



Holocaust distortion

IT WAS only slightly more than a year ago that Holocaust distortion, which has been going on undisturbed for the past almost 30 years, and is currently rampant throughout post-Communist Eastern Europe, suddenly became an issue in Israel. The reason was the uproar over the by now infamous Polish Holocaust bill, which made use of the term “Polish death camps” or the attribution of any Holocaust crimes to the Polish state, a criminal offense punishable by two years in prison. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded that “Israel would not tolerate Holocaust distortion,” the first public denunciation by an Israeli leader of the systematic efforts being made for decades by many of the new democracies of Eastern Europe to whitewash the crimes of their nationals during the Shoah.

As we all know, a new climax was recently reached in this quarrel, when in response to a comment by Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz, who quoted former prime minister Yitzhak Shamir’s famous statement that “Poles imbibed antisemitism with their mothers’ milk,” Poland pulled out of the Visegrad summit held in Jerusalem last month.

Perhaps it was only natural that it was Polish Holocaust distortion which finally prompted Israel to respond in defense of the accepted narrative of World War II and the Holocaust, since the largest number of Jews were murdered in Poland, and the largest number of survivors hail from that country. The sad truth is, however, that the problem in Poland is only the tip of a huge iceberg of lies and deceit regarding the events of the Shoah and the identity of the perpetrators responsible for those crimes, and the situation in other Eastern European countries is worse in many respects.

In order to understand the depth of the problem and the danger it poses to the future of Holocaust commemoration and education, it is important to explain that only in Eastern Europe did collaboration with the Nazis include participation in the systematic mass murder of Jews. The Third Reich was able to enlist local helpers in every country in Europe that it occupied or was allied with, but outside of Eastern Europe, the collaboration ended when the local Jews were sent to Eastern Europe to be murdered by someone else, by the Nazis and their helpers in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Romania, Hungary and Croatia.

Eastern Europe was not liberated at the end of World War II, as the Nazis were replaced by the Communists, who also manipulated the history of World War II, so it was only when these countries made the transition to democracy, following the fall of the Soviet Union, that they were able to learn and teach the truth about the Holocaust. The problem was, however, that the truth was quite difficult, given the widespread participation of their nationals in the annihilation of the Jews.

As a result, from the outset, these countries set out to replace the accepted narrative of World War II and the Shoah with an alternative

version to help advance four practical goals: to hide, or at least minimize, the crimes of their nationals; promote the canard of equivalency between Communist and Nazi crimes, thereby emphasizing their own suffering and projecting themselves as a nation of victims, rather than of perpetrators; glorifying individuals who led the postwar resistance against the Soviets, regardless of whether they murdered or assisted killing Jews during the Holocaust, which was often the case; and trying to establish a joint memorial day for all the victims of totalitarian regimes, which would make International Holocaust Remembrance Day superfluous.

Lithuania has always been a leader of such initiatives. In fact, a trial is currently underway in Vilnius, initiated by Grant Gochin, a Litvak, over 100 members of whose family were murdered in a region whose Lithuanian liaison with the Nazis was Jonas Noreika, a hero of the postwar anti-Soviet resistance movement. Gochin sued to have all the honors awarded to Noreika canceled, but the official response of the Lithuanian Genocide and Resistance Research Center was that since Noreika had not been convicted in his lifetime for any crimes against Jews, he is considered innocent.

This Orwellian logic is the norm in Lithuania when it comes to local complicity in Shoah crimes, where 96.4% of the 220,000 Jews who lived under the Nazi occupation were murdered, many of them by Nazi collaborators, where half of the 227 mass Holocaust graves are not protected by the state, and some have been privatized and offered for sale.

The situation regarding Holocaust commemoration and education in Lithuania is likewise extremely problematic. There is no lack of commemorations, but the official ones sponsored by the government studiously avoid mention of the widespread participation of locals from all strata of Lithuanian society in the murders. In schools, only two hours are devoted to the Holocaust and only if the principal approves dealing with the subject. In fact, the chapter on Lithuania in a fairly recent study of Shoah education in Europe sponsored by UNESCO was entitled: “Unless They Have to: Power, Politics, and Institutional Hierarchy in Lithuania Holocaust Education.”

Unfortunately, Greer Fay Cashman’s recent article on Holocaust commemoration and education in Lithuania (“Preserving Shoah Memory,” *The Jerusalem Report*, February 11, 2019) presented a very complimentary assessment, which was totally divorced from the sad reality of a country determined to hide its own complicity and promote its own suffering under Communist rule, both of which endanger the future of Holocaust commemoration and education, and the ever-important accuracy of the historical narrative of the annihilation of Lithuanian (and European) Jewry. ■

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