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Negationism, Antisemitism, and Anti-Zionism

Already in 1971, the French philosopher, Vladimir Jankélévitch, had predicted the increasingly ominous connection between Israel, antisemitism, and the Shoah, which has come to haunt the contemporary European mind. He remarked on the extraordinary shadow which the Holocaust had cast over the events of the Second World War and modernity as a whole—a kind of invisible cloud of remorse. This was the “shameful secret” (“ce secret honteux”) behind the apparent “bonne conscience contemporaine”—the hidden anxiety which seized so many Europeans at their belated realization of the enormity of the crime in which they were so deeply implicated.

How then could one be freed from such a terrible incubus? Jankélévitch suggested that “anti-Zionism” was likely to provide the providential and unexpected opportunity for much-needed relief: for it offered the freedom, the right, and perhaps even the duty to be “antisemitic” in the name of democracy!¹ Anti-Zionism would become the new “justifiable” and democratized antisemitism of the future, finally placed within the reach of Mr. and Mrs. Everyman. And what if the Jews themselves were no better than Nazis? Why, that would be just wonderful. One would no longer have to feel sorry for them—after all, “they would have deserved their fate.” What better alibi could there be for forgetting the unspeakable crime or diluting European responsibilities and thinking about happier things?

Today, of course, such observations come more naturally and may even seem self-evident, though they were much less clear at the time. At least some of the new European Judeophobia functions psychologically as a kind of overcompensation mechanism for discharging latent and often unavowed guilt feelings about the Jews. In fact, by branding Israel as a Nazi State, one is killing two birds with one stone. One may point the finger at the erstwhile victims who are no better than “we, Europeans” (in fact they are worse, since they did not try to learn from their history); and one is free to express in a “politically correct” anti-Zionist language those sentiments which are no longer respectable among educated people—namely dislike of Jews. The Star of David is thereby visually metamorphosed into the swastika, the victims mutate into perpetrators and

Jews (or others) who defend the “Nazi” State of Israel can expect to be vilified as “racists,” “fascists,” and “ethnic cleansers.” Indeed, in many European countries, it is becoming increasingly difficult to even discuss the Shoah without balancing it by appropriate references to Palestine, intended to offset the horrors of Nazi Germany with those of the Palestinian naqba (catastrophe) since 1948.²

For several decades now, the Shoah has ceased to be a taboo subject. On the contrary, it is at the heart of contemporary Western consciousness—a subject of constant interdisciplinary research and media interest—integral to the culture, pedagogy, and politics of the new Europe.³ Yet this preoccupation (which has at times assumed an obsessive quality) also has its perverse side effects. The most obvious perversion is of course, straightforward Holocaust denial. I mean the surrealist claim that there was no “extermination” of the Jews, that there were no gas chambers, that the Jews and/or Zionists (with some help from the Western Allies or the Communists) simply invented the “hoax of the century.” As Alain Finkielkraut once put it, the classical antisemites screamed: “À mort les Juifs” (Death to the Jews) but the Holocaust deniers added something new—“Les Juifs ne sont pas morts” (the Jews did not die).⁴ This was and is a double assassination. It begins with the genocidal antisemitism that produced the mass murder of European Jewry and is followed by the denial that the six million were even here, on our planet, that they ever existed. To quote Per Ahlmark: “First the antisemites take Jewish lives; a few decades later they take their deaths from them too.”⁵

Holocaust denial in its purest sense is precisely this sickening effort of the Jew-haters to destroy memory. Beyond that, by accusing Jews and/or Zionists of “inventing” the Shoah to extract billions of dollars and blackmail postwar Germany or the West, it has added a peculiarly vile conspiracy theory to the arsenal of millennial antisemitism and transformed the victims into superlatively cunning and fraudulent perpetrators. The main purpose of this monstrous perversion has been “to clear Nazism from its criminal stigma and rehabilitate antisemitism.”⁶ Hence this type of denial is primarily an expression of neo-Nazi,

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² A good illustration of this syndrome is Belgium; see Joël Kotek, La Belgique et ses Juifs: De l’antijudaïsme comme code culturel, à l’antisionisme comme religion civique (Les Études du Crif, no. 4, June 2004).
⁴ Alain Finkielkraut, L’avenir d’une negation: Reflexions sur la question du genocide (Paris, 1982).
⁶ Ibid.
Far-right and so-called “revisionist” politics in Europe, North America, and other parts of the world. Let me quote Irwin Cotler on this classic Orwellian cover-up of a true international conspiracy:

