

**Robert Wistrich and Holocaust Inversion: the British context**

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## The Robert Wistrich Memorial Lecture 2017

BICSA May 19, 2017.

### ***Robert Wistrich and Holocaust Inversion: The British Context***

Thank you for that wonderful introduction!

It is a great honour to be invited to give the *Robert S. Wistrich Memorial Lecture 2017*, the title of which is *Robert Wistrich and Holocaust Inversion: The British Context* and I should like to thank Dr Clemens Heni and BICSA for the invitation. It is an honour because not only was Robert a friend, an inspiration and a mentor to me personally, but he was regarded as an outstanding historian and the world's foremost authority on antisemitism, and I should like to begin my lecture by reminding everyone of Robert's distinguished career.

Robert's expertise in antisemitism was sought out by think-tanks, Jewish organisations and governments around the world. From 1999 – 2001 he was part of a special Catholic-Jewish Commission tasked with examining the wartime role of Pope Pius XII. He served as a rapporteur on antisemitism for the U.S. State Department, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe (Strasbourg), the United Nations Commission on Antisemitism and Human Rights, and the Human Rights Commission in Geneva.

Robert wrote 30 books and 400 academic articles on antisemitism in 11 different languages, all of which he spoke fluently. Among his most renowned books are *Socialism and the Jews* (1985), which received the American Jewish Committee Award; *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph* (1991), which won the Austrian State Prize for Danubian History and Antisemitism; *The Longest Hatred* (1992), which was awarded the H. H. Wingate Prize for nonfiction in the UK; *Laboratory for World Destruction: Germans and the Jews in Central Europe* (2007), which is a study of the fateful long-term symbiosis between Germans and the Jews in Central Europe that culminated in the Holocaust; *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (2010), which is a monumental and encyclopaedic survey of the history of antisemitism from the first recorded program in 38 B.C.E., and was named *Best Book of the Year* by the *Journal for the Study of Antisemitism*; and *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: the Left, the Jews and Israel* (2012), which is the first study to explore the transformation in attitudes on the Left towards the Jews, Zionism and Israel since the origins of European socialism in the 1840s. Other recent critically acclaimed works include *Hitler and the Holocaust* (2001), which examines Europe's long history of violence against its Jewish populations, and *Holocaust Denial: The Politics of Perfidy* (2012), which analyses different forms of Holocaust denial around the world and its relationship with anti-Zionism. He also edited several volumes including *Nietzsche – Godfather of Fascism* (2002) and his last volume, *Anti-Judaism, Antisemitism and the Delegitimization of Israel* (2016), in which Clemens and I each have a chapter.

These works, and more, illustrate that Robert was a seminal scholar. He backed up his claims with in-depth research and factual support. His writing style was clear and it was able to simplify the complex and centuries-long phenomenon of antisemitism into a narrative and analysis that could be easily understood. Because of these qualities, in 2011 *The Journal for The Study of Antisemitism* declared Robert "the leading scholar in the field of antisemitism study."

Robert also acted as an advisor for a number of documentaries, including the Thames Television 3-part series *The Longest Hatred* in 1993, which provided an historical overview of anti-Jewish persecution, and the BBC's *Blaming the Jews* in 2003, about present-day Muslim antisemitism.

But Robert was not just the world's preeminent scholar of antisemitism; he was also one of the most powerful advocates against it, always unafraid to state his views no matter how unpopular or politically incorrect. He was an eloquent and riveting speaker. He was a wonderful teacher who was dearly loved by his students at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where he held the Neuberger Chair for Modern European History and, from 2002, headed the *Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism*.

Robert died two years ago today, on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015, just as he was about to address the Italian Senate on the rise of antisemitism in Europe. His sudden and untimely death was a tragic loss not only to his family and friends, but to all those who are engaged in efforts to counter resurgent antisemitism. The prodigious body of work he left behind will, however, continue to guide and inspire us, as will the memory of the man himself. Indeed, those of us who knew him personally were fortunate and blessed, for he was a sweet, gentle, modest and kindly man who generously gave of his time and attention, whether we sought his professional advice or his personal companionship.

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Holocaust Inversion, which I defined in my own work as an "inversion of reality" (the Israelis are cast as the "new" Nazis and the Palestinians as the "new" Jews), and an "inversion of morality" (the Holocaust is presented as a "moral lesson" for, or a "moral indictment" of, "the Jews") is a commonly used antisemitic trope in Britain, and I am going to talk about Robert's explanation for its use.

Robert took a particular interest in British antisemitism. In fact, it could be said that he had an intimate understanding of it. This is probably because it was in Britain, where he grew up after having fled Europe with his Polish parents, that he first experienced antisemitism. In an interview in 2007 for a publication called *Covenant*, Robert said, "In the 1950s, [antisemitism in Britain] was a normal part of the landscape. Jews were "bloody foreigners" but I wasn't rattled by it. All the teachers at my grammar school were influenced by anti-Jewish prejudices. So in order to achieve, you had to outperform. I earned my first two degrees at Cambridge, where jokey upper class humour against Jews was part of the scene. My fellow undergraduates knew almost nothing about the history of the Jewish people."

