

Word crimes: reclaiming the language of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Holocaust inversion

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Published version

KLAFF, Lesley (2019). Word crimes: reclaiming the language of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Holocaust inversion. *Israel studies*, 24 (2), 73-90.

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Word Crimes against the State of Israel and the Jews: Holocaust Inversion and the British Context.

Lesley Klaff

The word 'Holocaust,' which literally means "a complete burned sacrifice", has been the principal English language referent to the systematic Nazi mass murder of European Jews since 1957. This was influenced by Yad Vashem's¹ adoption of the word as the English translation for *shoah* in the same year. Prior to that, the word *shoah* at Yad Vashem had usually been translated into English as "Disaster", "the Great Disaster," "the Destruction Period", and "the European Catastrophe."² The word 'Holocaust' as the dominant referent to the Nazi genocide of Jews is said to have entered mainstream American and British public discourse as a result of the Eichmann capture in 1960 and his trial in 1961; and the acceptance of the word as *the* appellation for the Nazi persecution and mass murder was hastened by the writer Elie Wiesel who also disseminated the term. In Israeli official and academic circles, however, the word *shoah* remained dominant and the word "Shoah" with a capital 'S' has been used in English speaking circles since the early 1990s as an alternative to, or as a synonym for, "Holocaust."

Despite its acceptance in the English speaking world as the principal referent to the Nazi mass murders, the meaning of the word "Holocaust" varies according to whether or not it refers to non-Jewish death as well as Jewish death during the Hitler period, and according to when the Holocaust is said to have begun. For example, President Carter's 1979 Executive Order which created the United States Holocaust Memorial Council defined "the Holocaust" as the "...extermination of six million Jews and some five million other peoples...."³ Today, the United States Holocaust

¹ Yad Vashem was established in Jerusalem in 1953 as the World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

² These translations appeared in several issues of the Yad Vashem publications, *Yediot* and *Yad Vashem Bulletin*.

³ This definition of the term, known as the Carter-Wiesenthal definition, was not welcomed by American Jews on the grounds that it was too broad. They feared that the destruction of European Jews could easily be obscured if "the Holocaust" was used to refer to non-Jews as well.

Memorial Museum follows a version of this definition and defines “the Holocaust” as the “murder of six million Jews and millions of non-Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators during World War II.”⁴ Britain’s National Holocaust Museum and Centre in Nottinghamshire does not offer a definition but seeks to separate the Nazi Judeocide from non-Jewish death during the Hitler period by describing itself as offering “Exhibitions exploring the history of the Jewish Holocaust and other 20th-century genocides.”⁵ The online *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines “Holocaust” as “the 12 years (1933 – 45) of Nazi persecution of Jews and other minorities....climax[ing] in the ‘final solution’.”⁶ The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (2007) defines Holocaust as “The (period of the) mass murder of Jews (or transf. of other groups)....1939 – 1945.”⁷ *The American Heritage College Dictionary* (1997) defines “Holocaust” as “The genocide of Jews, Gypsies, and others by the Nazis during World War II.”⁸ *The Oxford Modern English Dictionary* (1996) defines “Holocaust” as “[T]he mass murder of the Jews by the Nazis 1941 – 1945.”⁹ *The Random House Webster’s College Dictionary* (2000) gives a narrow but not uncommon meaning of “Holocaust” as the systematic mass slaughter of European Jews in Nazi concentration camps during World War II.”¹⁰ This definition places a significant portion of Jewish death by the Nazis outside the term’s boundaries. Finally, it’s worth noting the broad description of the Holocaust in the *Chambers Dictionary of World History*: “The attempt by Nazi Germany to destroy systematically European Jews. From the inception of the Nazi regime in 1933, Jews were deprived of their civil rights, persecuted, physically attacked, imprisoned, pressurized to emigrate, and murdered. With the gradual conquest of Europe by Germany, the death toll increased, and a meeting at Wannsee (Jan 1942) made plans for the so-called ‘final solution.’ Jews were herded into concentration camps, slave labour camps, and extermination camps. By the end of World War II in 1945, more than 6 million Jews had been murdered out of a total Jewish population of 8 million in

⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, <https://www.ushmm.org> (accessed June 24, 2018).

⁵ The National Holocaust Centre and Museum, <https://www.holocaust.org.uk> (accessed June 24, 2018).

⁶ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com> (accessed June 24, 2018).

⁷ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)

⁸ *The American Heritage College Dictionary* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

⁹ *The Oxford Modern English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1996).

¹⁰ *The Random House Webster’s College Dictionary* (New York: Random House 2000).

those countries occupied by the Nazis. Of these the largest number, 3 million, were from Poland. Other minorities (gypsies, various religious sects, homosexuals) and millions of Soviet prisoners were also subject to Nazi atrocities, but the major genocide was against the Jewish people.”¹¹ This is a broad description because it includes within the boundaries of the term “Holocaust” all the Nazi Government’s antisemitic actions from 1933 and all non-Jewish death during the Hitler period. It can be seen that the two variants are which groups were murdered, and when the persecution began. Despite their variation, all these definitions employ “the Holocaust” as a referent to the fate of the Jews in Nazi-dominated Europe.

