

Breaking Down and Fighting Holocaust Trivialization

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Introduction

After the deadly Hyper Cacher terror attack in January 2015,¹ the social media solidarity hashtag “Je Suis Juif” (#JeSuisJuif), or “I Am Jewish,” trended in support of French Jews. Statements such as “We’re all Jews” are often intended to reflect solidarity with the Jewish community or concern as antisemitic incidents increase in the United States. According to the FBI’s Hate Crime Statistics for 2020, anti-Jewish incidents accounted for 55% of all religious bias incidents and 8.3% of all hate crimes in America,² despite American Jews comprising only 2% of the U.S. population.

However, this very phrase, “We’re all Jews,” was used during a Facebook live stream last summer by Washington State Representative Jim Walsh with a starkly different intent. Walsh, referencing a mandate that all Americans get vaccinated for COVID-19,³ later apologized for wearing a yellow Star of David, but he is only one of the growing number of politicians instrumentalizing the Holocaust.

In an unfortunate display of insensitivity and historical ignorance at best, and manipulation and revisionism at worse, politicians, protesters, and everyday citizens have increasingly compared public health policies to end the pandemic and the Holocaust. These comparisons trivialize the genocide of Jews in the name of free speech and for the gain of political capital.

As Holocaust trivialization is increasing, knowledge about the Holocaust is waning. According to the Claims Conference’s [U.S. Millennial Holocaust Knowledge and Awareness Survey](#), over half (56%) of all millennial and Gen Z respondents could not identify Auschwitz, the

infamous death camp, and 63% were not aware that six million Jews were murdered.⁴ That is why it is more important than ever for students to learn about the Holocaust and for civic and political leaders to condemn all Holocaust comparisons, especially those connected to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As this phenomenon persists, this resource will:

1. Provide background information and contextual understanding about Holocaust trivialization;
2. Analyze how Holocaust trivialization is used for political gain, especially in the context of COVID-19; and
3. Share policy prescriptions for how to counter this troubling trend.

Background

Holocaust trivialization is not always obvious; a casual observer might miss it without an understanding of the terms, symbols, and relevant history. With that basis, it becomes more apparent why comparisons between the Holocaust and the coronavirus pandemic are more than insensitive, but dangerous.

The Holocaust refers to the systematic murder of six million Jews by Adolf Hitler, his National Socialist German Workers’ (Nazi) Party, and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Six million Jews—two out of every three Jewish men, women, and children in Europe—were killed for no reason other than being Jewish. This horrifying statistic does not account for the Jewish survivors, who had to re-enter a world largely indifferent to their suffering. It does not

account for the five million other victims, such as Roma, Sinti, LGBTQ, disabled, and others deemed “racially impure” by the Nazis. It does not reflect the often untold suffering of Jews in countries across North Africa and the Middle East, whose leaders collaborated with Hitler, sent Jews to forced labor camps, and eventually expelled them from their homes and countries of origin.

Nazi collaborators—leaders, bureaucrats, and even normal citizens who allied with the Nazis—were essential to keeping the machinery of Jewish segregation, detention, deportation, and murder running. Italy and Japan allied with Hitler, and many countries in Eurasia and beyond collaborated after Hitler invaded and installed puppet governments.



A yellow Star of David inscribed with the German word for Jew, courtesy of Fritz Glueckstein and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The racial antisemitism that motivated Hitler and his followers to target Jews for their inferiority is a mutation of the same anti-Jewish sentiment that had been present in Europe for millennia.

Badges, like the yellow star, were used for centuries in both Christian and Muslim communities to identify Jews and reinforce their inferior status. The Nazis introduced it strategically to shame and stigmatize Jews while controlling and tracking their movements.⁵

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen the yellow Star of David worn around the world to depict being unvaccinated. Anti-vaxxers don the yellow Star of David to imply that public health policies related to the pandemic are comparable to the racist Nazi laws. This action unites anti-vaxxers with neo-Nazis and others, making light of what it means to actually suffer the denial of civil liberties. It is one of the most



Washington state Rep. Jim Walsh wears a yellow Star of David while addressing a group in Lacey, WA on June 26, 2021.

prevalent instances of Holocaust distortion.

Holocaust distortion is an attempt to negate or downplay the facts of the Nazi genocide of the Jewish people, such as minimizing the number of victims or questioning the existence of gas

chambers. Distortion can include claims that the Holocaust was exaggerated to create financial gain or sympathy for Jews or for the state of Israel. It also includes the libelous claim that Jews themselves caused the Holocaust. In the Claims Conference study referenced above, 19% of New York millennials and Gen Z respondents believe that Jews caused the Holocaust.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s (IHRA) Working Definition of Holocaust Distortion and Denial says that denying or distorting the facts of the Holocaust is a form of antisemitism.⁶ Denying the scope and mechanisms of the Holocaust is also considered antisemitic by the widely-used IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism.⁷

Holocaust distortion, such as comparing COVID-19 protocols to what the Nazis did to the Jews, is one of many ways Holocaust distortion manifests, but there are other forms as well. Many anti-Israel activists claim that Israel is a “Nazi” state committing “genocide” against the Palestinian people. Some have said that “Gaza is today’s Auschwitz” or that former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is akin to Hitler. These comparisons, meant to highlight alleged human rights abuses and inspire action, trivialize Jewish suffering by downplaying the genocide of two-thirds of Europe’s Jews.