In 'a' 2005 article entitled *Cruel Britannia* and in a 2008 article entitled, *Antisemitism Embedded in British Culture*, Robert claimed that antisemitism, especially of the anti-Zionist variety, enjoys greater prevalence, legitimacy and tolerance in public life in Britain than anywhere else in Western Europe, where it tends to be relegated to the political extremes and to Muslim immigrant communities; and he repeated this claim several times, including in his monumental study of antisemitism, *A Lethal Obsession*. He thought that a major reason for this was that Britain has never had to undergo the kind of soul searching that Germany and France have undergone, where efforts to combat antisemitism have been intimately connected with the memory of the Holocaust that took place on their soil. Other reasons, he thought, include the fact that London has become a world-centre for Muslim antisemitism and the associated demonization of Israel; the infiltration of the British Labour Party and trade unions by Trotskyists; Britain's pioneering position in promoting academic and economic boycotts of Israel; and the long-standing bias in BBC reporting about Israel.

But he stressed that to truly understand the degree of legitimacy that antisemitism presently enjoys in British public discourse, one has to understand its deeper roots in British history. In an interview with the *The Jewish Chronicle* in June 2012, Robert said that what struck him quite forcefully when

researching for his book, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal*, was how much Britain is responsible for its own indigenous antisemitic traditions. Indeed, in *A Lethal Obsession*, he pointed out that England was the first European country to expel its Jewish population in 1290; an expulsion that was preceded by anti-Jewish measures that included torture, expropriation and murder. Robert further reminded us that it was England that established the blood libel in 1144, and that English literature and culture was so drenched in antisemitic stereotypes that they persisted in the literature of authors like Shakespeare, Chaucer and Marlowe after the Jews had been expelled.

Robert cautioned, however, that none of this is to say that British culture is inherently or overwhelmingly hostile to Jews. He noted that Britain was the birthplace of liberalism in its modern political and economic senses, and continues today to be a liberal society with a healthy democracy, a free press, and an independent judiciary dedicated to protecting the civil liberties of all. He also noted that following the readmission of Jews into England by Oliver Cromwell in 1656 and through to the end of World War II, Britain was, relative to the rest of Europe at least, a model of tolerance.

Nevertheless, Robert revealed that Holocaust Inversion has a British provenance. This was quite a disclosure because all other antisemitism scholars have assumed that the trope originates in the Soviet polemics of the 1960s and 70s. Although Robert did acknowledge in his 1984 article, *Anti-Zionism as an Expression of Antisemitism in Recent Years*, that by the 1980s “the Soviet Union stood at the forefront of the global campaign to equate Zionism with Nazism”, his revelation that Holocaust Inversion has a British provenance helps us to understand the trope’s prevalence and tolerance in British public life.

Before continuing with the British historical roots of Holocaust Inversion, let us recall what Robert said about the trope itself. Writing in a 2004 article entitled “Anti-Zionism and Anti-Semitism” for the *Jewish Political Studies Review*, Robert said that Holocaust Inversion was becoming more central to contemporary antisemitism and was, indeed, “in practice ...the most potent form of contemporary antisemitism.” He said that those who engage in Holocaust Inversion “exploit the reality that Nazism in the post-war world has become the defining metaphor of absolute evil” and that by associating Zionism with Nazism and Israel with the Third Reich, seek to place upon all people nothing less than “a moral obligation to wage war against Israel” as a unique evil. In *From Ambivalence to Betrayal*, he explained how the Nazi/Zionist equivalence makes Israel a fitting receptacle for the tropes, images and ideas of classical antisemitism.

As Robert suggested, Holocaust Inversion *is* prevalent and widely tolerated in British public life today. In fact, in 2009 the European Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism noted the “growing normalisation” in Britain of discursive acts “involving the use of Nazi or related terms or symbols” with respect to Jews, Israel and Zionism. And in his 2010 book, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England*, the lawyer, writer and antisemitism scholar, Anthony Julius, noted that Holocaust Inversion has become a “reflex” in Britain.

Holocaust Inversion is commonplace among the British left and Palestine solidarity groups, particularly during periods of conflict in the Middle East. The portrayal of Israelis/Zionists/Jews as Nazis was a prominent feature of protests against the Iraq War, Operation Cast Lead, Operation Pillar of Defence, and more recently, Operation Protective Edge. In one month alone – July 2014 – the Community Security Trust recorded 101 explicit references to the Holocaust, the majority of which were an attempt to equate Israel’s defensive actions in Gaza with the crimes of the Nazis. This amounted to one-third of all the antisemitic incidents recorded for the month of July.