[T]he Holocaust denial movement whitewashes the crimes of the Nazis, as it excoriates the crimes of the Jews. It not only holds that the Holocaust was a hoax, but maligns the Jew for fabricating the hoax.⁷

Nowhere has this imposture been more transparent and widespread than among militant Muslims. For example, the present leader of Iran, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, brazenly condemns the “exaggerated statistics on Jewish killings” and emphasizes the close relations between the Zionists and the German Nazis.⁸ The Lebanese Hezbollah, like its Iranian paymasters, sees the “Auschwitz lie” as an integral part of its general delegitimization of Israel and use of antisemitic discourse. Its spiritual leader, the late Sheikh Fadlallah, never tired of referring to the six million victims as a “pure fiction,” a mark of Zionist cunning and rapacity; and a testament to the ability of Jews to squeeze the West and manipulate its guilt feelings, as a result of their stranglehold over the capitalist economy and mass media.⁹ This media control allegedly permits Israel to persecute all those—like the French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy—who dare to challenge its founding myths.¹⁰ Islam and the Palestinians are naturally regarded as the prime victims of the “Zionist” hoax.

The former Mufti of Jerusalem, Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, like not a few Palestinian clerics and intellectuals, eagerly seized on Holocaust denial to assert that the Zionists used this issue “to blackmail the Germans financially” and protect Israel.¹¹ The dark shadow of Shylock is never far from such “revisionist” discourse. As one Palestinian professor at the Islamic University in Gaza City put it a decade ago,

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7 See the comments of Irwin Cotler on this phenomenon, in ibid., 242.
The Jews view it [the Holocaust] as a profitable activity so they inflate the number of victims all the time. As you know, when it comes to economics and investments, the Jews have been very experienced even since the days of *The Merchant of Venice*.¹²

At the same time, while slandering Jews and denying the reality of the Holocaust, some Arab and Muslim commentators have come to stress that Israel—the so-called “heir of Holocaust victims”—has committed far worse crimes than those of the Nazis. At the UN-sponsored Durban Conference of 2001, the decision was even implemented publicly to trivialize the Holocaust by denying its uniqueness and turning it into one of “many holocausts”—ultimately far less important than the Palestinian tragedy.

The growing centrality of Holocaust denial in contemporary Arab discourse was already revealed ten years ago by the Arab forum on historical revisionism that took place in Amman on May 13, 2001—replacing the aborted conference scheduled for Beirut two months earlier.¹³ At this gathering of Arab journalists and members of professional associations opposed to “normalization” with Israel, speakers enthusiastically praised the French “revisionists” Roger Garaudy and Robert Faurisson.¹⁴ They also argued that Zionism was much worse than Nazism, denounced the handful of Arab intellectuals who were critical of Holocaust denial and insisted that “revisionism” was not a reactionary ideology at all but a well-documented research project.¹⁵

The case of Roger Garaudy was particularly significant. As a prominent left-wing French intellectual (originally Catholic, then Stalinist) converted to Islam, he became a culture hero in the Arab world after his trial and conviction in a Paris

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¹³ The driving force behind that aborted conference was Swiss Holocaust denier, Jürgen Graf, founder of The Truth and Justice Association; it was co-sponsored by the California-based Institute of Historical Review—the leading “revisionist” organization in the world. Among those originally scheduled to speak were French deniers Garaudy and Robert Faurisson, and the German neo-Nazi ideologue, Horst Mahler. Lebanese President Rafiq Hariri (murdered by Hezbollah operatives in 2005) cancelled the Conference under intense prodding from the U.S. State Department and an open letter of protest by 14 Arab intellectuals. However, after severe criticism for having conceded too much to the “Zionist” narrative of the Shoah, several of these intellectuals retracted, including Edward Said and Mahmud Darwish.


court in 1998 for antisemitic incitement and *négationisme*.¹⁶ Garaudy’s completely unoriginal thesis that there was no Nazi extermination policy or gas chambers, his charge that Zionists had collaborated with the Nazis, and that Israel fabricated the Holocaust to justify its occupation of Arab lands, has proven to be a source of deep satisfaction for many Arab intellectuals.¹⁷

