

# **HOLOCAUST MEMORY AT RISK**

**The Distortion of  
Holocaust History Across Europe**

Background Research Brief | September 2021

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## Background Research Brief

“The things I saw beggar description....The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty and bestiality were...overpowering.... I made the visit deliberately in order to be in a position to give first-hand evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to ‘propaganda.’”

— General Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 15, 1945

“Remembering the crimes, naming the perpetrators, and commemorating the victims...is an unending responsibility [that]...defines who we are as an enlightened and liberal society, a democracy, and a state based on the rule of law.”<sup>1</sup>

— German Chancellor Angela Merkel,  
Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, December 6, 2019

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-en/news/speech-by-federal-chancellor-dr-angela-merkel-marking-the-10th-anniversary-of-the-auschwitz-birkenau-foundation-auschwitz-6-december-2019-1704954>.

As the eyewitnesses to the era of the Holocaust themselves pass into history, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has undertaken research on the current trends of Holocaust distortion in the lands where the Holocaust happened. As a result of its research, the Museum has concluded that after decades of progress, Holocaust memory is at risk across a rapidly-changing Europe. A summary of the Museum's full findings, along with its recommendations to encourage further conversation and robust action to confront the current trends, is available at [ushmm.org/holocaust-memory](https://ushmm.org/holocaust-memory). This document provides background information on which the Museum based its findings and recommendations, as well as some considerations that shaped its research. The information herein is illustrative of the situation at the completion of our research in 2019.

## Definition of Key Terms

**The Holocaust:** The Holocaust was the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its allies and collaborators. During the era of the Holocaust, German authorities also targeted other groups because of their perceived racial and biological inferiority: Roma and Sinti, people with disabilities, some of the Slavic peoples (Poles, Russians, and others), Soviet prisoners of war, and Black people. Other groups were persecuted on political, ideological, and behavioral grounds, among them Communists, Socialists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and homosexuals.<sup>2</sup>

**Antisemitism:** A certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.<sup>3</sup>

**Holocaust Denial:** Discourse and propaganda that deny the historical reality and the extent of the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices during World War II. Holocaust denial refers specifically to any attempt to claim that the Holocaust did not take place. Holocaust denial may include

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<sup>2</sup> <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>

<sup>3</sup> International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism (adopted May 26, 2016) (this is the core of the definition; the full definition includes accompanying guidance and 11 examples), <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/working-definition-antisemitism>.

publicly denying or calling into doubt the use of principal mechanisms of destruction (such as gas chambers, mass shooting, starvation, and torture) or the intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people.<sup>4</sup>

**Holocaust Distortion:** Intentionally expressing doubt about or misrepresenting established facts of the Holocaust era, e.g. by minimizing or shifting national and societal responsibility for aspects of the Holocaust; limiting academic and public discourse that challenges official or “acceptable” historical narratives; intentionally minimizing the impact of the Holocaust or its principal elements (including the impact of collaborators and allies of Nazi Germany); asserting that six million Jewish deaths is an exaggeration or that Jews were responsible for the Holocaust.

## Introduction: Research Considerations

**The Museum’s research focuses on distortions of the history of the Holocaust, rather than Holocaust denial.** Many are familiar with the concept of Holocaust denial, meaning the outright denial of the historical reality of the Holocaust or one of its basic established facts, such as the use of gas chambers to annihilate the Jews of Europe. Holocaust denial is illegal in many European countries, and exists primarily at the margins of political and public debate. Less well known but more pervasive today is Holocaust distortion, which is more subtle, often has a veneer of respectability, and can be harder to detect and decode. Holocaust distortion casts doubt upon, or intentionally misrepresents, established facts of the Holocaust era. Common themes include shifting responsibility for aspects of the Holocaust, minimizing the severity of specific Holocaust crimes, or even blaming the Jews for the Holocaust.