The current British vogue to account for the Israel-Palestinian conflict as a kind of Holocaust with the Israelis/Zionists/Jews portrayed as the “new” Nazis and the Palestinians portrayed as the “new” Jews is not that surprising when one learns about the trope’s British provenance as described by Robert. In *A Lethal Obsession*, he painstakingly traced the Nazism / Zionism comparison to the British Foreign Office during the time of the British Mandate in Palestine. He wrote that two administrators, Sir Harold MacMichael and Sir Edward Grigg “unabashedly compared Zionism with Nazism, even as the Jews were being mass murdered by the Germans across Europe;” and further wrote that in March 1945, the High Commissioner for Palestine, one 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 not to agree too quickly “to any solution which might perpetuate in the Middle East the fascist ideals we have sought so hard to eradicate.”

Such attitudes, wrote Robert, reflected the British Government’s policy of blocking Jewish immigration to Palestine after 1939, and of restricting survivors of the Holocaust from entering Palestine between 1945 and 1948. Robert believed that this policy, though mainly driven by *realpolitik* and imperial strategy, could not plausibly be detached from anti-Jewish sentiment. He explained that the refusal of Palestinian Jewry to conform to certain plans that the British had for them pushed British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, into “overt antisemitism.” Bevin became convinced that “the Jews were organising a world conspiracy against poor old Britain” and as a result from 1947 British policy in Palestine was largely motivated by his “determination to teach the Jews a lesson.” The first U.S. Ambassador to Israel, James G. McDonald, recorded in his diary on 3rd August 1948 that Bevin had a “blazing hatred for the Jews, the Israelis, [and] the Israeli government.” Indeed, British policy was perceived by many in the outside world to be hostile to Israel during the 1948 War of Independence.

It was in this context that another Arabist, Sir John Pasha Glubb, British commander of the Jordanian Arab Legion during the War of Independence, was influential. He was a long-established player in the region and he believed that the creation of Israel was a dreadful injustice to the Arab Palestinians. Described by Robert as “an unabashed anti-Semite” because he thought the Jews were “unlikeable”, “aggressive,” “stiff-necked” “vengeful” and had been “imbued with the idea of [being] a superior race,” he promulgated the claim that the Jews had anticipated Hitler’s master race theory. In a July 1946 memorandum to the British Government, Glubb wrote that the “new Jews” in Palestine had copied Nazi techniques, embracing “the theories of race, blood and soil, the terrorism of the gunman, the inculcation of hate into the young, and the youth movements.” 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 was modelled” and described Zionism as “a combination of Judaism and Nazism.” 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. As Robert wrote in *A Lethal Obsession*, “This would prove to be a libel with a great future ahead of it” not least because the allegation that the Zionists were the disciples of the Nazis was behind the notorious *Zionism Equals Racism* United Nations resolution of 1975.

The functionaries of the British Mandate that I have referred to so far faded into obscurity but a more lasting and damaging advocate of the Zionist/Nazi equivalence was, according to Robert, the distinguished British historian and passionate Arab protagonist, Arnold J. Toynbee, who put the Zionist/Nazi trope on an intellectual footing in the 1950s. Robert wrote in *A Lethal Obsession* that “[H]is monumental *Study in History* indicted the Jewish Zionists in Palestine as ‘disciples of the Nazis’”. Indeed, for Toynbee, Robert continued, the Zionists were *much worse* than their Nazi

teachers because they had *knowingly* chosen “to imitate some of the evil deeds that the Nazis had committed against the Jews.” Hence Toynbee, though professing some perfunctory shock at the extent of the German “apostasy” from the West, concluded that the “Nazi Gentiles’ fall from grace was less tragic than the Zionist Jews’ [fall from grace]”. Toynbee also claimed that the immediate reaction of the Zionists to the “worst atrocities ever suffered by the Jews or any other human beings” had been to let themselves become “persecutors” taking revenge on the Arabs and inflicting upon them similar “wrongs and sufferings.”

Here we see in Toynbee’s work not only Holocaust Inversion as an ‘inversion of reality’ but also the ideological source of Holocaust Inversion as an ‘inversion of morality’. Toynbee was Professor of International History at the London School of Economics, at the University of London and, for a while, at Oxford University, and therefore it is reasonable to assume that he passed on these views to his students, many of whom would go on to occupy positions of authority in politics, government, and business between the 1970s and 2000.

According to Anthony Julius, Toynbee’s account of the Jews has received wide condemnation as a historical text but his claim that Zionism is the avatar of Nazism has both survived and thrived in Britain. It may also be that Toynbee’s claim that the Zionists became the “persecutors” of the Arabs because of the terrible “atrocities” they suffered at the hands of the Nazis found such a welcome home in Britain because it is but a variant of the “persecuted Jews become the persecutors” trope, which was popularised by the Bishop of Norwich in 12<sup>th</sup> century England and which is a view that even today retains its popularity with some anti-Zionists like Jacqueline Rose. Whatever the reason, Holocaust Inversion may be said to have entered main stream public opinion in Britain as early as the 1950s.