Holocaust Trivialization: Recent Examples

Over the last several months, dozens of politicians, online personalities, protesters, and others have compared public health mandates, such as vaccinations and mandatory mask ordinances, to the Holocaust. Notable examples among the scores of incidents include:

EXAMPLE 1: PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL BOARD: “DOBOS AND HER NAZIS ARE OUT.”

In August, 2021, multiple Holocaust comparisons were made during school board meetings in Pennsylvania. Straight-armed Nazi salutes, references to infamous Nazi experimental doctor Josef Mengele, and other insensitive Holocaust analogies were made at two [Fox Chapel Area School Board meetings](#). A few weeks later, at the [Bethel Park School Board meeting](#), after a vote mandating masks inside district buildings, a participant yelled, “Dobos and her Nazis are out,” directly comparing Fox Chapel School Board President Pamela Dobos with Adolf Hitler.

Why it’s problematic: Time and time again, frustrated individuals have resorted to Holocaust comparisons to “make a point” or “score a point.” What many of these folks don’t realize is that **words or actions can be antisemitic in effect if not antisemitic in intent**. These comparisons dehumanize Jews and trivialize Jewish suffering, which perpetuates the idea that anti-Jewish hatred is less severe or pressing than other hatreds.

EXAMPLE 2: “THIS HAS BEEN DONE BEFORE.”



Ohio Congressman Warren Davidson shared a Nazi-era vaccination card to his Twitter page on January 12, 2022.

In January 2022, Ohio Congressman Warren Davidson compared COVID-19 vaccine mandates with Jewish suffering under the Nazis, [tweeting](#), “This has been done before,” posting a Nazi-era health pass alongside the message #DoNotComply.⁸

Why it’s problematic: Congressman Davidson sharing this image is problematic for several reasons. First, sharing a Nazi vaccination card serves to glorify Nazi memorabilia, whether intended for that purpose or not. This will serve as a dog whistle for online followers seeking to have their antisemitic views validated by leaders with authority, such as a member of Congress. He [followed up](#) his initial #DoNotComply tweet with, “Let’s recall that the Nazis dehumanized Jewish people before segregating them, segregated them before imprisoning them, imprisoned them before enslaving them, and enslaved them before massacring them... Dehumanization and segregation are underway—and wrong.” Again, Rep. Davidson belittles Jewish suffering in the Holocaust by calling himself a metaphorical “Jew,” dehumanized and persecuted.

EXAMPLE 3: “LOST: NAZI GERMANY; FOUND: NAZI ISRAEL”



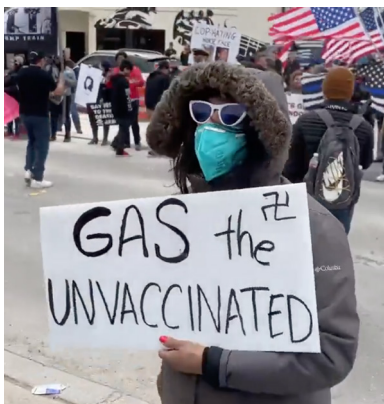
An activist holds a sign equating Nazi Germany with the State of Israel, May 2021, courtesy of Nathan Posner for the *Atlanta Jewish Times*.

In May 2021, during the most recent conflict between Israel and Hamas, anti-Israel protesters across the country and around the world used language to describe Israel that crossed the line from criticism to anti-Jewish hatred. At one such protest in Atlanta, Georgia, a protester held a sign reading, “Lost: Nazi Germany. Found: Nazi Israel” with a Nazi swastika equated with a Jewish Star of David.

Why it’s problematic: Referring to Israel, the home of the world’s largest population of Holocaust survivors, as a Nazi state is an insult to identity and memory. Yet Palestinian leadership, including President Mahmoud Abbas, perpetuates a narrative about “the secret relationship between Nazism and Zionism,” claiming Zionist leaders

were partners with Nazis and responsible for the Holocaust.⁹ Additionally, despite any grievance one might hold toward the State of Israel, there is not one instance in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that necessitates a Holocaust comparison.

EXAMPLE 4: “GAS THE UNVACCINATED.”



A counter-protester at an anti-vaccine rally in San Antonio, Texas on February 12, 2022. Image captured from @StopAntisemites.

On February 12, 2022, at an anti-vaccine rally in San Antonio, Texas, a counter-protester held a sign that read, “Gas the unvaccinated,” next to a Nazi swastika.

Why it’s problematic: “Gas the unvaccinated” is a reference to the Nazi method of choice for mass murder: gas chambers. The Nazis used either carbon monoxide or Zyklon-B in gas chambers, often disguised as shower facilities, to murder Jews, the disabled, and others.¹⁰ In the image, the Nazi swastika reinforces the Holocaust connection. In this scenario, the counter-protester is calling to gas, or kill, people who are not vaccinated against the coronavirus. Her shameless reference to the Nazi method of mass murder shows an enormous level of insensitivity to all Holocaust victims, not just Jews. Even more dangerous is how her sign could embolden neo-Nazis and others who pose a threat to Jewish safety and wellbeing.

