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Primary Holocaust Inversion and Eastern European Antisemitism

Dovid Katz*

INTRODUCTION

As a strategy for arguing about almost anything adversarial, be it interpersonal or intergroup, inversion is as old as language and as human-grade thought itself. Its prime location in the psyche is in the realm of defense against a complaint or accusation. From the kindergarten child admonished for wronging a peer to the adult before a court of law defending him or herself against some accusation or other, a prime human rejoinder is to bring up how the wrongdoer was wronged or how the wronged is not wholly blameless, is equally at fault, or is perhaps even the real wrongdoer, who initiated an unfortunate chain of events that got out of hand, to cite just a few common examples.

Little wonder that inversion strategies are paramount in intergroup relations, including interpersonal, societal, political and prejudicial relations. While academics and scholars are just as human as anyone else, it does behoove them to at least attempt to compensate for this pan-human defense mechanism in their professional work by examining the facts of a situation with enhanced sensitivity for the perpetration of false equivalence and bogus symmetry by the perpetrator. In the legal and judicial sphere, there is scrutiny and oversight and an automatic two-sided dispute that helps expose fallacious or mendacious presentations on either side. By contrast, the academic world has no such built-in protections, least of all in the sphere of history, where there is no a priori practical point of law or punishment to be decided. That lack of protection can be amplified exponentially when governments or other wealthy forces invest in promoting a particular version of history or a particularly desired revision of history. If a government believes that a certain historical narrative is beneficial to its current and future security, the temptation to influence this narrative grows, and academics' all-too-human appetite for funding, support, recognition, honors and other favors can come into play.

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Translated into the realm of Holocaust studies and the closely allied field of antisemitism studies, scholars have for years discerned, first, that attempts to obfuscate, distort, minimize, or explain away the Holocaust are inextricably linked to antisemitism (see Vidal-Naquet 1992; Gerstenfeld 2009; Lipstadt 1993; Wistrich 2010; Heni 2012). In the case of the “nationalist” parts of Eastern Europe, particularly the Baltics, researchers have found, second, that issues relating to the Holocaust narrative can even be at the heart of contemporary antisemitism (see Donskis 2004, 2006; Zuroff 2005; Katz 2009; Heni 2012). The reader is invited to peruse the works cited below for further sources, as these two cardinal points cannot be relitigated here.

It is quite natural that this second phenomenon, the Far Right’s nationalist revision of Holocaust-era history in a tilt away from the classic Western (and Jewish) narrative, has generally been studied by a very small group of specialists on those parts of Eastern Europe, without attracting more widespread attention. At international level, the main issues relating to antisemitism are obviously those that have shown a capacity to lead to violence, have manifestations in many parts of the world, and pose a threat to the security of the State of Israel. Turning to Europe, one discerns a clear divide between east and west.

Antisemitism in Western Europe is nowadays overwhelmingly a product of the (Far) Left. Its practitioners are socially, educationally, and demographically diverse. It focuses above all on Middle Eastern affairs and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, distinguishing—or not distinguishing, as the case may be—between Jews and Israeli policies and between different types of Jews on a scale of presumed “Zioncity,” in order to determine which individuals and groups are to be designated as villains. Both before and after the insertion of Western European jihadism and Islamic radicalism into the mix, there have been tragic acts of violence. There have also been curious cases of staunch anti-Zionists going to extraordinary lengths to prove they are not antisemites, including a young taxi driver in the United Kingdom who had his name tattooed on his wrist in Hebrew letters to make the point with panache (and permanence).

By contrast, antisemitism in the “nationalist” parts of Eastern Europe, comprising the new EU/NATO member states as well as (western) Ukraine, has thus far thankfully been mostly nonviolent. It is overwhelmingly a product of the nationalist (Far) Right. Its practitioners tend to be suave, educated elites and often include members of the country’s political, academic, and media establishment. The vast majority of these people are generally positive toward Israel, have no interest in Palestinian or other Arab causes, and have little or nothing against Jews abroad. I have heard hundreds of versions of the following during my eighteen years in Vilnius, the beautiful Lithuanian capital, where, I hasten to add, I have been treated splendidly by everyday people: “We love American, British, and Israeli Jews! It’s just the local Jews here that are awful. They think

that our national heroes helped murder their families during the war and that the Russians saved their families!”