Thus far I have adhered to Robert’s researched observations on the origins of Holocaust Inversion and now I should like to draw attention to some contemporary examples of the trope’s occurrence in British public life, and in so doing I am mindful of the extent to which Robert’s work has assisted in understanding why the trope is tolerated in Britain.

I shall first turn to some recent instances of the trope’s use in elite discourse, specifically, among politicians. Writing in his *Cruel Britannia* article, Robert said that antisemitic sentiment and the demonization of Israel is the mainstay of a polite discourse in Britain which permeates the political classes and is not just relegated to the political extremes. So let us now consider some recent instances where Holocaust Inversion was deployed by Members of Parliament to publicly execrate Israel without the relevant party leadership doing anything to discipline the MPs concerned. In each case, the Leadership’s failure to discipline the use of Holocaust Inversion amounts to acquiescence in its use.

Just to provide the context for the instances we are about to consider: the 2006 *Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry into Antisemitism* had recommended that the Government adopt the EUMC Working Definition of Antisemitism, which lists the Nazification of Israel as a manifestation of antisemitism. Although the Government had not adopted the Definition, it was widely assumed that Members of Parliament, and especially the leaders of each political party, were aware of the Report and its recommendations, and that they were also aware of the sensitivity of the British Jewish community to the use of the Nazi/Zionist trope. In fact, the 2009 Report of the European Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism, *Understanding the Nazi Card: Intervening Against Antisemitic Discourse*, which was funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government to examine the consequences of antisemitic discourse, reported that the “Nazification of Israel” has the potential to incite violence against British Jews and

that “the Government and all the main political parties are aware of the problem with the Nazi card.” Furthermore, the Jewish community in Britain, through its communal organisations, had complained to the Party Leaderships that statements which “Nazify” Israel are antisemitic and offensive.

One recent example of Holocaust Inversion by a Member of Parliament which was tolerated by his party leadership involved the former Liberal Democrat MP for Bradford East, David Ward. After signing the Book of Remembrance in the Houses of Parliament on Holocaust Memorial Day in 2013, he 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 Palestinians in the new state of Israel and continue to do so on a daily basis in the West Bank and Gaza.”

This is a typical example of Holocaust Inversion as it is used in Britain, with the Israelis as the ‘new’ Nazis and the Palestinians as the ‘new’ Jews on the one hand, and the Holocaust presented as a ‘moral lesson’ for “the Jews” on the other hand.

Needless to say this statement caused huge offense to Britain’s Jewish community, which was made worse by the fact that Ward made no distinction between Israel and “the Jews,” and by the fact that he chose Holocaust Memorial Day – a day of national mourning for victims of the Shoah – to make his statement. Letters of complaint from the Jewish community poured in to Nick Clegg who was then the Leader of the Liberal Democrat Party and the Deputy Prime Minister in the Coalition Government. These letters pointed out that Ward’s Israel-Jews-Nazi comparison was antisemitic and deeply offensive. They urged the Liberal Democrat Party to remove the Party Whip from Ward, which would have had the effect of either expelling him permanently, or of suspending him temporarily, from the Party. Despite this, the Party Leadership took no action against him; and they did not go on record as to why they chose not to censure him.

Then, amid the continuing furore, and no doubt emboldened by his Party Leadership’s silence, Ward caused further offense to the Jewish community because he insisted on the validity of his comparison. He said:

“Because, don’t forget, long before the death camps were set up, the treatment of the Jews in many of these European countries and of course following 1933, in particular in Nazi Germany, was racist, and directed at the Jewish people. It was very low level or what is regarded as low level cases and [sic] nastiness and harassment to begin with, and then escalated. And when you look at it –wherever it may be – the West Bank, and a declared intent by the Israeli forces to harass, often just annoy Palestinians – in terms of a check point that will be open on certain days, and then it will be open but at a later time, and the next day, it will be open slightly earlier, so you get there and it’s been shut again...really just to harass, in many cases to remove the Palestinians from land, to just give up and move on....”

One can question David Ward’s motivation when he made this comparison. Even if IDF soldiers do deliberately change the opening and closing times of check points in the West Bank in order to harass Palestinians, no matter how wrong that is, there is absolutely no equivalence between that and the ghettos, the labour camps, the starvation, the disease, the denial of paid work, and the Jew-baiting, that occurred in Germany and Eastern Europe between 1933 and the Holocaust. Not only is

there no real equivalence between the two, but there is no moral equivalence either. So what motivates politicians like David Ward?

The fact is that there are powerful trends in Britain today which help shape the political agenda and these make it more likely that certain Members of Parliament will use Holocaust Inversion to demonise Israel.