The word “holocaust” with a small ‘h’ had a significant secular history prior to its employment as a referent to the European Jewish tragedy of the Hitler period.¹² In fact, as Jon Petrie has shown, it was in broad secular use up until 1959.¹³ Today, it has been revived in political debates concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is used to describe Israel’s behaviour towards, and treatment of, the Palestinians. This is problematic because, as Petrie argues, “the name given to an event together with the understanding of that name significantly effects the perception and understanding of that event”¹⁴ and “[T]he employment of “holocaust” with non-Nazi referents is of concern to those with some investment in guarding and perpetuating the memory of the Jewish slaughter of the Hitler period.”¹⁵ In other words, by comparing Israel’s behaviour towards the Palestinians with that of the Nazis towards the Jews, any wrongdoing on the part of Israel is magnified and exaggerated and the crimes and atrocities the Nazis inflicted on the Jews are diminished. The rest of this article will consider the contemporary use of the Holocaust as a means to criticise Israel and “the Jews” in political debates concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with particular reference to Britain.

¹¹ Bruce P Lenman and Trevor Anderson, eds. *Chambers Dictionary of World History* (Chambers: Edinburgh 2004): 373.

¹² The word ‘holocaust’ with a small ‘h’ was also used to denote Jewish persecution and death between 1919 and 1949.

¹³ Jon Petrie, “The secular word HOLOCAUST: scholarly myths, history, and 20th century meanings,” *Journal of Genocide Research* (2000): 2(1), 31-63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

The practice of using the Holocaust as a means to criticise Israel and “the Jews” in political debates concerning the Israel-Palestinian conflict is known as ‘Holocaust Inversion’¹⁶ and is so prevalent that it is regarded as the ‘new’ trope¹⁷ of the ‘new’ or ‘contemporary’ antisemitism.¹⁸ Holocaust inversion actually involves two distinct but closely associated tropes, which may or may not appear together. These are an ‘inversion of reality’, whereby the Israelis are cast as the ‘new’ Nazis and the Palestinians are cast as the ‘new’ Jews, and an ‘inversion of morality’, whereby the Holocaust is presented as a ‘moral lesson’ for, or a ‘moral indictment’ of, “the Jews.”¹⁹ A good illustration of Holocaust inversion involving both tropes may be found in the 2013 statement of former British Liberal-Democrat MP, David Ward, who said:

Having visited Auschwitz twice, once with my family and once with local schools – I am saddened that the Jews, who suffered unbelievable levels of persecution during the Holocaust, could within a few years of liberation from the death camps, be inflicting atrocities on the Palestinians in the new state of Israel and continue to do so on a daily basis in the West Bank and Gaza.²⁰

In terms of what Petrie has said about how the name given to an event affects our perception and understanding of that event, the claim that Israel is inflicting a kind of Holocaust on the Palestinians implicitly involves the accusation that Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians. As the late sociologist Robert Fine and his co-author, sociologist Philip Spencer note, this is a shocking accusation to make against Israel, a country whose very existence became so

¹⁶ Manfred Gerstenfeld, *The Abuse of Holocaust Memory: Distortions and Responses* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, Anti-Defamation League, 2009): 101 – 113.

¹⁷ Anthony Julius defines “trope” as “a taken-for-granted-utterance, a figure and metaphor through which a more general position is intimated, without ever being argued for.” Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 64.

¹⁸ The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism (2016) lists “drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis” as a contemporary manifestation of antisemitism, https://holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/press_release_document_antisemitism.pdf (accessed June 24, 2018).

¹⁹ Lesley Klaff, “Political and Legal Judgment: Misuses of the Holocaust in the UK,” *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism* 5, no. 1 (June 2013): 45 – 61.

²⁰ Ben Quinn, “Lib Dem MP David Ward defends remark about Israel,” *The Guardian*, 25 January 2013, <https://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2013/Jan/25/lib-dem-david-ward> (accessed June 24, 2018.)

compelling precisely because of the genocide that was perpetuated against the Jews.²¹ The accusation, moreover, does not stand up to analytical scrutiny.²² To justify it, it would have to be shown that Israel's treatment of the Palestinians satisfies the criteria for genocide specified in the 1948 Geneva Convention. Specifically, it would have to be shown that the Palestinian people have been destroyed as a group, in whole or in part, and that Israel has shown an intent to commit genocide through measures designed to expel Palestinians, prevent Palestinian births, transfer Palestinian children to Israeli families and destroy Palestinian culture.²³ Fine and Spencer argue that this cannot be shown even in relation to Operation Protective Edge 2014, when over 2000 Palestinian combatants and civilians were killed.²⁴ Yet it was in relation to that particular 50-day conflict that the practice of Holocaust inversion reached a record high in Britain. The Community Security Trust, a charity that protects British Jews from antisemitism and related threats, recorded 101 explicit references to the Holocaust for the month of July 2014 alone, the majority of which were an attempt to equate Israel's military actions in Gaza with the crimes of the Nazis.²⁵ At one anti-Israel demonstration in London, well-spoken, apparently middle class protestors were comfortable expressing the following sentiments to the camera: "I'm not condoning Hitler's actions at all, but I think it's even worse perhaps;" "Hitler probably had more mercy;" "If you look at the Warsaw ghetto, this is identical;" "What they are doing is no different."²⁶ An analysis of antisemitic discourse on twitter undertaken by Lancaster University's Corpus Approach to Social Sciences Unit for the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism 2015, found that the 346 tweets that