So there you have it, in a colloquial nutshell. To translate this sentiment into scholarly terms, Eastern European antisemitism is a (Far) Right movement that is laser-focused on World War II, the Holocaust, and local Jews’ (historically accurate) collective memory of these events. Their antisemitism is directed at fellow citizens who do not share the state’s official historical narrative concerning the war years. For Westerners accustomed to even educated younger people caring little—and knowing even less—about history, it can come as a surprise that state versions of history can (and are) being turned into components of contemporary national identity. Moreover, there is more than a little irony in the fact that, while many young Jews around the world spend very little time thinking about the Holocaust, right-wing antisemites in Eastern Europe are haunted by it and are determined to “fix” history. They want to fix it because, like many ultra-nationalists, they covet a history devoid of stains and errors (although such countries do not exist). Deep in the Freudian core of today’s Eastern European antisemitism lurks a serious case of Holocaust envy, a phenomenon that merits further study (see Katz 2015). They continue to suffer from Aryanist models of imagined, nationwide racial, ethnic, and linguistic purity (with its concomitant disdain for local Jews, leftists, Russians, Roma, homosexuals and the other “Others” targeted by the Nazis). Their ranks overflow with members of the elite, historians, sundry academics, and PR specialists. They have hit on a big-time project.

This is a form of antisemitism whose only direct living victims are local Jews, who are disliked by parts of elite society because they adhere to a different Holocaust narrative. In many cases, their lives are not impacted negatively, because they are able to live full and rich lives far removed from these elite governmental, media, academic, arts and other circles. The much more profound victims are the dead Jews whose fate is being obfuscated and distorted. Beyond that, the Holocaust itself is being reduced, without a single death necessarily being denied, to one of two “equal genocides.” This revisionist paradigm, which has come to be known as “double genocide” (see, e.g., Katz 2011; Ben-Moshe 2012), has been debunked by leading Holocaust scholars, including Yehuda Bauer (2010).

The “double genocide” project is a form of historical revisionism that inverts the Holocaust through an array of sleight-of-hand tricks and ruses. It is not a conspiracy but a public program of revisionism supported by substantial financial investment from governments. Its components include: the redefinition (or downgrading via conceptual inflation) of “genocide” to include such Soviet crimes as deportation, wrongful imprisonment, and deprivation of rights (as well as noting the chronological firstness of Soviet crimes in the areas first

invaded by the Nazis during Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 in order to recast the Nazi genocide as a “reaction”); the glorification of local Holocaust collaborators as “anti-Soviet heroes” (since virtually all Eastern European Holocaust perpetrators were reliably “anti-Soviet”); and the vilification of Jewish ghetto residents who fled to join the anti-Nazi (Soviet-sponsored) partisans in the forests and are rightfully regarded in the West as heroes of the free world. In various Eastern European states, laws have actually been passed to criminalize the opinion that only the Nazis were guilty of genocide and the Soviets of other crimes. Large amounts of money and political and diplomatic capital have been invested in exporting these ideas, in various forms and guises, to the West, Israel, and the world at large, most famously through the project’s “constitution,” the 2008 Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism, which is discussed below.

I. SECONDARY HOLOCAUST INVERSION

The term “Holocaust inversion” is widely used in the sense described by Melanie Phillips:

The key motif [in contemporary antisemitism] is a kind of Holocaust inversion, with the Israelis being demonized as Nazis and the Palestinians being regarded as the new Jews. Israel and the Jews are being systematically delegitimised and dehumanised – a necessary prelude to their destruction – with both Islamists and the Western media using anti-Zionism as a fig-leaf for prejudices rooted in both mediaeval Christian and Nazi demonology. (Phillips 2003)