One powerful trend is to regard the “fight for Palestine” as an affirmation of progressive political values. According to Anthony Julius, this struggle has replaced the “fight for socialism” as a self-standing cause, unrelated to any larger project of human liberation, and even unrelated to any particular politics, and this has made it especially vulnerable to antisemitism. Every act and statement that is hostile to Israel is viewed in a positive light because the Israel-Palestinian conflict is regarded as inherently disproportionate and asymmetrical, with all the force and none of the justice on Israel’s side, and all the justice and none of the force on the Palestinian side. Robert referred to this trend as “The Palestinian Question”, which, he claimed, has gripped Europe. Writing in his essay, *Gaza, Hamas, and the “New” Antisemitism*, which was published in his last edited volume, *Anti-Judaism, Antisemitism, and Delegitimizing Israel* in 2016, he said “‘The Palestinian Question’ has adopted the deceptive mask of a ‘liberation struggle’ for human rights, dignity, and social justice, while at the same time stigmatizing Israel as an apartheid state that is practising genocide against the Palestinians,” and this makes it “the principal vector for expressing resentment and hostility towards Europe’s Jews.”

Another powerful trend in Britain is to be found among many British Muslims. The *2006 All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism* heard evidence that the Israel-Palestinian conflict has fuelled a sense of anger and injustice among many in the British Muslim community, creating a climate that is more hospitable to radical Islamist ideology, which calls for Israel’s destruction. For those sympathetic to this world-view, the Israel-Palestinian conflict is inherently disproportionate.

Several MPs, some of whom I shall refer to in a moment, either share these opinions themselves or are influenced by the fact that they serve large electorates that hold – or are assumed to hold – these views. Specifically, while some British Muslims may not have a strong view on the Israel-Palestinian conflict, it appears that MPs think they do and believe that the electoral impact of Israel’s military operations in Gaza cannot be overestimated.

For example, Sir Bob Russell, who was the Liberal Democrat MP for Colchester until he lost his seat in the 2015 General Election, is a member of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, which advocates a one-state solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict. In July 2013 he used Holocaust Inversion to criticise Israel when he asked the Education Secretary the following question during a debate on the national school curriculum in the House of Commons: “On the assumption that the 20<sup>th</sup> century will include the Holocaust, will he give me an assurance that the life of the Palestinians since 1948 will be given equal attention?”

Yasmin Qureshi, Labour MP for Bolton South-East and currently the Shadow Justice Minister, is a British Muslim who serves a constituency with a large Muslim electorate. In February 2014 she used Holocaust Inversion to criticise Israel when she said during a debate in the House of Commons on the Israel-Palestinian conflict:

“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.”

John Prescott, Labour Peer in the House of Lords and Deputy Prime Minister between 1997 and 2007, while no longer influenced by an electorate, has long been associated with the “fight for Palestine.” On 26th July 2014, during Operation Protective Edge, he wrote an open editorial column in the *The Daily Mirror*, a mass-circulation newspaper, in which he claimed that Israel was “acting as a judge, jury and executioner in the concentration camp that is Gaza” and added:

“What happened to the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis is appalling. But you would think that those atrocities would give Israelis a unique sense of perspective and empathy with victims of the ghetto.”

This column was widely tweeted and could be expected to be received by many of its readers as a factually correct statement.

These powerful trends were at work in the case of David Ward. Not only is he an active member of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign but, until he lost his seat in the 2015 General Election, he served a large Muslim electorate. In fact, it was announced on April 25<sup>th</sup> by a senior party source that Ward had been *reselected* to stand for the same seat in the forthcoming general election because it was thought he would win his seat back because of his popularity with its large Muslim electorate.

A new era might be dawning in the Liberal Democrat Party, however. Immediately following the announcement that Ward had been reselected, and Prime Minister Theresa May’s comment in the House of Commons that people would be “disappointed to see the Liberal Democrats readopt a candidate with a questionable record on antisemitism,” the new leader of the Liberal Democrat Party, Tim Farron, dismissed Ward from the Party. Farron said: “I believe in a politics that is open, tolerant and united. David Ward is unfit to represent the party and I have sacked him.... Let me be clear, I won’t tolerate antisemitism in my party.” Tim Farron seems to be serious about this. Just the day before, on 24<sup>th</sup> April, he suspended the Luton South parliamentary candidate, one Ashuk Ahmed, over a series of social media posts that were antisemitic. These included Holocaust Inversion.

It must be remembered that these politicians are in a minority in Parliament. There are many politicians who identify as Friends of Israel in all the major political parties. There are well-established Friends of Israel associations in each of the major political parties which have existed since Israel’s inception.

In his *Cruel Britannia* article, and in *A Lethal Obsession*, Robert wrote that antisemitic sentiment in the guise of anti-Zionist rhetoric has also gained legitimacy in British civic discourse. It might be instructive, then, to consider the use of Holocaust Inversion, and the extent to which it is tolerated, at public demonstrations against Israel. I shall focus on the use of Holocaust Inversion by the public during Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014.