²¹ Robert Fine and Philip Spencer, *Antisemitism and the Left: On the Return of the Jewish Question* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017): 113.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid; Philip Spencer, "The Left, Radical Antisemitism, and the Problem of Genocide," *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism*, 2 (2010): 501 – 519.

²⁵ Michael Gove, "We need action – now more than ever," *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 September 2014, 52.

²⁶ Ben Gidley, *50 Days in the Summer: Gaza, Political Protest and Antisemitism in the UK: A sub-report for the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism 2015*, <https://www.antisemitism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BenGidley50daysinthsummerAPPGAAsubreport-1.pdf> (accessed June 24, 2018).

mentioned 'Israel' or 'Gaza' for the month of July 2014 also invoked 'Hitler,' 'Nazis,' or 'Holocaust.'²⁷ It appears that the use of the Holocaust as a means to criticise Israel by equating it with Nazi Germany has become a "reflex" among anti-Zionists in Britain.²⁸

In terms of why there is apparently such *unthinking* use of the Holocaust to criticise Israel among British anti-Zionists, academic Ben Gidley has suggested that it might be because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is hugely over-represented in the British media when compared to other conflicts around the world. This frames Israel as "exceptional in the minds of the protestors" and inculcates the perception that "allows the obscenity of the Holocaust to go unnoticed."²⁹ For instance, *The Guardian* published 351 articles on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2014, a conflict that cost 2,200 lives for that year, but only 190 on Syria with its death toll of 76,021 for that year. The war in the Ukraine resulted in less than a quarter of the coverage given to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict despite its being responsible for over twice the number of deaths. Indeed, the late distinguished historian Robert Wistrich wrote about the role of the British media in legitimating the anti-Zionist narrative, and noted in particular the long-standing bias in BBC reporting and commentary about Israel, and the double-standards that have long been a defining characteristic of its Middle East coverage.³⁰

It is possible that Holocaust inversion has found a welcome home in the anti-Zionist narrative in Britain for two reasons. First, it is but a variant of the "persecuted Jews become the persecutors" trope, which was popularised by the Bishop of Norwich in 12th century England and continues to inform contemporary discourse on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, the academic and anti-Zionist Jacqueline Rose argued in 2009 that Israel's "brutal treatment" of the

²⁷ Paul Iganski, Mark McGlashan and Abe Sweiry, "The Spectre of Nazism Haunts Social Media," *LancsLaw*, the official blog of Lancaster University Law School, 2015, <https://lancslaw.wordpress.com/2015/02/12/the-spectre-of-nazism-haunts-social-media/> (accessed June 24, 2018).

²⁸ Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora*, 507.

²⁹ Gidley, *50 Days in the Summer*.

³⁰ Manfred Gerstenfeld, "Antisemitism Embedded in British Culture: An Interview with Robert Solomon Wistrich," *Post-Holocaust and Anti-Semitism* 70 (1 July 2008); Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House 2010): 386

Palestinians is the result of a deep, collective, long term historical trauma that reached its climax in the Holocaust.³¹ And second, Holocaust inversion has a British provenance.

In fact, the phenomenon has its historical roots in the British Foreign Office during the Mandate in Palestine. It started with the claim that Zionism is the avatar of Nazism and this can be seen most strikingly in the attitude of Sir John Bagot Glubb, the British Commander of the Jordanian Arab Legion during the War of Independence and a long-established player in the region. Believing that the creation of Israel was a dreadful injustice to the Palestinian Arabs, and an antisemite who considered Jews to be “unlikeable,” “aggressive,” “stiff-necked,” “vengeful” and “imbued with the idea of [being] a superior race,” he promulgated the idea that the Jews had anticipated Hitler’s master race theory.³² In a July 1946 memorandum to the British Government, he wrote that the “new Jews” in Palestine had copied Nazi techniques, embracing “the theories of race, blood and soil, the terrorism of the gun man, the inculcation of hate into the young, and the youth movements.”³³ “The young Jew of Palestine,” Glubb informed the British Government, was “as hard, as narrow, as fanatical, and as bitter as the Hitler youth on whom he is modelled,” and described Zionism as a form of “Jewish Nazism.”³⁴ His claims were bolstered by other high ranking officials in the Palestine administration, such as Lord Altrincham, who claimed that the Zionist youth movements were a copy of the Hitler youth, and Sir Harold MacMichael and Sir Edward Grigg who “unabashedly compared Zionism with Nazism, even as the Jews were being mass murdered by the Germans across Europe.”³⁵ Further, in March 1945, the High Commissioner for Palestine, Lord Gort, informed the Colonial Secretary in London that “the establishment of any Jewish State in Palestine in the immediate future will almost inevitably mean the rebirth of National Socialism in some guise” and cautioned the British Government against agreeing too quickly “to any solution which might perpetuate in the