**The Museum’s research does not cover all aspects of contemporary antisemitism in Europe.** Holocaust distortion and antisemitism are closely related. Distortion can be a vehicle to express antisemitic ideas, or an intentional effort to incite antisemitic feeling. But it is not always antisemitic in substance or motivation. Contemporary antisemitism has many forms, including Holocaust denial and distortion. Both denial and distortion are often couched in, and thus perpetuate, pervasive antisemitic stereotypes, such as that “Jews are greedy” (and have invented or are exploiting Holocaust history to receive compensation), or that “Jews manipulate world events in their favor” (and have invented or exaggerated the Holocaust in order to establish the State of Israel). Holocaust distortion also helps open the door to other dangerous forms of antisemitism. It casts doubt on aspects of the Holocaust—such as the number of Jews killed—and on the existence and virulence of antisemitism in some parts of Europe before and during World War II.

**The Museum’s research highlights regional and transnational trends in Holocaust distortion in Europe.** Each European country has its own specific history, historiography, national narratives, and political dynamics. The Museum’s research begins to piece together trends and their implications across many countries, in both Western and Eastern Europe. When viewed together, the trends across the continent are all the more clear, instructive, and alarming.

<sup>4</sup> See IHRA, Working Definition of Holocaust Denial and Distortion (adopted October 10, 2013), <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-holocaust-denial-and-distortion>.

**The Museum’s research covers many of the lands where the Holocaust happened.** Europe sets the tone for how the Holocaust is remembered **everywhere**. The nations on whose territory the perpetrators implemented the crimes of the Holocaust have a unique responsibility to preserve and make available the evidence and to promote the memory of what happened there.

**The Museum’s research covers Holocaust distortion promoted or enabled both by official and by non-state actors: governments, political leaders, and others with substantial current or potential future influence over public policy and discourse.** There are significant differences between manifestations of Holocaust distortion by governments, government officials, and leaders of political parties in power, on the one hand, and political and other leaders who are outside of government on the other. Nevertheless, the Museum’s research covers manifestations of Holocaust distortion from both official and unofficial sources because we believe that both are influential. Those both in and out of power shape the political and societal environment for Holocaust memory.

## Methodology

This research is based on in-depth reviews of Holocaust distortion in 11 countries on whose territory the Holocaust took place: Austria, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine. This mix of present-day countries includes what was then the Third Reich, several of its Axis partners, and countries or territories that Germany or other Axis powers occupied. It covers the territory where the vast majority of Jews lived before World War II, and where the vast majority of the victims of the Holocaust were murdered. The exclusion of a particular country from this list does not mean that there are no manifestations of Holocaust distortion there.

The Museum solicited the input of experts in Holocaust history, historiography, and memory in each of the countries. We asked them about the state of commemoration, research, and education, as well as the manifestations and ramifications of state-sponsored and otherwise influential Holocaust distortion, including related abuse of history for political purposes, during the period of 2017–19. This input was supplemented by the Museum’s own research, as well as reports from the US Department of State, relevant multilateral organizations, and other publicly available sources. Of course, in this rapidly changing environment, our information is illustrative of the situation at the completion of our research in 2019.

# Historical Background

## A NEGATIVE TRAJECTORY IN THE ARC OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

The recent trajectory in Holocaust memory across Europe is disturbingly negative. By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the general trend was that Holocaust commemoration, research, and education was increasingly informed by a far-reaching confrontation with difficult history. Outright Holocaust denial had begun to fall into disrepute following a number of high-profile trials and efforts by European governments to criminalize it. In the past decade, however, we have witnessed an accelerating trend toward distortion of Holocaust history in mainstream political and public discourse. Although governments and nongovernmental institutions continue to launch important initiatives to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and promote public awareness and education about it, the current trend threatens decades of progress.

The research findings presented in this brief present a snapshot of the previous several years. To understand the significance and implications of current trends, it is necessary to look at the long arc of Holocaust memory throughout the postwar period.

The memory of World War II and the Holocaust has long been politicized. Some of the national narratives that developed in the early postwar decades omitted difficult aspects of the history, giving rise to heroic and/or exculpatory myths. Assertions such as “it was those Nazis, not us Germans”; “we resisted the Nazis”; “many hid and saved Jews”; “no one was aware of what was happening”; and “we all were the victims of the Nazis” are the hallmark of these narratives, which have become central to national memory policies and practices in some countries.

