

Debate Holocaust Remembrance

Pilgrimage to Auschwitz

By Iris Hefets (2010)

Published in [Tageszeitung \(Taz\)](#), Berlin, 09 March 2010.

Translated from German by Paul Hendler and Carlotta von Maltzan

The remembrance of the holocaust has become a form of religion. It counts as part of the rituals of this religion to marginalise Jewish critics of Israeli politics.

What do both professors Ilan Pappé (Israel) and Norman Finkelstein (USA) as well as the journalist Hajo Meyer (Germany) have in common? All three are Jews, survivors of the holocaust or children of survivors as well as vehement critics of Israeli politics.

What do the City of Munich, the Trinitatis Church in Berlin and the Heinrich Böll and Rosa Luxembourg Foundations have in common? All of them, after initial confirmation, disinvited Ilan Pappé and Norman Finkelstein and denied them previously confirmed event venues - just like the Heiliggeistkirche in Frankfurt a few years ago did to Hajo Meyer. The named institutions thereby gave in to the pressure of the pro-Israeli lobby, which even denounced Finkelstein, Pappé and Meyer as "anti-semites". Because of the Shoah. That is how it is called nowadays.

Initially it was called "Auschwitz", then "Holocaust". Until Claude Lanzmann. For the gigantic crime against humanity he looked for an appropriate word, which he also did not understand. Therefore in 1985 the French director named his nine-hour documentary about the genocide of the Jews, "Shoah". He was not concerned that he used a word loaded with religious meaning. In Hebrew this term means a catastrophe visited by God on the world. In the meantime the term has embedded itself also in Germany.

The word "Shoah" veils the genocide of the Jews with an aura of the inexplicable, and the sacred. However, this genocide as horrific as it was, is not an esoteric event but a modern, well-documented and researched crime, committed by people against other people. Countless books have been written: therefore it is not inexplicable on an intellectual level, but if at all then on an emotional level.

With the Hebrew word "Shoah" the Israeli interpretation of the event is taken over in Germany. In Israel this is a type of national narrative and an essential pillar of the state, so that every Jewish child identifies with it, even when its parents originate from Yemen or India. School trips to Auschwitz, originally organised by Israeli elite schools only, are nowadays an integral part of every Israeli post puberty biography. Before a young Israeli goes to the army he must have experienced alcohol, sex and an Auschwitz trip at least once. Having fulfilled these requirements he can then serve out his military service and flip out in India afterwards.

For official commemoration days even older Israelis catch up on what in the meantime has become the obligatory pilgrimage to Auschwitz. From the lowest ranking soldiers to the top generals and politicians, they march in uniform (!) through Auschwitz and remind us of the words of Ehud Barak: "We have arrived 60 years too late". Now the evangelism of Auschwitz has even reached outer space: when the first Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon flew into the cosmos in the spaceship "Columbia" he had with him a pencil drawing of a young boy murdered in Auschwitz.

This Shoah cult has become a kind of religion with fixed rituals, as one probably has to point out. This means that, regardless of all current realities, there is a firm conviction that Germans are the

eternal perpetrators and Israelis the eternal victims, which is why the laws and regulations of democratic states should not be applicable to the latter: an exceptional case, after all.

This religion experiences not only great popularity in Israel. Also many Germans are comfortable with this type of mystification of Auschwitz. If Auschwitz is surrounded by a sacred aura then it is no longer necessary to confront one's own potential to become a perpetrator. If the holocaust is so holy then one is allowed only to walk on tip toes.

Not a few Germans have through this awareness come to a comfortable arrangement with the past. In this way they can explain the crime of their forbears as so horrific that it has achieved the status of the quasi mystical. Therefore, the topic has been removed from the profane and the field of politics to sphere of the sacred. As long as you practice the rituals of this religion you cannot be accused, and you are able to behave as Angela Merkel did with regard to the scandals surrounding the Pius Brethrenhood, more papal than the pope. Little wonder then that in Germany occasionally you meet far more engaged defenders of Israeli policies than in Israel itself.

But there are also Jews who do not accept this Israeli-German interpretation of the Shoah. For them Auschwitz is not sacred and the policies of Israel are still subject to criticism, such as for Israeli academic Ilan Pappé, who wrote a book about "The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine", his US colleague Norman Finkelstein, who authored "The Holocaust Industry" and the German-born Dr. Hajo Meyer who published "The End of Judaism". However, in Germany they are not welcome because of this.

Imagine that Heinrich Böll would like to speak today about the language of the Israeli settlers, and the foundation named after him would not allow this. Rosa Luxemburg would not receive the opportunity from the foundation that carries her name, to talk about power relations in Israel. And the Jew Jesus would find the doors of the Trinitatskirche locked when he would want to speak about the disdain of the neighbour in Israel.

All these institutions practice self-censorship and they prohibit journalists and authors fighting for human rights in the Middle East, from speaking. It is still valid to pass on Rosa Luxemburg's legacy and to call things as they are. However, the City of Munich, the Trinitatskirche in Berlin and the Böll and Luxemburg Foundations shirk the responsibility.