³¹ Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion* (Princeton University Press, 2015); Shalom Lappin, “Therapists to the Jews: Psychologising the ‘Jewish Question’,” <https://engageonline.wordpress.com/2009/05/18/shalom-lappin-therapists-to-the-jews-psychologising-the-jewish-question> (accessed June 24, 2018.)

³² Manfred Gerstenfeld, “Antisemitism Embedded.”

³³ Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession*, 377.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 375.

Middle East the fascist ideals we have fought so hard to eradicate.”³⁶ These attitudes reflected the British Government’s policy of blocking Jewish immigration to Palestine between 1945 and 1948.³⁷ The policy was driven not only by realpolitik and imperial strategy, but also by anti-Jewish and anti-Zionist sentiment, which could be found throughout the mandate years among many military, colonial, and Foreign Office personnel, such as the governor of Jerusalem, Sir Ronald Storrs, who objected to “Arab soil” being treated as an “involuntary dumping ground for people unacceptable elsewhere.”³⁸

Had the practice of equating Zionism with Nazism remained within the British Foreign Office during the mandate years, it might have faded into obscurity along with the mandate functionaries themselves, but it was put on an intellectual footing by the distinguished British historian and Arab protagonist, Arnold J. Toynbee, whose antagonistic stance towards Jews was thematic throughout his work.³⁹ Toynbee was an anti-Zionist who thought that Israel was established by force of arms, supported by the guilty West, and at great injustice to the Palestinian Arabs.⁴⁰ He was also an antisemite who believed that the Jews’ ill-repute was not mere libel.⁴¹ He claimed in his monumental *A Study of History* that “[T]he Jews’ immediate reaction to their own experience was to become persecutors in their own turn.”⁴² The Jewish Zionists in Palestine were, he wrote, “disciples of the Nazis,” and were much worse than their Nazi teachers because they had *knowingly* chosen to imitate them.⁴³ He located here the ideological origins of the Holocaust as a ‘moral lesson’ for the Jews rather than a ‘moral wrong’ done to them, for he claimed that, “[T]he lesson they learned was

³⁶ Ibid., 375 – 376.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 374 – 375.

³⁹ Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora*, 412 – 414.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 413.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession*, 377 (emphasis in original.)

not to eschew but to imitate the evil deeds committed by the Nazis against them.”⁴⁴ He also claimed a moral equivalence between Israel’s attitude to the Arabs in 1947 and 1948 and the Holocaust.⁴⁵

Although Toynbee’s account of the Jews received wide condemnation as a historical text, his claim that Zionism is the avatar of Nazism survived and, according to lawyer and writer Anthony Julius, had entered mainstream public opinion in Britain by the 1950s. By the 1980s, the Soviet Union led the global campaign to equate Zionism with Nazism and the trope gradually became an integral part of the cultural code of many left and liberal circles in the West.⁴⁶ Today, however, Holocaust inversion is not merely the preserve of many on the left. It has become the principal signifier or reference point of contemporary anti-Zionist discourse,⁴⁷ and is a prominent feature of antisemitic discourse in the Muslim world. Moreover, Toynbee’s claim that the Holocaust was a ‘moral lesson’ for the Jews has been promoted in a more temperate form by prominent academics in the anti-Zionist movement. For instance, Edward Said has suggested that Israelis and Jews should be more compassionate and sensitive in their treatment of the Palestinians because of their own history of persecution and suffering, of death camps and the Holocaust.⁴⁸ Other academics have expressed the view not only that the Holocaust imposes a greater moral responsibility on Israel and the Jews, but have also implied that Israel and the Jews use the Holocaust to evade responsibility for what Israel does.⁴⁹ These views may account for statements like those of John Prescott, Labour Peer in the House of Lords, who during Operation Protective Edge wrote an open editorial in *The Daily Mirror*, a mass circulation newspaper, in which he said, “[W]hat happened to the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis is appalling. But you would think that those atrocities would give Israelis a

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Yaacov Herzog, ed., “The Herzog-Toynbee Debate,” in *A People That Dwells Alone* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975): 21 – 47.

⁴⁶ Robert S. Wistrich, *Anti-Zionism as an Expression of Antisemitism in Recent Years* (Jerusalem: Shazar Library, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1985.)

⁴⁷ Alan Johnson, “Antisemitism in the guise of Anti-Nazism: Holocaust Inversion in the UK during Operation Protective Edge.” Paper delivered at the Anti-Zionism, Antisemitism and the Dynamics of Delegitimization Conference, April 2 – 6, 216, Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, Indiana University, Bloomington.

