

The Prague Declaration: Antisemitism with a democratic face...

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by Dr. Clemens Heni

We are facing two substantial antisemitic movements today. Anti-Zionist action and propaganda against Israel from one side, and a rewriting of the history of the Holocaust from the other. The latter has been named the “Holocaust Obfuscation movement” by Yiddish Professor Dovid Katz, Vilnius.

I was recently invited to Jerusalem to take part in the Global Forum for Combating Antisemitism, and spoke at the workshop on “Nationalist Trends in Central and Eastern Europe and in the CIS: New Challenges Facing the Jewish Communities”. My topic was the Prague Declaration. As Efraim Zuroff pointed out in the JPost (23 Dec), the Global Forum was very controversial this year because it invited as opening session guest speaker the foreign minister of a leading country in the Holocaust Obfuscation movement – Lithuania. Barry Rubin, who has written many insightful and frankly vital articles and books on the Middle East, the Arab World, and Israel, argued against Zuroff in the East European arena with some truly remarkable statements: “One important element here is teaching about the costs and crimes of Communism in Western schools as well as the depredations of Nazism.” Well, “depredations”? Is this an adequate word for the unprecedented crimes of the Shoah? No, it is not. It obfuscates the Holocaust and I will explain why.

Rubin does not mention the Prague Declaration, though the condemnation of this declaration is central to Zuroff's article.

The Prague Declaration was adopted on 3 June 2008 at the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, organized by politicians Jana Hybaskova and Martin Mejstrik. The declaration wants to "recognize Communism and Nazism as a common legacy" and "calls for" an understanding that both engaged in "exterminating and deporting whole nations". It therefore calls for a "Nuremburg Trial" for Communism as well, and particularly for the "establishment of 23rd August, the day of signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact" as a "day of remembrance of the victims of both Nazi and Communist" regimes, and – literally! – "in the same way remembers the victims of the Holocaust on January 27th".

This is the new fashionable form of anti-Semitism. Why?

Well, direct Holocaust Denial has never been really mainstream, because it is too simple even for some Neo-Nazi circles or the New Right. Also NSDAP member and German philosopher Martin Heidegger was present at the inception of this movement of new anti-Semitism and Holocaust Obfuscation, or soft-core denial, as I put it. In 1949 he compared "agriculture", which had become in his view a "motorized nutritional industry", with the "production of corpses in gas chambers". This led to post-structural theory which accuses modernity itself of being fascist or National Socialist or nothing other than a democratic form of concentration camps. Fashionable Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has therefore claimed that the Jews in Nazi concentration camps had a better life than detainees in Guantanamo Bay!

Other forms of Holocaust Obfuscation appeared, and Germany is the core playground here. Since the publication of the French "Black Book of Communism" in 1997 (German edition a year

later, and 1999 the English edition, by Harvard UPress) it has again become fashionable to ignore the following simple fact:

There have been people who established concentration and extermination camps during World War II: The Germans (with the help sometimes of friends). And there have been people who liberated those camps in the East: the Soviet Red Army, who liberated Auschwitz on 27 January 1945.

John Mann, the UK MP who head the cross-party group against anti-Semitism, put it in similar words at the above mentioned working group at the Global Forum.

The Soviet Union never tried to exterminate a nation or a people. The expulsion of some people, for example from the Baltics, was a crime, but incomparable to any Nazi Germany action. The Soviet Union committed crimes for political purposes, mostly to gain power. National Socialism had the intention to exterminate the Jewish people for no purpose. The killing of the Jews was the aim of the Germans. No political, economic, military etc. idea behind this. This senseless killing was an unprecedented crime in human history. The Germans looked for every single Jew in Greece, Yugoslavia, Poland, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, the Soviet Union, Hungary, and all other countries they reached. They wanted to kill every single Jew.

The Soviet Union started as a promising idea in 1917, to get rid of the aristocratic, anti-democratic, and also anti-Jewish Czarist Russia, which had expelled part of their own Jewish population during World War I, and some 100,000 Jews died as a result. From 1917 until 1921 approximately 60,000 Jews were killed by anti-Bolshevik troops during 1236 pogroms, mostly in Ukraine and Southern Russia, according to Holocaust survivor and German historian Arno Lustiger, who wrote one of the most insightful books on "Stalin and the Jews". There was even a flourishing Jewish and Yiddish culture in the 1920s in the Soviet Union. However, the fight against anti-Semitism, which

was part of Lenin's struggle, was not central to most Soviet leaders. Stalin became more and more anti-Jewish, especially at the end of his life. And Soviet anti-Semitism respective anti-Zionism is a horrible story, a tragic one, too.

But without the help of the Red Army, many more Jews would have perished in the Holocaust. Stalin never accepted Jews as Jews, as Holocaust survivor Yitzhak Arad pointed out already in the 1970s. Nonetheless I am wondering (as Arad does as well) why so many people do not see the unbridgeable gap between this Stalin approach and the German way, which led to the Holocaust.

The 2008 Prague Declaration ignores history and wants to rewrite history. Insistence on a false "equality" of Stalin's crimes and the unprecedented crimes of the Germans is anti-Semitic, particularly in the East European context. It is the most fashionable form of anti-Semitism, as it does not deny the Holocaust. Rather, it obfuscates the Shoah by saying it was as *bad* as the crimes of Communism. This distorts the fact that, again, the Holocaust wanted to exterminate the entire Jewish people. Not a single Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian was killed by the soviet for *being* Lithuanian, Latvian or Estonian.

Again, the German situation can explain a lot: we had discussions the last years there about Germans as victims. The "Bomb-Holocaust," accusing particularly British bomber Arthur Harris for attacking Dresden, was invented as a term e.g. by Neo-Nazis from the National Democratic Party (NPD), and backed by mainstream scholars like Jörg Friedrich who uses the term "crematory" for the city of Dresden. Also the term "Holocaust of expulsion" of the Germans from the East is used, accusing Czech, Polish, and other people of "crimes" against Germans. The Prague Declaration fits right into the puzzle: urging the EU to establish a common day of remembrance, 23rd August, is the attempt to rewrite history and to say that Hitler and

Stalin were both criminals on precisely the same level. The Shoah is obfuscated and forgotten, if it is compared with crimes of the Soviets like expulsions (!) of people; of killing of relatively (!!) few, and moreover for political reasons, not as part of an extermination program like the Holocaust.

We should think twice before using stereotypical phrases like "totalitarian regimes". German historian Wolfgang Wipperman wrote books on this topic and argued powerfully and correctly that it is misleading to use this term today, particularly because it distorts what is specific about National Socialism and the Holocaust. In Germany, many people even describe the GDR as "totalitarian", which is of course ridiculous.

We have now to become very careful with words, remembrance, and historical comparisons. Not every bad society is as evil as Nazi Germany was. Therefore the Prague Declaration is an extremely dangerous attempt to minimize the Holocaust and to rewrite the history of the 20th century. Ask any Holocaust survivor of Lithuania if it was the same for her or him to be tortured by the Germans and Lithuanians, to see their loved ones butchered, as it was for them to be rescued by the Soviets, either by fleeing to Soviet territory at the war's start, by fleeing the ghettos to join up with the Soviet partisans in the forests during the war, or to be liberated by the Soviet army at its conclusion.

Some people however, prefer to host and talk to nationalistic Eastern European politicians, instead of listening to Holocaust survivors or historians who tell the truth and try to decode anti-Semitic myths.