EXAMPLE 5: “I’VE BEEN ACTIVE IN THE RESISTANCE MOVEMENT.”

Not unlike wearing a yellow Star of David, protesters of public health protocols related to COVID-19 have made direct comparisons between themselves and Jews who were murdered during the Holocaust. At a rally in Germany in November 2021, one protester said she felt like Sophie Scholl “because I’ve been active in the resistance movement for months.”¹¹

Why it’s problematic: A famous resistance fighter, Sophie Scholl formed the White Rose resistance group in 1940 with her brother Hans. White Rose was one of the few German groups to outwardly condemn the Nazi regime. Sophie and Hans were turned in to the Gestapo and murdered in 1943.¹² To compare the environment in which Sophie Scholl was moved to organized resistance with the current public health measures enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic belittles and distorts the true nature of the Nazi regime.

EXAMPLE 6: “ANNE FRANK WOULD HAVE BEEN ON OUR SIDE.”

Around the world, a seemingly common tactic for protesters of COVID-19 protocols is to compare themselves to Anne Frank. A Canadian newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, ran an op-ed titled, “Lessons in Living from Anne Frank,” instructing readers about how to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹³ The op-ed was removed after considerable backlash. At an anti-vaccine rally in Washington, D.C. in January, 2022, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. said, “Even in Hitler’s Germany, you can hide in the attic like Anne Frank did.”¹⁴ At a German rally, protesters held signs that read, “Anne Frank would have been on our side.”¹⁵

Why it’s problematic: Anne Frank is the most well-known Jewish teenager murdered by the Nazi regime during the Holocaust. Originally from Germany, Anne spent two years hiding in an attic in the Netherlands alongside her family and other Jews in hiding. The hiding place was discovered in 1944 and the Gestapo sent them on train transport to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Rhetorically used today as a catch-all phrase to reference any Nazi perpetrators, the Gestapo was an elite secret police force tasked with seeking out and eliminating perceived threats to the Nazi state.¹⁶

Anne’s journal, published posthumously as *The Diary of a Young Girl*, has been translated into dozens of languages, sold millions of copies, and touched countless lives. Using Anne Frank to further a political agenda or provide “lessons for living when we’re stuck inside” distorts and downplays Anne’s memory and the suffering endured by Holocaust victims and survivors.

Fighting Holocaust Trivialization

Efforts to downplay or deny the Holocaust existed well before COVID-19, and will unfortunately persist in fringe or ignorant circles, online and all over the world, well after the pandemic subsides. Targeted action from informed and engaged citizens can help reverse the trend:

- 1. Condemn Holocaust distortion and trivialization:** Holocaust trivialization normalizes latent antisemitic discourse, which can serve as a dog whistle to overt antisemites and their supporters. When it is not condemned, it allows this dangerous rhetoric to appear mainstream. **Urge local elected officials, editorial boards, and civic and community leaders to condemn Holocaust comparisons, especially related to COVID-19. Share AJC's [Translate Hate](#) with those in your community to increase awareness of antisemitic triggers and tropes.**
- 2. Confirm a Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism:** Holocaust distortion is a growing issue around the world. To ensure America's role as a global leader in the fight against antisemitism, including Holocaust denial, **join AJC in [urging the Senate to confirm Deborah Lipstadt as the State Department's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism.](#)** A renowned Holocaust studies scholar, Lipstadt has written extensively about Holocaust denial, and has personally fought—and won—a Holocaust denial libel suit against her.
- 3. Promote effective Holocaust education in your state:** The Holocaust is an irrefutable fact, and yet still, seventy-seven years after the liberation of Auschwitz, large percentages of young people are ignorant of the scope of the Holocaust or simply know nothing at all. There are three steps you can take to ensure future generations

receive proper Holocaust education. First, look at the "[Claims Conference Survey on Holocaust Knowledge of American Millennials and Gen Z](#)" to see the level of knowledge about the Holocaust state-by-state. Second, [review](#) the laws around Holocaust instruction in your state. Third, **if your state does not mandate Holocaust education, call on your local elected officials, school boards, and principals to include it in curriculum requirements**, utilizing the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's educational materials. If your state does have Holocaust education curriculum guidelines, urge elected officials to conduct an audit of their Holocaust education.

Affixed to the exit of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum's permanent exhibit is a famous warning against indifference by Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller: "First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist...Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me."

Antisemitism is often called the "canary in the coalmine," meaning it is society's barometer of intolerance toward minorities and those deemed "other." In this way, what might start with the Jews does not end with the Jews—antisemitism affects everyone. Antisemitism is not just a Jewish issue: healthy, democratic societies do not foster antisemitism.

It is incumbent on all of us to speak out against intolerance and not be bystanders in the face of indifference. As we pledge to never forget the atrocities of the Holocaust, part of that responsibility is honoring the lives of those who perished and those who survived. Another is actively countering efforts to distort or trivialize the Holocaust, wherever it occurs.

Endnotes

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