⁴⁸ Edward Said, *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with Edward Said by David Barsamian* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010): 42.

⁴⁹ Hazem Saghiyah and Saleh Bashir, “Universalizing the Holocaust,” *Palestine-Israel Journal* 5 (3 & 4) (1998).

unique sense of perspective and empathy with victims of the ghetto;”⁵⁰ and of Yasmin Qureshi, Labour MP for Bolton South East, who stated during a House of Commons debate on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in early 2014, “Israel was founded because of what happened to the millions and millions of Jews who suffered genocide. It is quite strange that some of the people who are running the State of Israel seem to be quite complacent and happy to allow the same to happen in Gaza.”⁵¹ In addition to an inversion of morality, both these statements also involve an inversion of reality with Israel characterised as comparable to the Nazis in behaviour, and the Palestinians characterised as comparable to the Jews in victimhood. Comments such as these are perhaps not surprising when one considers the fact that there is a long tradition of left wing political antisemitism in Britain. In fact, the depiction of Zionism as equivalent to Nazism in far-left British circles can be traced back to the Lebanon War 1982 when the hard-left *Labour Herald* newspaper, co-edited by Ken Livingstone, and *The Socialist Review*, a monthly magazine produced by the Socialist Workers’ Party, published cartoons depicting Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin as a Nazi.⁵² In the same year, the Workers’ Revolutionary Party’s publication, *The News Line*, wrote that “the Zionists” were employing “horrendous gas weapons which were once used against the Jewish people by the Nazis” and accused them of trying to carry out a “Final Solution” against four million Palestinians.⁵³ Such uncritical use of the Nazi analogy has been explained by the fact that radical leftists in Britain readily swallowed and reflected the antisemitic motifs from Soviet propaganda and Holocaust inversion was the major Soviet antisemitic trope throughout the 1960s and 1970s.⁵⁴ By the 1980s, when the *Labour Herald*, *The Socialist Review*, and *The News Line* were published, “the Soviet Union stood at

⁵⁰ Daniel Martin, “Lord Prescott accused of ‘trivialising the Holocaust’ after comparing the Gaza Strip to a concentration camp and a ghetto,” <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2711447/John-Prescott-accused-trivialising-Holocaust-comparing-Gaza-Strip-concentrationcamp.html> (accessed June 24, 2018).

⁵¹ Marcus Dysch, “Labour MP Condemned for Gaza-Holocaust Comparison,” *Jewish Chronicle*, 7 February, 2014, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk-news/115471/labour-mp-condemned-gaza-holocaust-comparison> (accessed June 24, 2018.)

⁵² Robert S. Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2012.)

⁵³ Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010): 383.

⁵⁴ Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora*.

the forefront of the global campaign to equate Zionism with Nazism.”⁵⁵ Unfortunately, Soviet antisemitism, along with the Nazi analogy, has re-emerged in the Labour Party under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, which began in September 2015.

The culture of political antisemitism in the Labour Party is currently very strong. On July 16, 2018, the Labour Party’s National Executive Committee (NEC), the large governing body of the party, which is dominated by 41 far-left Momentum members, refused to adopt the full International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) international Working Definition of Antisemitism,⁵⁶ despite its near universal adoption in Britain. Instead, it voted to alter the definition with respect to four of its eleven examples of antisemitism by requiring ‘intent’ in order to establish antisemitism in each of those cases. One of the examples so altered was the one relating to Holocaust inversion, “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”⁵⁷ This meant that, according to the Labour Party’s new 16 point Code of Conduct which incorporated the truncated definition, comparing Israeli policy to that of the Nazis or calling a supporter of Israel a Nazi would only be antisemitic if ‘intent’ could be proved.

The NEC claimed to oppose the IHRA definition with all eleven examples on the grounds that it chills free speech in relation to criticism of Israel and interferes with the Palestinians’ rights to define their own oppression. This is incorrect. The IHRA definition does not prevent criticism of Israel, or criticism of the way in which Israel was founded. It specifically states that “Criticism of Israel similar to that levelled against any other country cannot be regarded as antisemitic.”⁵⁸

Proponents of the IHRA definition believe that the real reason for the NEC’s rejection of the full IHRA definition was to allow Labour Party members to continue to demonise Israel without being

⁵⁵ Robert S. Wistrich, *Anti-Zionism as an Expression of Antisemitism in Recent Years* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Press, 1985): 27.

⁵⁶ The IHRA Working Definition.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* The other three examples that the NEC altered were “Denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination”; “Accusing Jewish citizens of being more loyal to Israel, or to the alleged priorities of Jews worldwide, than to the interests of their own nations”; “Applying double standards by requiring of [Israel] a behaviour not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation.”

⁵⁸ The IHRA Working Definition.

adjudged antisemitic. American reporter James Kirchick echoed this view when he wrote that invalidating rhetoric like comparing Israelis to Nazi Germany as antisemitic is a “supremely cynical attempt to inculcate themselves from the charge of antisemitism after decades of spread it.”⁵⁹ This is because proving ‘antisemitic intent’ is virtually impossible.