According to academic Ben Gidley, examples of Holocaust Inversion at anti-Israel demonstrations in London in July 2014 included placards that read: “Stop the Palestinian Holocaust now – Fascist Israel will not escape justice;” “Rabid evil mass murders Hitlers clone;” “Genocide Apartheid Holocaust 2014”; and “Bush and Blair are our Adolf Hitler’s and Gaza is our Auschwitz.”

Some protestors passively tolerated these incendiary placards, while others marched behind them or demonstrated alongside them, which could be said to be active acts of endorsement. The police also tolerated these placards. The 2015 Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism found that “banners and placards equating Israel with Nazi Germany ... were said to have been paraded without police interruption.” This is despite the fact that the College of Policing follows *Hate Crime Operational Guidance* that has incorporated what was formerly the EUMC and is

now the IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism. Also, some of these placards could constitute public order offences and yet the police stood by and did nothing.

Gidley reported that at one anti-Israel demonstration, well-spoken, seemingly 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".

During an anti-Israel demonstration in London on July 11<sup>th</sup> 2014, a demonstrator drew a lot of media interest because he wore a T-shirt with the words, "Auschwitz, Iraq, Dachau, Palestine," and carried a placard opposing the "Holocaust of Gaza". He was a demonstrator of the far-right, as it happens, rather than the far left, but he still drew no condemnation.

Other examples of Holocaust Inversion discourse included depictions of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as Adolf Hitler, of Gaza as the "real Holocaust" or as "our Auschwitz", of the Star of David equated with, or morphing into, the Swastika, and of placards stating "Hitler would have been proud."

The Community Security Trust reported that a letter was sent to an Israeli organisation in London which said "You loathsome killers, murdering bastards; you perpetrators of infanticide. Hope you ISRAELI NAZI WAR CRIMINALS all go to Hell when you die, you rotten to the core modern day NAZI JEWS". Several synagogues in Birmingham, Liverpool and London received an anonymous letter that read: "Israeli-Nazis have turned Gaza into a modern Auschwitz and are now annihilating its civilians without remorse." The letter also contained a Swastika inside a Star of David.

Social media was another platform for Holocaust Inversion during Operation Protective Edge. Two academics from Lancaster University's Corpus Approach to Social Sciences Unit, Paul Iganski and Abe Sweiry, analysed antisemitic discourse on Twitter during the conflict for the 2015 All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism. They worked with 22 million Tweets and analysed a sub-sample of 38,460 containing the words 'Israel' or 'Gaza', along with the words 'Jews' , 'Jew' or 'Jewish'. They found that 346 Tweets that mentioned Israel or Gaza in their corpus for the month of July 2014 also invoked Hitler, Nazis or the Holocaust. They concluded from these findings that Holocaust Inversion is moving closer to the centre of contemporary antisemitic discourse in Britain.

Indeed, Holocaust Inversion appears to be a prevalent feature of the anti-Zionist rhetoric on many university campuses. To give an example, I (along with a colleague), on behalf of UK Lawyers for Israel, recently assisted a student in bringing an antisemitism complaint against my university. The student alleged that the university tolerated criticism of Israel on campus that crossed the line from legitimate criticism into antisemitism and harassment, and pointed to social media activity by the university's Palestine Society which went beyond the right to free speech and created a hostile environment for him. What is interesting for our purposes is that much of the social media activity complained of – and there was an evidence file spanning 154 pages - consisted of Holocaust Inversion. Here are a few examples taken from the file:

A Facebook post showing a photograph of a line of people queuing between the security wall and a barbed-wire fence, with the caption "21<sup>st</sup> Century concentration camp? No just Palestinians coming home from their Israeli slave jobs"; A Tweet comparing Bethlehem to the Warsaw Ghetto; A Tweet saying "Operation Ethnic Cleansing: #OperationNameSuggestionsForIsrael;" A Tweet showing a black and white photograph of 10 men facing a wall with their hands in the air, with the caption "Is this image from the Holocaust? No, it's 1948 Palestine and Hamas didn't exist then;" A post quoting a

South African writer who draws comparisons between the situation in Palestine and the death camps at Auschwitz and Dachau, and who says “Even if Israel has not embarked upon a genocide of the same magnitude as the Holocaust, the ethnic cleansing it is inflicting on the Palestinians is morally equivalent to a slower and smaller-scale version of the death camps...”; a Tweet providing a link to an interview in which Zionists are compared to “Nazi criminals”; and so on. The university dismissed the student’s complaint but it was, I am pleased to say, upheld on appeal to an independent body called The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education.