The Cold War also exerted a strong influence over national narratives about the Holocaust. In much of Eastern Europe, the ruling Communist regimes used Nazi crimes as propaganda to promote their own legitimacy, while at the same time discrediting the “capitalist West” as “fascist.” On the other hand, in the West, interest in holding Holocaust perpetrators accountable quickly yielded to overriding concern with the potential for conflict with the Soviet Union.

Although progress had been made in research and Holocaust commemoration in Western Europe in the 1970s and 1980s, a real sea-change occurred across all of Europe in the mid-1990s following the fall of the Soviet Union. Massive amounts of formerly restricted archival material became available in both the former Communist and Western European countries. New research helped establish the full scope of the Holocaust and called into question earlier myths and national narratives. Moreover, new freedom in former Soviet bloc countries allowed people to raise issues about the war and the Holocaust that could not have been discussed in the past.

As the public debate grew—often spurred by the tireless efforts of a small number of dedicated survivors, researchers, and activists—so did important developments in public memory. Heads of state began to articulate aspects of their nations’ responsibility for the Holocaust. Government agencies and private organizations created new programs of reparations and property restitution, opened important memorials and museums, established official commemorations, and developed new curricula and textbooks for secondary schools.

Most of these positive steps were taken against the backdrop of growing European unity following the fall of the Iron Curtain, and as many Central and Eastern European nations were seeking to join NATO and the European Union. During this period, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) developed a number of Europe-wide standards and guidelines for Holocaust commemoration and education.<sup>5</sup>

Beginning around 2000, European developments were bolstered by broader international action to promote Holocaust remembrance, research, and education. The US Department of State created the Office of the Special Envoy for Holocaust Issues in 1999.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the 2000 Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust led to the creation of a multilateral organization whose purpose is to “promote Holocaust education, remembrance, and research worldwide,” the now 34-nation International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA).<sup>7</sup> The United Nations General Assembly established International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2005 and condemned Holocaust denial in 2007.<sup>8</sup>

By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, the trend toward Holocaust commemoration, research, and education, informed by a far-reaching confrontation with difficult history, appeared to be well established. The past decade, however, has witnessed an accelerating trend toward distortion of Holocaust history in mainstream political and public discourse. Although governments and nongovernmental institutions continue to launch important initiatives to preserve the memory of the Holocaust and promote public awareness and education about it, the current trend threatens decades of progress.

<sup>5</sup> See European Parliament, “Resolution on European and International Protection for Nazi Concentration Camps as Historical Monuments,” *Official Journal*; European Parliament, “Resolution on a Day to Commemorate the Holocaust,” *Official Journal*; European Parliament, “Resolution on the Remembrance of the Holocaust,” *Official Journal*; European Parliament, “Resolution on Remembrance of the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and Racism,” *Official Journal*; European Parliament, “Resolution on the 60th Anniversary of the End of the Second World War in Europe on 8 May 1945,” *Official Journal*; European Parliament, “Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism (Final Resolution, P6\_TA(2009)0213),” *Official Journal C-137 E/05\_27/05/2009*; Council of the European Union, “Framework Decision on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law,” [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec\\_framw/2008/913/oj](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dec_framw/2008/913/oj); Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), [Berlin Declaration on Antisemitism](#), April 29, 2004. Education Ministers of member states of the Council of Europe took the decision in October 2002 to introduce a Day of Holocaust Remembrance and Prevention of Crimes against Humanity. See <https://www.coe.int/en/web/holocaust/holocaust-remembrance-day>; see also Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, “Recommendation Rec(2001)115 on history teaching in twenty-first-century Europe” <https://rm.coe.int/0900001680909e91> (condemning Holocaust denial); Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 2106 (2016), “Renewed commitment in the fight against anti-Semitism in Europe” <https://pace.coe.int/files/22716/pdf>; Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, No. 686, “Adopting new tools in the fight against anti-Semitism in Europe,” [https://www.coe.int/t/16800/2019/06/Doc\\_14937\\_28\\_June\\_2019](https://www.coe.int/t/16800/2019/06/Doc_14937_28_June_2019).