The requirement of antisemitic intent contravenes the Macpherson Principle which recognised that racism, including antisemitism, is an objective, external social phenomenon and not just a moral failing on the part of certain people.⁶⁰ This means that antisemitism exists in ways of thinking, discourse, institutions, practices, and politics regardless of subjective intent. The requirement of intent also goes against all anti-racist scholarship.⁶¹ Moreover, Alan Johnson of the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM) has suggested that it is impossible to grasp the discursive context of Holocaust inversion if we insist upon the presence of individual subjectivity, personal motivation and subjective intent. Instead, we should understand the significance of any single piece of discourse as dependent upon (a) its place in the entire discursive structure in which it is embedded and (b) the social and political conjuncture in which it is employed, which also shapes its meaning, emotional colouring, and ‘affective dimension’ and (c) its real-world consequences.⁶²

⁵⁹ James Kirchick, “Britain’s most dangerous export: Corbynism,” *Opinion, Politico*, 7 August, 2018, available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/jeremy-corbyn-left-uk-europe-britains-most-dangerous-export-corbynism> (accessed August 13, 2018). Jeremy Corbyn himself has repeatedly shared platforms with activists who likened Israel to Nazi Germany. The *Mail on Sunday* unearthed a previously unpublicised video showing Corbyn speaking at a pro-Palestine meeting in 2012 which included the reading of a poem that said that “the victims of Auschwitz” were now “the torturers,” see, Simon Walters, Brendan Carlin, & Jonathan Petrie, “Corbyn allegedly called Dame Louise Ellman ‘the Honourable Member for Tel Aviv,’” *MailOnline*, 4 August, 2018, available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6027151/Corbyn-allegedly-called-Dame-Louise-Ellman-Honourable-Member-Tel-Aviv.html> (accessed August 10, 2018).

⁶⁰ William MacPherson, “Report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (London Home Office 1999),” available at: <http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/sli-06.htm> (accessed August 31, 2018.)

⁶¹ David Hirsh, “Stop accusing the Jewish community of conspiring against the left,” *Open Democracy UK*, 9 August, 2018, available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/david-hirsh/stop-accusing-jewish-community-of-conspiring-against-left> (accessed August 10, 2018.)

⁶² Alan Johnson, *Antisemitic anti-Zionism: the root of Labour’s crisis. A submission to the Labour Party inquiry into antisemitism and other forms of racism*, 2.2, (BICOM 2016), available at: <http://www.bicom.org.uk/wp->

Rabbis representing competing varieties of Judaism, the editors of Britain's three rival Jewish newspapers,⁶³ and the three Jewish communal organisations⁶⁴ united to condemn the Labour Party for choosing "to ignore those who understand anti-Semitism best, the Jewish community."⁶⁵ This is because those who raised concerns about antisemitism in the Labour Party were accused of playing the 'antisemitism card' to smear Jeremy Corbyn or to prevent Israel from being criticised.⁶⁶ This amounted to a denial of antisemitism and an accusation of bad faith against the Jewish community. For example, in denunciations reminiscent of Soviet antisemitism, an editorial in Britain's Communist newspaper, *The Morning Star*, on September 5th, 2018, attacked the "Jewish establishment" for allegedly scheming to bring down Corbyn. It stated that "Labour's enemies, including its most embittered fifth column, have tasted blood and won't end their attacks until Corbyn is hung out to dry."⁶⁷ A further example is provided by Mark Serwotka, general secretary of the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) and president of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), who suggested that Israel created the antisemitism row to distract attention from its own atrocities. Speaking at a TUC fringe event organised by the Palestine Solidarity Campaign on 12th September, 2018, he said that "one of the best forms of trying to hide from the atrocities that you are committing is to go on the offensive and actually create a story that does not exist for people on this platform, the trade union movement or, I have to say, for the leader of the Labour Party."⁶⁸

[content/uploads/2016/06/Prof-Alan-Johnson-Chakrabarti-Inquiry-submission-June-2016.pdf](https://www.jns.org/content/uploads/2016/06/Prof-Alan-Johnson-Chakrabarti-Inquiry-submission-June-2016.pdf) (accessed September 7, 2018.)

⁶³ The Jewish Chronicle, Jewish News, and the Jewish Telegraph.

⁶⁴ The Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Jewish Leadership Council, and the Community Security Trust.

⁶⁵ Nick Cohen, "The old left and the new anti-Semitism," *The Spectator*, 8 August, 2018, available at: <https://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2018/08/the-old-left-and-the-new-anti-semitism> (accessed August 13, 2018).

⁶⁶ This practice of antisemitism denial and victim-reversal is referred to as the 'Livingstone Formulation', see, David Hirsh, "Accusations of Malicious Intent in Debates about the Palestine-Israel Conflict and about Antisemitism," *Transversal* 1 (January 2010): 47-77.

