

*The Abuse of Holocaust Memory: Distortions and Responses*

by Manfred Gerstenfeld

(Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2009), 243 pages

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As the direct witnesses are slowly leaving us for the ultimate darkness, the memory of mankind's descent into hell known as the Holocaust seems increasingly fragile. It may seem incredible that such a seismic event that nearly succeeded in extinguishing the Jewish people should be subject to crass political manipulation, but so it is. That should come as no greater surprise than the mind-numbing horror of the original crimes themselves. But in his foreword to this useful volume, Abraham Foxman, president of the Anti-Defamation League, is correct to note that complacency is not an option. For if we fail to expose and confront the lies about and distortions of the heinous crimes committed by the Nazis and their collaborators, "the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust will perish a second time."

The book's author, Manfred Gerstenfeld, chairman of the Board of Fellows at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (JCPA) and editor of the *Jewish Political Studies Review*, is also co-publisher of *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism*. As the book amply demonstrates, the perpetrators of that denial include not only political figures like the infamous semi-literate president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the Nicaraguan president of the UN General Assembly, Miguel d'Escoto Brockmann, but religious figures such as Bishop Richard Williamson, a variety of academics—not only Middle Eastern but Western—and many others. The distortion of Holocaust memory is especially pernicious when added to the crescendo of antisemitism pervading the political culture that has been thoroughly infected for more than half a century by the noxious rhetoric spewing from the UN General Assembly.

The perennial unbinding, yet decidedly pernicious, UN declarations sanctified by majorities of mostly undemocratic regimes, which routinely blast Israel with the automatic regularity of a catechism, culminated in the infamous GA Res. 3379, passed on November 10, 1975, branding Zionism as "a form of racism." These quasi-legal diatribes continue to serve as a thinly veiled justification not only for crass political interest but for old-fashioned antisemitism. Not infrequently, the intent is outright murderous. In an atmosphere polluted by innuendo and disinformation, Holocaust distortion thrives alongside a whole slew of accusations against Israel and the Jewish people that run the gamut from brazen lies to vicious calls for genocide, for pushing Israel into the sea.

The most egregious and alarming misuse of the Holocaust includes not only its alleged justification, preposterous enough, by blaming Jews themselves for the hatred directed against them, but Holocaust promotion, which involves encouraging or even demanding their murder. The book, which also includes a number of contributions by leading authorities on this phenomenon in various parts of the world, such as Shmuel Trigano on Western Europe, Susanne Y. Urban on Germany, and Ivan Ceresnjec on the former Yugoslavia, dedicates separate chapters to “Holocaust Deflection and Whitewashing,” “Holocaust Inversion” (portraying Israel and Jews as Nazis), “Holocaust Equivalence,” “Holocaust Trivialization,” and, of course, “Obliterating Holocaust Memory,” among others. The bizarre list ranges from the risible and grotesque to the deeply alarming.

Indeed, not long ago, in 2006, an entire conference convened—unsurprisingly enough—in Tehran, on President Ahmadinejad’s home turf, dedicated to a “Review of the Holocaust Global Vision.” Organized by the Iranian Institute for Political and International Studies, the event was a travesty, its absurdity beyond the pale. The Iranian foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, claimed that US presence in Iraq and Afghanistan was reason enough for “the official version of the Holocaust [to be] thrown into doubt.” From this, it “follows” that “the identity and nature of Israel will be thrown into doubt,” and no reason would be left for Muslims, and especially Palestinians, “having to pay the cost of the Nazis’ crimes” that never took place.

The latter claim, unfortunately, is not as preposterous as one might imagine, thanks to widespread misunderstanding that is the result of disinformation and ignorance, to say nothing of willful deception. And the US is not always helpful here. Even the much-praised speech by US President Obama in Cairo in June 2009 played into the hands of the Holocaust distortionists when the president asserted that America’s ties to Israel were based on the “recognition that the aspiration for a Jewish homeland is rooted in a tragic history that cannot be denied.” Obviously, the Jewish claim to Israel does not rest on the Holocaust; “Next year in Jerusalem” is no idle incantation. Yet the distorted narrative continues, virtually unstoppable.