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-political-affairs/bureau-of-european-and-urasian-affairs/office-of-the-special-envoy-for-holocaust-issues/>.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/international-holocaust-remembrance-alliance>.

<sup>8</sup> See UN General Assembly Resolution 60/7 of 1 Nov 2005, <https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/60/7>. UN General Assembly Resolution 61/255 of 26 Jan 2007, <https://undocs.org/A/RES/61/255>. The UN Secretary General has created an outreach program on the “Holocaust and the United Nations,” see <https://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/>. See also UNESCO General Conference resolution 34C/61 (2007) on “Holocaust Remembrance” asking UNESCO to promote “awareness of Holocaust remembrance through education and (to combat) all forms of Holocaust denial” in accordance with previous United Nations resolutions, <https://www.un.org/en/holocaustremembrance/docs/UNESCO%20res.shtml>. For UNESCO’s activities on education about the Holocaust and genocide, see <https://en.unesco.org/themes/holocaust-genocide-education>.

# Research Findings on Contemporary Trends in Holocaust Distortion

## KEY FINDINGS

- State-sponsored or otherwise politically influential Holocaust distortion is wide-ranging and widespread across Europe.
- Trends in Holocaust distortion and those who spread it reach across national boundaries.
- Conflicts over Holocaust-era history contribute to transnational tensions between several European countries.
- The proponents and enablers of Holocaust distortion have increasing political power and societal influence, and are bringing ideas once considered to be unacceptably extreme into the mainstream of political and public discourse.
- Holocaust distortion is fueled by a climate of resurgent, aggressive nationalism in several parts of Europe.
- Current trends in Holocaust distortion do not exist in a vacuum. Growths in distortion have occurred parallel to other troublesome trends, such as the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, the intensification of antisemitism, and the rise of aggressive nationalism and xenophobia.
- Holocaust distortion can promote negative views about other groups perceived to be “outsiders.”

## A REGION-WIDE PROBLEM WITH TRANSNATIONAL IMPACT

State-sponsored or otherwise politically influential Holocaust distortion is wide-ranging and widespread across Europe.



Governments, leading politicians, and others with growing influence over national policy making and public opinion are distorting or disregarding the historical record of the Holocaust. The numerous manifestations of this tendency reflect a variety of motives. They fall into four general categories, described below.

### Public statements denying or minimizing national and societal responsibility for crimes against Jews or collaboration with Nazi Germany

- Since at least 2011, the government of **Hungary** has adopted constitutional, political, and cultural measures aimed at bending public memory in order to cast Hungarians as the victims of the German occupation and to absolve them of responsibility for Holocaust crimes. Such measures include changes to the state education curriculum and establishing public monuments depicting Hungary in the role of victim during World War II. The government has also moved to rehabilitate interwar political figures such as Miklós Horthy and Balint Homan, despite their documented participation in the persecution and, in Horthy’s case, the murder of Hungarian Jews.
- Marine Le Pen, presidential candidate of the then-National Front party in **France** stated in March 2017 during her campaign that “France is not responsible for the [round-up of Paris’s Jews at the Vélodrome d’Hiver in 1942]. If there are people who are responsible, they are the ones who were in power at the time, it is not France.”<sup>9</sup> This statement harkened back to the era before French President Jacques Chirac affirmed the responsibility of France for these events in 1995. Le Pen heads the leading opposition party in France.
- In June 2018, in Germany, then-Alternative for **Germany** (AfD) party co-leader Alexander Gauland told the party’s youth wing that “Hitler and the Nazis are just bird shit in more than 1,000 years of successful German history... Yes, we accept our responsibility for the 12 years [of Nazi rule, but] we have a glorious history—and that, dear friends, lasted longer than the damn 12 years.” A major German political party leader has not made this type of statement since the 1980s. AfD is the number one opposition party in Germany.<sup>10</sup>