If such “revisionist” charlatans as Henri Rocques, Wilhelm Stäglich, and Gerd Honsik can be regarded as respectable historians in the Arab world, it is small wonder, that *The Founding Myths of Israeli Politics* struck such a responsive chord among Muslims. Among Garaudy’s most fervent advocates was former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the same cleric who proclaimed on “Jerusalem Day” 2001 in Teheran that “one atomic bomb would wipe out Israel without a trace.”¹⁸ It is, of all-too-revealing of this radical Islamist mind-set that the real Nazi Holocaust should be so vehemently denied by those determined to repeat it.

A discussion eleven years ago on Al-Jazeera TV (15 May 2001) revealed just how widespread such genocidal passions had become.¹⁹ During the debate, Hayat Atiya, the female translator of Garaudy into Arabic, shouted before the cameras (while brandishing the photograph of an Arab child accidentally killed during the intifada):

> Here is the Holocaust.... There is no Jewish Holocaust! There is only one Holocaust, that of the Palestinians!²⁰

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¹⁷ The Arab reaction to Garaudy was overwhelmingly favorable. None of those who protested on his behalf questioned his claim that the Holocaust was a Zionist invention. His supporters included Sheikh Muhammad Al-Tantawi of Al-Azhar University, Rafiq Hariri, former prime minister of Lebanon, Egyptian Nobel Laureate Nadjib Mahfouz, and the famous Arab political commentator Muhammad Hassanin Haikal. The Arab Lawyers Federation and Palestinian Writers Association also wrote protest letters in his favor. For the contrast between the French and Arab reaction, see Mouna Naim, “Critiqué, jugé, sanctionné pour ses theses en France, l’ancien théoricien du PC, Roger Garaudy, est décoré et louangé dans les pays arabes,” *Le Monde*, 1 Mar. 1998.
¹⁸ *Holocaust Denial in the Middle East*, 8–9.
²⁰ Israeli, ibid., 151.
Among the statements appearing on the Al-Jazeera website and announced before the end of the debate was one to the effect that

nothing will dissuade the sons of Zion, whom our God described as descendants of apes and pigs, except a real Holocaust which would exterminate them in a single blow....²¹

At the end of this so-called “debate,” it emerged from an internet survey conducted by the channel that 85% of Arab spectators watching this program believed that Zionism was indeed worse than Nazism.

Arab Holocaust denial, unlike its Western counterparts, is undoubtedly mainstream. In Egyptian government-subsidized newspapers like Al-Akhbar, deniers regularly treat the Holocaust as a “swindle,” already proven by French and British “revisionists” (such as David Irving), while regretting that Hitler did not succeed in carrying it through to completion.²² The deniers endlessly manipulate figures to pretend that there were less than a million Jewish victims all told; that the Jews were a fifth column in Germany, that they were traitors and spies who had in any case to be eliminated; that the Zionists originally inspired Hitler’s racism while deliberately stoking up antisemitism (as stated in the doctoral dissertation of Palestinian leader Abu Mazen).²³ Such a bewildering tissue of contradictions reveals a seemingly boundless abyss of hatred.²⁴

This culture of hatred has carried over into European countries with large Muslim populations, such as France (and to a growing extent Belgium, Holland, Sweden, and Great Britain) where Holocaust denial or relativization fuses all too easily with pro-Palestine, anti-Zionism, and anti-Americanism.²⁵ The situation in French public schools emerged as especially alarming after 2000, with pupils from the Maghreb often rejecting any attempt to teach them about the Shoah. The subject was negatively identified by the young Maghrébins with the established order, with the “Zionist enemy” and the political self-interest of the Jewish community. In this immigrant milieu, far from having a beneficial pedagogical effect,