It was further popularized by others, including Manfred Gerstenfeld in a 2008 *Wall Street Journal* op-ed (Gerstenfeld 2008). Academically, the term reached its apex in Robert Wistrich’s *From Ambivalence to Betrayal: The Left, the Jews, and Israel* (Wistrich 2012). In a chapter entitled “The Holocaust Inversion of the Left,” Wistrich traces this type of Holocaust Inversion to Soviet anti-Zionist (anti-Israel) usage that made its way into the parlance and culture of the anti-Israel Left in the West:

The Soviet specter of “Zionist Nazism” was an almost perfect mirror-image of the Nazi propaganda myth of “Jewish Bolshevism.” In the Nazi worldview, Bolshevism was a central part of the international Jewish conspiracy, linking Moscow with Wall Street and the City of London. For the neo-Stalinists, “Zionist Nazism” was the sinister agent of imperialism and a clique of international financiers seeking to subvert the socialist camp led by the U.S.S.R. The great difference is that the Holocaust inversion of the Left, which execrates Zionism as a form of Nazism is still very much with us today. Indeed its rapid spread into the Western world during recent decades suggests that it still has a future before it. The twinning of the Nazi Swastika and the Star

of David as symbols of genocidal fascism (today a commonplace) was, however, at one time an exclusive Soviet preserve. (Wistrich 2012: 448)

Phillips in the media and Wistrich in academia are among those who have brought the concept of Holocaust inversion into the contemporary discourse on antisemitism. They were both right to do so for the simple reason that it was not an a priori construct or comparison. It came about as an analysis of and a response to the practice of using Nazi symbols and terminology to characterize twenty-first century Israel. This practice has been observed in the highest circles of society, particularly in Europe, and not just among left-wing extremists and Islamists (see Klaff 2014). Wistrich's posthumously published essay is the last word to date on this issue (Wistrich 2017).

Secondary Holocaust inversion is a strategy that aims to turn the Holocaust into a propaganda tool against the Jewish people, Jewish causes, and the Jewish state. It is a malignant and spiteful strategy that is disconnected from the Holocaust both temporally and geographically. It is encouraging that various journalists, activists and scholars have taken on these abusers of history and language by entering the fray, especially at a time when the prevailing intellectual mood is not necessarily in their favor.

II. PRIMARY HOLOCAUST INVERSION

By contrast, primary Holocaust inversion—or, to put it more colloquially, “real Holocaust Inversion”—entails the conceptually much more audacious effort to falsify Holocaust history per se and to pull off this impossible-sounding feat not—or at least not openly—as part of an “anti-Jewish” campaign but as part of “ongoing research” and so-called “progress.” That “progress” is of course the “double genocide” theory, which seeks to equate Nazi crimes with Soviet crimes through extensive recourse to terminology emphasizing the equality of all suffering and evil. In fact, the 2008 Prague Declaration uses the word “same” five times:

1. “consciousness of the crimes against humanity committed by the Communist regimes throughout the continent must inform all European minds to the *same* extent as the Nazi regimes crimes did”;
2. “believing that millions of victims of Communism and their families are entitled to enjoy justice, sympathy, understanding and recognition for their sufferings in the *same* way as the victims of Nazism have been morally and politically recognized”;
3. “recognition that many crimes committed in the name of Communism should be assessed as crimes against humanity serving as a warning for future generations, in the *same* way Nazi crimes were assessed by the Nuremberg Tribunal”;

4. "establishment of 23rd August, the day of signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as a day of remembrance of the victims of both Nazi and Communist totalitarian regimes, in the *same* way Europe remembers the victims of the Holocaust on January 27th";
5. "adjustment and overhaul of European history textbooks so that children could learn and be warned about Communism and its crimes in the *same* way as they have been taught to assess the Nazi crimes."¹

Critics of the Prague Declaration have pointed out that it contains several false analogies (e.g. comparing the ordeal of people sent to Siberia to the genocide of an entire ethnic minority) and Orwellian attempts at mind control (e.g. demanding that all "European minds" must think alike and—in a case of supreme irony—that all history textbooks across the continent must adhere Soviet-style to the same holy narrative). For a partial bibliography of critiques to date, see Katz (2017b). The main academic rejoinder is from Heni (2009), while the main political response comes from UK MP John Mann, who referred to it as a "sinister" document (Mann 2009). The present author is proud to have partnered with Professor Danny Ben Moshe in drafting a response, the Seventy Years Declaration (SYD), in 2012. This "battle of declarations" has been discussed in recent history books (see, e.g., Stone 2014: 281). These issues therefore need not be relitigated here.