⁶⁷ Ben Cohen, "Soviet anti-Semitism in a British guise," *JNS*, 7 September, 2018, available at: <https://www.jns.org/opinion/soviet-anti-semitism-in-a-british-guise/> (accessed September 7, 2018.)

⁶⁸ Benjamin Kentish, "Labour antisemitism row was created by Israel to distract from 'atrocities,' trade union boss suggests," *The Independent*, 14 September, 2018, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-antisemitism-israel-corbyn-mark-serwotka-tuc-trade-union-pcs-a8535986.html> (accessed September 14, 2018.)

Nevertheless, after the antisemitism row threatened to split the party in two, on September 4th, 2018, the Labour Party NEC adopted the IHRA definition with all of its examples. However, it issued a confusing additional statement, referred to as a “clarification” on criticising Israel, which said that, “This does not in any way undermine the freedom of expression on Israel and the Palestinians.”⁶⁹ This has been described as a “proviso,” “caveat,” or “free-speech clause.”⁷⁰ Britain’s Jewish organisations fear that this wording signals that extremist and offensive language will still be permitted;⁷¹ whilst the distinguished scholar, Denis MacEoin, writing for the *Gatestone Institute* believes that the caveat was designed to let anyone accused of biased criticism of Israel wriggle out of demands for their removal from the Labour Party and dismiss all but the most unspeakable forms of antisemitism.⁷² If these observations are correct, this could mean that the use of the Nazi analogy by party members will continue to be tolerated. It does not bode well that British anti-Israel activist, Ewa Jasiewicz who in 2010 sprayed the words “Free Gaza and Palestine” on one of the last surviving walls of the Warsaw ghetto where 92,000 Jews died and 300,000 more were held before being transported to death camps, has been invited to speak at a Momentum event at the Labour Party Conference in September 2018. Other speakers include Jeremy Corbyn and John McDonnell, the Labour Party’s shadow chancellor. Jaziewicz described her act of desecration, which was an attempt to compare contemporary Israeli policy with that of the Nazis, as a “small act of unarmed resistance” against how Israel had “co-opted” the Holocaust to serve “agendas of colonialization and repression.”⁷³

⁶⁹ “Labour adopts antisemitism definition, but guarantees free speech on Israel,” *BICOM* September 5, 2018, available at: <http://www.bicom.org.uk/news/labour-adopts-antisemitism-definition-but-guarantees-free-speech-on-israel> (accessed September 6, 2018.)

⁷⁰ Denis MacEoin, “The British Labour Party’s New Definition of Anti-Semitism,” *Gatestone Institute International Policy Council*, September 6, 2018, available at: <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org.12965/labour-party-antisemitism> (accessed September 6, 2018.)

⁷¹ “Labour adopts antisemitism definition,” *BICOM*.

⁷² Denis MacEoin, “The British Labour Party’s New Definition of Anti-Semitism.”

⁷³ Andrew Gilligan and Anna Gizowska, “Warsaw ghetto vandal to speak at Momentum’s Corbyn festival,” *The Sunday Times*, September 9, 2018, available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/warsaw-ghetto-vandal-to-speak-at-momentums-corbyn-festival-0rr8m7wqb> (accessed September 9, 2018.)

Berenbaum and others have argued that our conscious and unconscious understanding of the term “Holocaust” affects how we understand the Jewish catastrophe⁷⁴ and Petrie has suggested that if this is true, then it follows that changes in the word’s connotation distort the lens and falsify the event.⁷⁵ The deployment of the Holocaust to characterise the Israeli-Palestinian conflict distorts history by trivialising the crimes of the Nazis. Indeed, the acclaimed historian Deborah Lipstadt, author of the 1993 book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, and successful defendant in the 1996 libel suit brought against her and Penguin books by Holocaust denier, David Irving, has coined the neologism “soft-core denial” to explain Holocaust inversion.⁷⁶ This is because the false comparison between Israel and the Nazis “...lessens by a factor of a zillion what the Germans did,” thus whitewashing the crimes of the Nazis and distorting the Holocaust.⁷⁷ In addition, the false comparison between Israel and the Nazis “elevates by a factor of a zillion any wrongdoing Israel might have done [...]”, making Holocaust inversion “a very convenient way of engaging in antisemitism” because it involves “accusing Jews of atrocities.”⁷⁸ Similarly, Robert Wistrich noted that Holocaust inversion is “in practice...the most potent form of contemporary antisemitism” because those who engage in it “exploit the reality that Nazism in the post-war world has become the defining metaphor of absolute evil.”⁷⁹ By associating Zionism with Nazism and Israel with the Third Reich, he explained, they seek to place upon all people nothing less than “a moral obligation to wage war against Israel” as a unique evil.⁸⁰ This makes Holocaust inversion a powerful political tool in the fight to deny Israel’s legitimacy and to justify a one-secular state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and would explain why the trope is so commonplace in contemporary anti-Zionist polemic. Further, the Nazi-Zionist equivalence makes Israel a fitting receptacle for the

⁷⁴ Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know* (Boston: Little, Brown & company, 1993).

