charged issue would make its way into Finnish curricula, as part of human rights education, for example? This is a particular matter of concern if research in general focusing on contemporary antisemitism is either discouraged on the whole, judged as resting on an anecdotal and subjective basis, or as exhibiting too much political “advocacy” and too little academic analysis.

This news event, along with the ensuing public discussion, offered a good venue for observing reactions and attitudes that at least some parts of the general public in Finland today exhibit toward the Holocaust, the Jews, and the State of Israel. One cannot, however, draw any further conclusions on how prevalent these kinds of sentiments might be among the wider Finnish public, apart from those nine hundred or so online comments examined for this case study. This was only one case and one news event, and much additional research is needed to be able to say anything more all-embracing about Finland.

To conclude, the case for Holocaust education in Finland can be made rather pointedly if the primary reasons for this negativity were indeed media influence and the groupthink phenomenon, let alone deep-rooted European anti-Jewish attitudes. But especially in light of the reportedly critical response by Finnish teachers toward the news, there remains in the end a certain gray zone, which may be of importance but is not so easy to gauge—namely, the attitudes of the teachers themselves. A question of the extent to which an individual teacher’s strong anti-Israel attitude, for example, may determine the manner in which the Holocaust is approached in class or is used to educate students about other human rights issues of a more contemporary nature remains for the most part a matter of guesswork.

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