Instead, we intend to take the debate a step further. The false "equality" of Soviet and Nazi crimes is not only the official stance of the "double genocide" movement and a viewpoint that is attractive to Western ears and sensibilities. It has also enabled the newest strain of mainstream Holocaust revisionism to latch on to a range of external circumstances, including attempts to tie Holocaust obfuscation to the new Cold War and anti-Putin efforts (on the basis that the accurate narrative "helps Russian propaganda"), the hunger of many Jews of Eastern European origin to enjoy trips to the ancestral homeland unfettered by current events, and the even greater hunger of some dignitaries and organizations for Eastern European medals, honors, grants, and junkets. In practice, however, it is hard to find a single person in Eastern Europe, or beyond, who genuinely believes that Nazi and Soviet crimes were "equal." Behind this alleged equality lurks something else.

That something else is primary Holocaust inversion. The genesis of this idea took root in the minds of the planners, perpetrators, and collaborators of the Holocaust before, during, and after the actual murders. At first, it was not formulated so clearly. Later, it was (and sometimes still is) repeated as part of

¹ Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism, adopted on June 3, 2008 at an international conference hosted by the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, <http://www.praguedeclaration.eu>.

Eastern European antisemitic discourse: "The Jews were all Communists and supported the Soviet takeover of our county. They therefore got what they deserved." Given that virtually all the local murderers and accomplices in the Baltics were reliably "anti-Soviet" and that this motivation was universally regarded as "good," the scene was set for the first seeds of primary Holocaust inversion.

In the time between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of independent democratic states on its former western frontier, including the successful Baltic states, the intellectual manifestations of those earlier antisemitic and ultranationalist sentiments contributed to the emergence of a two-track "double genocide" paradigm. On the one hand, in European Parliament resolutions and conferences for foreign—especially Jewish—audiences, the emphasis has been on moving the narrative in the direction of "double genocide." See, for example, Zuroff (2011) on a University College London conference sponsored by the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry. On the other hand, the emphasis has been on creating a "united history" under the banner of European unity—the rather absurd notion that European unity depends on all of Europe (or even the world) adopting the Eastern European narrative concerning World War II, which equates Nazi and Soviet crimes. See, for example, Fridberg (2013) on a conference in Vilnius promoting these ideas.

For local consumption, however, the accepted historical narrative has slipped even further, from equalization to inversion. It is perhaps psychologically and sociologically inevitable that this would happen, given that equalization is itself a ruse (a) to cover up the massive local voluntary participation in the murder of the Jewish minority in the three Baltic states, western Ukraine, and elsewhere; and (b) to diminish the Holocaust altogether as part of historic anti-Jewish prejudice and as a strategy aimed at depriving modern Russia, the successor state of the Soviet Union, of its one grand achievement, namely the defeat of Hitler in alliance with Great Britain, the United States, and the other allies.

Twenty-first century examples of Holocaust inversion, which blame the Soviet Union, the Jews, or both, for Eastern European suffering can be found in state-sponsored events and projects throughout the Baltic states and Ukraine. Museums and exhibits often dip into the history of other states. In 2008, for example, an exhibit on the Ukrainian famine of the 1930s at Vilnius's Museum of Genocide Victims, which did not even mention the Holocaust until 2011, featured a poster on which an elderly woman states: "[In Auschwitz] we were given some spinach and a little bread. War is terrible, but famine is even worse" (see Katz 2016: 17). In 2011, the elitist Estonian National Movement declared that "the Holocaust pales before the crimes of Communism" (BNS 2011). Latvia and Estonia continue to honor their *Waffen SS* units (see Rudling 2012). In

2012, in a rare slip before a Western audience, a former foreign minister of Lithuania wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that “we had a few years’ respite from the Communists while the Nazis were in control during World War II” (Ušackas 2012).