In terms of why there is such apparently *unthinking* use of Holocaust Inversion in Britain, Gidley has suggested that it might be because the Israel/Palestinian conflict is hugely over-represented in the British media when compared to other conflicts around the world and that this frames Israel as “exceptional in the imagination of protestors”. This in turn inculcates a perception that “allows the obscenity of the Holocaust comparison to go unnoticed”. For example, *The Guardian* published 351 articles on the Israel-Palestinian conflict in 2014, a conflict that cost 2,200 lives that year, but only 190 on Syria with its death toll of 76,021 that year. The war in the Ukraine resulted in less than a quarter of the coverage given to the Israel-Palestinian conflict in *The Guardian* in 2014 despite its being responsible for over twice the number of deaths. In fact, Robert wrote about the role of the British media in promoting anti-Israelism in British society. In “Antisemitism Embedded in British Culture” and in *A Lethal Obsession*, he claimed that the British media are leaders in the field of legitimating the anti-Zionist narrative. He 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.

The Nazi/Zionist trope also compounds two additional tropes: that the Zionists and Nazis share the same fascist ideology, and that the Zionists are said to have been complicit with the Nazis in the Holocaust. Robert wrote about the British far-left’s insistence that the Zionists collaborated with the Nazis in his 1984 article, “Anti-Zionism as an Expression of Antisemitism in Recent Years”, his 2008 article, “Antisemitism Embedded in British culture”, his 2010 book, *A Lethal Obsession*, and his 2012 book, *From Ambivalence to Betrayal*.

In his article “Anti-Zionism as an Expression of Antisemitism in Recent Years”, Robert said that by the 1980s “the Soviet Union stood at the forefront of the global campaign to equate Zionism with Nazism” and that the willingness of supposedly anti-Soviet radical leftists to swallow Soviet anti-Zionist fabrications ensured that a demonising anti-Zionism became “an integral part of the cultural code of many Leftist and some liberal circles” in the West; and he claimed that this trend was “most striking in Great Britain” where the far-left have led the way in “reflecting motifs long familiar from Soviet propaganda.”

A prominent member of the British far-left is Ken Livingstone, former Mayor of London from 2000 to 2008. According to sociologist and antisemitism scholar David Hirsh, Livingstone has spent half a century trying to cultivate the view amongst the general British public that Zionism and Nazism are similar and that the Zionists and Nazis were acting together against the ordinary innocent Jews. He was suspended from the Labour Party on March 30<sup>th</sup> for two years (- the period running from April 2016 -) for saying on BBC Radios 4’s *Today* programme that Hitler “was supporting Zionism – this was before he went mad and ended up killing six million Jews.”

Livingstone has remained unrepentant. He gave interviews on the steps of the tribunal that suspended him, insisting that Hitler intervened on behalf of the Zionists against the Yiddish speaking rabbis in Germany and that the SS was giving training to Jews to help them in Palestine.

Robert had plenty to say about Ken Livingstone. Writing in his article, “Antisemitism Embedded in British Culture,” he said: “Among those who have contributed to the hostile mood is Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London until May 2008. In the 1970s, he knocked on my door to ask for my vote in a local North London election. It turned out he was a passionate admirer of Leon Trotsky and was enthused to learn that I had just written a book on the Bolshevik leader – the kind of Jew he could empathise with – a radical leftist, an international socialist, and an ‘anti-Zionist.’” He added: “Livingstone always presents himself as an antiracist. He claims to be against any form of discrimination that affects minorities and outsiders. Supposedly he was the friend of gays, lesbians, new immigrants, Afro-Caribbeans and Muslims. Yet Livingstone has often related to Anglo-Jewry as a kind of Israeli fifth column in Britain and as accomplices of its ‘racist’ policy.” Writing in *A Lethal Obsession* and *From Ambivalence to Betrayal*, Robert again noted that Livingstone always presents his criticism of Israel in the name of human rights, as part of the fight against racism and fascism.

On Livingstone’s use of Holocaust Inversion, Robert wrote that Ken Livingstone’s *Labour Herald*, which he co-edited with the then Lambeth Labour Leader, carried an article on 19th March 1982 entitled “Zionism and the Holocaust,” which claimed that Zionists had betrayed the Jews during the Holocaust in order to achieve their own “devious” political ends; and that in June 1982, the *Labour Herald* featured what Robert described as a “sinister and repulsive cartoon, featuring a bespectacled Jewish-looking Menachem Begin dressed in Nazi jackboots and uniform, replete with Death’s Head insignia and a Star of David armband. His right arm is raised in Seig Heil salute over a mountain of skull bones. Begin stands impassively, left hand on hip in a conqueror’s pose, while a bleeding Lebanon lies sprawled at his feet. The headline reads “The Final Solution.””

In fact, Robert traced the rise of the British far left’s obsession with Nazi/Zionist collaboration to the 1982 Lebanon War. This was when the Workers’ Revolutionary Party’s publication, *The News Line*, published the claim that “Zionism was a racist, fascist, ideology” which had “shamefully collaborated” with Nazi Germany. It further stated 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.