### Attempts to limit academic and public discourse on Holocaust history by means of legislation and penalties

- Using criminal provisions adopted in 2014 purportedly to prevent historical falsification, officials in **Russia** have prosecuted several individuals for arguing that the Soviet Union contributed to the outbreak of World War II. Although not directly a case of distortion of Holocaust history, the omission of the Soviets’ role in facilitating Nazi German aggression against Poland, and of the territorial and material benefits to the Soviet state of its partnership with Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1941, bolsters the prevailing Russian government narrative portraying the Soviets as consistent opponents of Nazism and fascism and as saving Europe from Axis conquest in World War II.

<sup>9</sup> In June 2018, the French Front national (National Front) political party changed its name to *Rassemblement national* (National Rally), a name reminiscent of the *Rassemblement national* populaire, a pro-fascist party of the World War II period.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.bundestag.de/en/members>. The AfD has grown rapidly since its founding in 2013, when it failed to reach the 5 percent electoral threshold necessary to gain seats in the federal parliament. In 2017 federal elections, it came in third with 12.6 percent, gaining 89 of the 709 seats in the federal parliament. It is particularly popular in the former East Germany, scoring high in September 2019 elections in Saxony (27.5 percent) and Thuringia (23.4 percent).

- In 2015, **Ukraine** enacted a law that recognized several World War II-era Ukrainian groups, including those who cooperated with the Germans in the murder of Jews, as “fighters for independence” during the German occupation. The law also made it illegal to insult the memory of fighters of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). This law provides the legal grounds for the official glorification of the OUN and UPA (see below).
- In 2018, the parliament of **Poland**, in an effort to “protect the reputation of the Polish nation,” amended the country’s Act on the Institute of National Remembrance to establish criminal (later limited to civil) penalties for certain forms of expression about Polish responsibility for crimes committed during World War II by Nazi Germany.

Though promoted as defending historical truth, these laws nevertheless stifle or censor public debate, scholarly research, and other activities that challenge official national narratives, minimizing the responsibility of regional and local authorities and individuals for Holocaust-related crimes. In some cases, authorities have prosecuted individuals under these laws.

### **Political interference with the accurate representation of history in museums, exhibitions, and historical sites, or the rejection of the importance of Holocaust remembrance and memorials by influential political and societal leaders**

- The concept of a new government-sponsored museum in **Hungary**, the “House of Fates European Education Center”—announced in 2014 and originally scheduled to open in 2021—has attracted international criticism for focusing on the rescue of Jews as the predominant feature of Holocaust history in Hungary. Critics fault the museum for ignoring the crucial role played by Hungarian authorities and individual Hungarians in the systematic persecution and deportation of more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- In the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in **Lithuania**—the major government-supported museum dedicated to the foreign occupation of the country (1940–1991, i.e., both the Nazi and Soviet eras)—the material related to the crimes of the Communist era dwarfs that related to the Holocaust. The museum promotes a false equivalency between Holocaust-era and Soviet postwar crimes and does a disservice to the understanding both of the Holocaust and the post–World War II Soviet era by describing both histories as examples of genocide, a practice common in several former Communist countries (see section below on “The Legacy of Communism”).
- In January 2017, Björn Höcke, a leader of the opposition AfD party in **Germany**, said in a speech: “We need nothing other than a 180-degree reversal on the politics of remembrance.” Referring to Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, he added: “We Germans...are the only people in the world who have planted a monument of shame in the heart of their capital.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> “Höcke-Rede im Wortlaut: ‘Gemütszustand eines total besiegten Volkes,’” *Der Tagesspiegel*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/hoecke-rede-im-wortlaut-gemuetszustand-eines-total-besiegten-volkes/19273518.html>. The demand by the AfD and others for an end to the current remembrance culture appears to be having some success in the German population. A 2020 survey by Deutsche Welle reports that 37 percent of Germans support leaving Holocaust remembrance behind (i.e. “Schlussstrich”), up from 33 percent in 2019 and 26 percent in 2018. <https://www.dw.com/de/die-deutschen-wollen-keinen-schlussstrich/a-52094901>