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²¹ Ibid.
²² Al-Akhbar (Egypt), 29 Apr. 2002; Memri, special report no. 375, 2 May 2002; no. 231, 20 June 2001.
²³ Abu Mazen’s doctoral thesis was defended in Moscow in 1982 and published in Arabic two years later in Amman under the title The Secret Ties between the Nazis and the Leadership of the Zionist Movement; on Abu Mazen’s “moderation,” see Israeli, “L’antisémitisme travesti en antiszionisme,” 165–68.
²⁴ See the column by Rifaat Sayed Ahmed in Al-Lewaa al-Islami (Islamic banner) branding the Holocaust as a Zionist lie to justify the founding of Israel; Jerusalem Post, 5 Aug. 2004, 6.
the very mention of the Holocaust has seemed to elicit violence and threats to exterminate or burn the Jews. The importance given to the subject, if anything, “confirmed” the widespread Muslim belief in a Jewish conspiracy or Jewish control of the Western media. European and French sensitivity to the Shoah is frequently linked by young Muslims to “Jewish money” and the power of the Zionist lobby. Hence the paradox that antisemitism has risen to unprecedented levels in France, Britain, and Europe as a whole (particularly among Muslims but not exclusively by any means) at a time when the Shoah has never been so widely recognized and integrated into cultural consciousness. Surely this fact should inspire greater prudence and soul-searching among those who believe that Holocaust education, in and of itself, can dam up the rising antisemitic wave. On the contrary, I would argue, there is ample evidence that it is currently serving as a potentially dangerous boomerang against Israel and Diaspora Jewry.

If this is increasingly true in the school classroom, it is even more painfully evident at the level of public discourse that invokes the Holocaust for political ends. No doubt some of this malaise has its roots in the earlier postwar years, and in the case of Eastern Europe, it reflects transparent communist manipulations of the national memory.²⁶ All serious debate on the truth of the war years was delayed in the former Soviet bloc until the 1990s. But in the West, Holocaust education and growing interest in the Shoah have been a reality for a considerable period of time. There is no convincing evidence, however, that educating young people about the Shoah will prevent attacks on Jews; or lead to a better world, let alone reduce racism and antisemitism.²⁷

Most dangerous for the future is not only the outright denial of the Holocaust but its relativization and banalization through false analogies, especially with the policies of the Jewish State. Increasingly, we see the bitter fruit of this syndrome across Europe, as well as on other continents. Examples of the “Nazi-Zionist” amalgam abound on the internet, television, radio, in the press and the arts. The instances I will mention are only the tip of a huge iceberg. In April 2002, the pro-Government Center Left Greek publication, Eleftherotypia, featured a caricature of a Nazi soldier, labeled with a Star of David, threatening an Arab, dressed up like a Jewish concentration camp prisoner. The headline read “Holocaust II” and the caption said:

The War machine of Sharon is attempting to carry out a new Holocaust, a new genocide.²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., 45.
²⁸ Eleftherotypia, 1 Apr. 2002.
Such caricatures are frequent in Greece. In Italy, the well-known journalist of the liberal daily *La Stampa*, Barbara Spinelli, wrote in October 2001, that

> there are those, in Israel itself, who suspect that the people of Israel, in order to regenerate itself, wish to attract new pain from future days, while dreaming of a sort of second holocaust.²⁹

In Spain, the leader of the left-wing *Izquierda Unida*, Caspar Llamazares, a confirmed Israel-baiter, declared that his party was fed up with the six million Jews killed during the Holocaust. He ostentatiously announced that his comrades would no longer participate in any homage to their memory.³⁰

The deceased Portuguese Nobel Prize winner, José Saramago, for his part compared Ramallah to Auschwitz while on a visit to Israel several years ago. Writing in the Spanish daily *El País* he subsequently described Israelis as

> educated and trained in the idea that any suffering that has been inflicted, or is being inflicted, or will be inflicted on everyone else, especially the Palestinians, will always be inferior to that which they themselves suffered in the Holocaust. The Jews endlessly scratch their own wound to keep it bleeding, to make it incurable, and they show it to the world as if it were a banner.³¹

In Belgium, a Catholic writer from a prominent family, Simon-Pierre Nothomb, also visited the West Bank and was instantly reminded of Poland during the darkest years of the war; he advised his readers that, when crossing the Gaza Strip, they should think above all of the Warsaw Ghetto. Typically, he asked, how such a talented people like the Jews which had suffered so many atrocities in its history, could accept

> that its government and army inflict today on others, who are not responsible for it, that which they themselves suffered.³²

In France, even the august *Le Monde* could not resist the temptation in May 2002 to publish a caricature showing the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising as identical to Jenin after the Israeli military operation. For many French intelle-