⁷⁵ Petrie, “The secular word HOLOCAUST,” 32.

⁷⁶ Jonny Paul, “Holocaust Scholar Warns of New ‘Soft Core’ Denial,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 6 February, 2007.

⁷⁷ Amy Klein, “Denying the deniers: Q & A with Deborah Lipstadt,” *JTA News*, 19 April, 2009,

<https://www.jta.org/news/article/2009/04/19/1000426> (accessed June 24, 2018.)

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Robert S. Wistrich, “Anti-Zionism and Antisemitism,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 16 (3-4) (Fall 2004): 29.

⁸⁰ Ibid

tropes, images and ideas of classical antisemitism:⁸¹ “What the demonised and essentialised ‘Jew’ once was, demonised and essentialised Israel now is: malevolent in its very nature, all-controlling, full of blood lust, and the obstacle to a better, purer, and more spiritual world.”⁸² In fact, Alan Johnson has described the spread of Holocaust inversion as “one of the most dangerous developments in antisemitic anti-Zionism⁸³ in recent times.”⁸⁴ He gave evidence to the *Chakrabarti Inquiry into antisemitism and other forms of racism in the Labour Party* in June 2016 that the Nazi analogy works within “an entire discursive field or set of communications to *renew* the core motif of antisemitism which is that the Jews, conceived collectively, and essentialised, are cast not just as the Other but as malevolent.”⁸⁵ Moreover, this is true regardless of the subjective intentions of the speaker.⁸⁶ This is why the use of the Nazi analogy has also become an essential tool in the strategy of the BDS movement, which is a social movement to exclude Israel (and only Israel) from the academic, cultural, economic, and sporting life of the community of nations. Experienced political BDS activists who are drawn from parts of the far-left and parts of the Islamist movement are embedded within British civil society organisations such as the Churches, universities, trade unions, and the Labour Party. By projecting into British society the notion that the Jewish state is the equivalent of the Nazi state through their BDS campaigns, these political activists effectively demonise Israel in an attempt to justify its exclusion from the world stage. In this way, through the

⁸¹ Robert S. Wistrich, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews and Israel* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2012).

⁸² Alan Johnson, “Denial: Norman Finkelstein and the New Antisemitism,” *Fathom*, August 2018, available at: <http://fathomjournal.org/denial-norman-finkelstein-and-the-new-antisemitism/> (accessed August 31, 2018).

⁸³ “Antisemitic anti-Zionism” is the term used by British writers like Anthony Julius and Alan Johnson to refer to “contemporary antisemitism” or the “new antisemitism,” see, Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora*; Alan Johnson, “The Left and the Jews: Time for a Rethink”, *Fathom*, Autumn 2015, available at: <http://fathomjournal.org/the-left-and-the-jews-time-for-a-rethink/> (accessed June 24, 2018.)

⁸⁴ Alan Johnson, *Antisemitic anti-Zionism: the root of Labour’s crisis. A submission to the Labour Party inquiry into antisemitism and other forms of racism*, 2.3, (BICOM 2016), available at: <http://www.bicom.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Prof-Alan-Johnson-Chakrabarti-Inquiry-submission-June-2016.pdf> (accessed June 24, 2018.)

⁸⁵ Johnson, *Antisemitic anti-Zionism: the root of Labour’s crisis*,” 2.2 (emphasis in original), citing Manfred Gerstenfeld, “Anti-Israelism and Antisemitism: Common Characteristics and Motifs,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 19: 1-2 (Spring 2007).

⁸⁶ Johnson, *Antisemitic anti-Zionism: the root of Labour’s crisis*,” 2.3.

political activism of BDS campaigners, Holocaust inversion reaches the institutions of civil society and has a real-world impact.⁸⁷

It is both curious and tragic that the Holocaust which, as Anthony Julius has noted, should have rebutted once and for all “the anti-Semitic fantasy of malign Jewish power” and “satiated the appetite of the most murderous anti-Semites for Jewish death,” has instead precipitated a new antisemitic trope.⁸⁸ Antisemitism has thus returned in the guise of anti-Nazism.⁸⁹ For Petrie the word “Holocaust” is a subtly distorting lens through which we view the Jewish tragedy and any misrepresentation of the word’s history and connotation also influences its historiography.⁹⁰ modern Jewish history has been rewritten as the Israeli Final Solution to the Palestinian Question.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Alan Johnson, “Why the Nazi Analogy and Holocaust Inversion are Antisemitic,” *Fathom*, August 2018, available at: <http://fathomjournal.org/why-the-nazi-analogy-and-holocaust-inversion-are-antisemitic/> (accessed August 10, 2018.)

⁸⁸ Julius, *Trials*, 64

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 508

⁹⁰ Petrie, “The Secular Word HOLOCAUST,” 32

⁹¹ Alain Finkielkraut, *L’Avenir d’une négation: Reflexion sur la question du génocide* (Paris: Editions du Soleil, 1982.)