How to account for this narrative? Robert explained that by 1983, some British Trotskyists, including Ken Livingstone, had openly embraced the left-wing Holocaust “revisionism” espoused by the American Jewish author Lenni Brenner, at the heart of which is the theory of Nazi-Zionist congruence. Indeed, Livingstone has repeatedly in recent months cited Lenni Brenner as the source of his “knowledge” about Zionist collaboration with the Nazis. This is why he remains unrepentant despite the Labour Party’s ruling that he has brought the Party into disrepute and its decision to suspend him. He claims that what he said is true. Moreover, he is supported by far-left anti-Zionist Jews like Tony Greenstein, who is founder of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign. Robert wrote about him in *A Lethal Obsession* and in *From Ambivalence to Betrayal*, too. He has also propagated the Zionist/Nazi collaboration thesis for a quarter of a century. According to Robert, Greenstein even managed to suggest that the Zionists had provided the Nazis with an “alibi” for the Holocaust. In 1983, the National Front magazine, *Sussex Front*, praised Greenstein’s anti-Zionist diatribes as a “seminal work” equal in importance to Holocaust denial literature.

All this is why, as Robert told *The Jewish Chronicle* in a 2012 interview, he moved away from the Left when he was in his early 20s. He was born in Kazakhstan in 1945 at the height of Stalin’s power after his family fled Cracow during the Second World War and his father had been a member of the Polish Communist Party. Despite his disenchantment with communism, its cruelty and its mendacity, Robert said that he was still drawn to left-wing thought. He recalled becoming “radicalised at grammar school” in Kilburn, London and later spending “two years of study and radical protest” at

Stanford University in California, as well as being present at the Paris student riots in 1968, opposing “capitalist alienation and the racism and militarism of the West.” However, he grappled with Marxist theory and its ambivalence towards Jews as a student at Cambridge; and when researching for his PhD on “Socialism and the Jewish Question” at University College London, Robert found himself debating against pro-Palestinian leftists on British campuses, where he detected an inescapable “sharp edge to anti-Israel sentiment which went beyond theory.” He wanted to know why “so many on the new Left had turned against the Jewish state with such vehemence?” He returned to this question 40 years later after four decades of research and scholarship into the question to write *From Ambivalence to Betrayal* where he provides the answers. Stating in his interview with the Jewish Chronicle that “Today’s ideology of the Left is a boutique of fragments – what I call the ‘debris of dead Marxist galaxies,’” and that all the fragments are linked by a baseline animosity towards the Jews and Israel, he nevertheless held out a ray of hope in his belief that the British Left “is ideologically impoverished and the level of its argumentation is truly pitiful.” But as Robert also noted in “Antisemitism Embedded in British Culture”, the infiltration of the Labour Party and the trade unions by Trotskyists in the 1980s means that Holocaust Inversion will no doubt remain a prominent feature of contemporary British antisemitism.

Robert explained further that the other major source of Holocaust Inversion in Britain is the antisemitic discourse of the Muslim world which was brought to the UK with post-war immigration. In the Muslim world and in the Middle East, he said, Holocaust Inversion is routine in public discourse about Israel. In his chapter on the Red-Green Axis in *A Lethal Obsession* and in *From Ambivalence to Betrayal*, Robert explained how the deeply engrained antisemitism of the Muslim world has combined with the left-wing antisemitism of the Soviet era in Britain, and that these are important sources of Holocaust Inversion.

Finally, I should like to leave you with a quote about Holocaust Inversion by the British author Howard Jacobson from an essay he wrote in 2003 entitled, *Wordsmiths and Atrocities Against Language: The Incendiary Use of The Holocaust and Nazism Against Jews*, with which I am sure Robert would agree.

“One thing is not another thing. What makes a thing the thing it is and not something else is not just a question for artists and intellectuals, it is *the* question. Where all things look the same, there is no life of the mind.

Thus when Jews demur from the word ‘holocaust’ each time there is an instance of man’s inhumanity to man, it is not because they think their suffering is keener, or somehow more pristine, than anyone else’s. It is simply that one thing is not another thing. When next there is an attempt first to slander and then to wipe out a whole people, to burn away every trace of them and their beliefs from the face of the earth, to make it as though they never were and to ensure that they never will be again, Jews will accept that ‘holocaust’ is the word.

This is not a species of scholasticism, verbal fastidiousness for its own sake. If we do not properly describe what a thing is like and not like, we do not know what it is.

It is important that we know what we mean. We do not serve the present by miss-describing it, and even worse we obliterate the past. Once everything is a war crime, nothing is. Turn every abomination into a whatever-takes-your-fancy holocaust, and there never really was one. This is the trickle-down effect of continuous verbal and syntactical diminishment. Little by little the thing itself is washed away.”