In terms of actual policy and actions, rather than just exhibits, events, and quotations, the Lithuanian authorities have gone beyond other states in the region by taking inversion to the point of absurdity. While having done everything to avoid prosecuting alleged Nazi war criminals while they were alive and well enough to stand trial, the nation’s prosecutors and affiliated elites have since 2006 been defaming Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who joined the anti-Nazi resistance—the partisan groups sponsored by the Soviet Union that formed the only serious resistance to the Nazis during the country’s occupation—as suspects of “war crimes,” in effect for having survived. Other survivors have “merely” been accused of libeling Lithuanian heroes by naming alleged local collaborators. Charges were never brought, because there was never anything to charge anyone with. Instead, this was a massive state-sponsored campaign of historical distortion designed to complete the inversion paradigm. While local collaborators have streets named after them for their “anti-Soviet heroism,” survivors who joined the resistance are defamed in history books and on the internet as alleged suspects of war crimes. See the timeline in *Defending History* (2017).

Most recently, primary Holocaust inversion reached a crescendo in Ukraine. For the second time, a boulevard in Kiev, the nation’s capital, was named after a Holocaust perpetrator (Eichner 2017b). At roughly the same time, the country’s prosecutors began taking action against a 94-year-old Jewish veteran of the Red Army’s war against Hitler (see Eichner 2017a). For a long time, the mainstream Western media, led by *The New York Times*, has systematically covered up Holocaust revisionism and inversion in Ukraine (see Katz 2014). It is heartening to see, at long last, some impressive breaches of the embargo on critiquing US and Western allies on Holocaust issues, including inversion, which by virtue of inverting perpetrators and victims is an affront to the most elementary values of Western democracy. Among those breaches are two recent op-eds that will go down in the history for having broken a long and shameful taboo in our supposedly free Western media: Eduard Dolinsky’s “What Ukraine’s Jews Fear” in *The New York Times* (Dolinsky 2017) and Josh Cohen’s “How Trump Can Show He’s Tough on Antisemitism” on *Reuters* (Cohen 2017), which refers to a meeting with Ukraine’s president.

A final and telling example of Holocaust inversion, which starts from the premise that perpetrators and victims are interchangeable in certain circumstances, involves an “explanation” provided by the executive director of the Orwellian-sounding Commission for the Evaluation of the Crimes of the Nazi

and Soviet Occupation Regimes of Lithuania, in which he offers his justification for the Lithuanian prosecutors' harassment of a Holocaust survivor who joined the resistance.²

CONCLUSION

If the Eastern European Far Right, supported by generous government financing and taking ample advantage of the current crisis in East-West relations emanating from the corrupt, authoritarian, and revanchist regime of Vladimir Putin, succeeds in further chipping away at the truth of the Holocaust, this will represent a major setback for human rights, the struggle against antisemitism, and key values of democratic societies. In a worrying development, the trend in "acceptable" Holocaust revisionism is drifting, slowly but surely, from the equalization of Nazi and Soviet crimes in the framework of the "double genocide" paradigm to the even more dismaying inversion paradigm, which uses various ruses to praise the perpetrators and defame the victims of the Holocaust in a pseudo-postmodernist reversal of the narrative. It is imperative that the Western timidity in responding meaningfully to such deliberate distortions of history is overcome. It is equally imperative that scholars of antisemitism devote attention to the old, new, and recombined strains of this pernicious malady that are emerging from the nationalist (Far) Right, which stands at the helm of a number of Eastern European states currently allied with the United States and the West.

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² "Ronalas Račinskas on Fania Brancovskaya," excerpt from the documentary film *Liza ruft!* (2015), Youtube video, uploaded April 22, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxjJ0DvqJP8&t=1s>.

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