Ironically, such distortions now thrive at a time when information travels with the greatest ease in history, and reaches even deep inside the very land of the Jews—among Israeli Arabs. A May 2009 poll by the University of Haifa, for example, demonstrated how profound Holocaust denial is (and expanding, no less) within that special community: The study found that over 40 percent of Israeli Arabs believe that the Holocaust never happened—which is much higher than the 28 percent in 2006.

But Holocaust denial is by no means restricted to Arabs, Persians, and other Muslims; it is alive and thriving in the developed, democratic Western world as well, for a variety of deep and complex reasons. Among the favorite forms of Holocaust

inversion—or perversion—is accusing Israelis of behaving like Nazis. Leading European politicians, such as the late Swedish Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme and the late Greek Socialist Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou, did so routinely. In Spain in 2006, Susan Leon Gordillo, a member of the ruling Socialist party, proposed commemorating “Palestinian Genocide”—a phrase that has become virtually commonplace. The Portuguese Nobel Prize winner (and, as it happens, Communist) José Saramago, for example, has compared the blockaded Palestinian city of Ramallah with Auschwitz. One British Anglican paper recently marked Holocaust Memorial Day by printing a claim by Rev. Richard Spencer that Ramallah was the site of “suffering and deprivation that I could only imagine in Auschwitz.”

It is this kind of absurdity that has prompted data banks and major websites to fight Holocaust denial. Emory University operates a site called “Holocaust Denial on Trial: Using History to Confront Distortion,” and, after the 2006 Tehran charade, announced that it would translate its content into Farsi, as well as Arabic and Russian. It is also planning to extend the translation effort to other languages in countries where Holocaust denial is especially common. Similarly, in spring 2009, the Center for Information and Documentation and its umbrella organization of Dutch Jewry announced that it would maintain a data bank on the Holocaust in order to counter this growing problem.

Gerstenfeld demonstrates that the sources of Holocaust manipulation are by no means univocal. One of the most interesting contributions to this important volume was written by Dave Rich, deputy director of communications at the Community Security Trust, an organization that provides security and defense services to the UK Jewish community and advises the government and police on antisemitism and terrorism. In his article with the long title, “The Holocaust as an Anti-Zionist and Anti-imperialist Tool of the British Left,” Rich explains that the high-profile promotion of antisemitism by the president of Iran “has taken Holocaust denial out of the hands of the far-right and put it firmly on the agenda of the leftists and Islamists who make up the new global imperialism. Some, like Paul Eisen of [the organization] Deir Yassin Remembered, are sympathetic to outright Holocaust denial.” Rich describes a new political subculture that is home to the antiwar movement, anti-globalizers, radical street politics, and populist political leaders, who readily condone Holocaust denial and every other form of antisemitism, provided it comes in anti-imperialist packaging.

Not only Western but Eastern European countries have been dabbling in Holocaust revisionism—notably my native Romania. On the one hand, the first post-Ceausescu, if not quite post-Communist, president, Ion Iliescu, praised the 2004 report by the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, chaired by Elie Wiesel, which declared that “Romania bears responsibility for the deaths of more Jews than any country other than Germany itself,” though

it also recognized examples of Romanian individuals and institutions who have struggled (not very successfully) to correct the record. On the other hand, as noted in the book, one of Iliescu's parting gestures as president was to award the state's highest decoration to Corneliu Vadim Tudor, leader of the neo-Fascist and virulently antisemitic România Mare [Greater Romania] party, thus "pandering to Romanian nationalist sentiment." The moral waters thus continue to be muddied in the very heart of the region most affected by the Holocaust.

The clear conclusion of this important book is that we cannot allow the most shameful stain in human history to be forgotten, distorted, or desecrated in any way.