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tuals, especially of the “progressive” persuasion, it goes without saying that the Shoah has to be ritually invoked when denouncing Israel’s allegedly “racist” policies. Hidden behind this obsessive analogy is a barely concealed need to undermine the singularity of the Holocaust and call the Jews to account.³³

In Germany, this preoccupation has been present for several decades, featuring in a long series of debates about antisemitism and the burden of Holocaust memory on postwar German society.³⁴ After the Moelleman and Walser Affairs (post-2000), there was the notorious effort to invert the roles of Jews and Germans made by the Christian Democrat MP, Martin Hohmann. In October 2003 he announced that the Jews, too, were a Tätervolk (a nation of perpetrators) no better than the Nazis themselves.³⁵ In this context, it is worth remembering the cynical observation, made over sixty years ago: “The Germans will never forgive the Jews for Auschwitz.”³⁶

Even in Sweden, a country in the forefront of Holocaust education, there have also been deep ambivalences when it comes to Israel. Swedish Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds saw fit to castigate Israelis, accusing them of behaving like Nazis towards the Palestinians before and after an unofficial visit to Yad Vashem in June 2004. If Israeli Jews are assumed to resemble “Nazis,” even at the higher levels of European diplomacy, then one can only conclude that Holocaust education has failed miserably, even among a part of Europe’s educated elites.³⁷

Much the same could be said about Great Britain, where Holocaust education in the past ten years made considerable progress, almost in tandem with Israel-bashing and the emergence of a new form of Judeophobia. Thus the Irish poet and Oxford University professor, Tom Paulin, angrily linked the Israel Defence Forces with the SS, the most brutal of Hitler’s executioners—and continued to be host of a BBC arts program.³⁸ Prominent journalists like A. N. Wilson, Brian Sewell, and Richard Ingrams have also made similarly despicable comparisons with very little opposition. As elsewhere in Western Europe, it is no longer possi-

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36 Henryk Broder, Der ewige Antisemit (Frankfurt a.M., 1987). The remark was originally made by an Israeli psychologist, Zvi Rex, many years earlier.
ble to discuss the Arab-Israeli conflict without invoking the spectre and vocabulary of Auschwitz—only this time it is Jews who are depicted as the perpetrators of genocidal crimes.³⁹ Thus, the notion that the “Zionist State” is a mirror image of Nazism or else a racist “apartheid” state is unabashedly mainstream at many British universities.⁴⁰ So, too, illustrations that could have been lifted from Der Stürmer have surfaced at times in respectable British newspapers and periodicals, like The Independent or the New Statesman.

This is not, of course, the crassly antisemitic Holocaust denial of the Arab world, of the neo-Nazis, or radical right-wing extremists in Europe and America. Such Holocaust “inversion” which has reopened so many unhealed wounds, originates in a “post-national” Europe that outwardly, at least, repudiates the Nazi legacy, deplores all forms of racist antisemitism, warmongering, empire, and power politics.⁴¹ For this new Europe which has become so fervently anti-Israel, the Holocaust is the direct antithesis of its pluralist, democratic credo currently rooted in the civic religion of human rights. The contemporary European “consensus” attacks Zionism in the name of universal humanity and the rights of the “Other,” which by some strange twist of history, appears to have become exclusively Muslim and Palestinian. If, however, the Palestinian “other” is assumed to be the absolute victim of injustice, then Israel, too, must logically be the absolute perpetrator, the ultimate configuration of evil—literally a “Nazified” State.

This is a much more subtle form of lying about the Holocaust. It has no resemblance to the visions of blackshirted skinheads in jackboots yelling “Sieg Heil!” The future of antisemitism does not belong to them but to militant Muslim immigrants and their “progressive” allies who have constructed a Manichean universe where Jews who defend Israel find themselves beyond the pale. Indeed, “Zionists” have been demonized and turned into “enemies of humanity,” the embodiment of racism, the lackeys of a criminal State. The painful truth is that antisemitism is back despite decades of Holocaust education, interfaith dialogue, memorials, films, and university courses; despite the Stockholm Conference of 27 January 2000, and the creation of national Holocaust Memorial Days across the civilized world.⁴² The antisemitic sickness has returned to haunt us and we have as yet no

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⁴⁰ Ibid., 17.
obvious antidote, except the stubborn if problematic hope that eventually truth, honesty and rationality will prevail over the would-be falsifiers of history.