- A 2018 exhibition in **Bulgaria** titled “Country of the Rescued Jews,” sponsored in part by the Bulgarian government and opened by Deputy Prime Minister Valeri Simeonov,<sup>12</sup> presented a distorted picture of the Holocaust in Bulgaria. It portrayed officials in Bulgaria’s wartime government as rescuers of Bulgaria’s Jews and omitted their role in persecuting Bulgarian Jews and in deporting Jews from Bulgarian-controlled Thrace and Macedonia.

### **Efforts to glorify, honor, exonerate, or otherwise “rehabilitate” Holocaust-era historical figures or entities despite their association with crimes against humanity, collaboration with Nazi Germany, or direct involvement in the persecution and murder of Jews**

The means of rehabilitation include official recognition of these individuals or entities as heroic fighters for the national cause (often, in the struggle against communism) and prohibition of “defamation” against them; the naming of streets, squares, and public buildings after them; the erection of plaques and statues; and the organization of marches, rallies, and other forms of public commemoration. These efforts vary, but at times involve government officials and agencies (at the local as well as the national levels), or political parties or other influential non-state groups.

- In 2019, the annual torch-lit march held in the capital Sofia, **Bulgaria**, in honor of the memory of Hristo Lukov, drew thousands of participants from within and outside Bulgaria, despite condemnations by many Bulgarian politicians. Lukov was war minister between 1935 and 1938 and, as leader of the fascist Union of the Bulgarian National Legions, was a fervent supporter of anti-Jewish legislation in Bulgaria. The march is sponsored by the NGO Bulgarian National Union. Sofia’s mayor took steps to limit its scope in 2020.
- In **France** in 2018, at the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I, French President Emmanuel Macron sought to justify paying official homage to Marshal Philippe Pétain, World War II leader of the collaborationist Vichy government, as one of several French World War I military heroes, calling Pétain “a great soldier.” Although Macron acknowledged that Pétain had made “disastrous choices” and was “complicit in grave crimes” during World War II, the remarks provoked intense criticism, including as a form of rhetorical rehabilitation, from a wide spectrum of French politicians and commentators, as well as representatives of the Jewish community.
- A controversy in **Lithuania** surrounded the removal of a plaque commemorating the alleged Nazi collaborator Jonas Noreika, who, as the chief administrator of Šiauliai District during the first months of the German occupation, followed German directives to establish ghettos and expropriate the property of the Lithuanian Jews of the district. In 1991, Noreika was posthumously awarded the country’s second highest military medal for his leadership in the anti-Soviet guerilla war of the mid- to late-1940s. In 2018, Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius urged authorities to remove the plaque to Noreika that appears on the wall of the Lithuanian Academy of Sciences in central Vilnius. In July 2019, the plaque was removed on orders of the capital’s mayor, who condemned Noreika’s actions against the Jews. In September 2019, a crowd of protesters placed a

<sup>12</sup> Simeonov, formerly associated with the Ataka Party, in 2011 founded the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB), a nationalist party. In advance of March 2017 parliamentary elections, the NFSB joined with two other right-wing parties to form the United Patriots (UP) electoral coalition. UP gained sufficient votes to have a place in the governing coalition with GERBA, formed in May 2017, the first time a far-right party was part of the government. Simeonov served as deputy prime minister of Bulgaria for economic and demographic policies until his resignation in November 2018 over controversial remarks he made about disability rights activists. He was appointed as one of the deputy-presidents of the Bulgarian National Assembly in 2019 and remains in the leadership of the NFSB.

new plaque honoring Noreika on the site. The mayor said the action was “unlawful,” but police did nothing to prevent it.<sup>13</sup>

- Local officials and political organizations in **Ukraine** contribute to the glorification of individuals and groups who collaborated with Nazi Germany, including the OUN, a faction of which, called the OUN-B, was led by Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera, and the UPA. These groups are often portrayed as part of a larger nationalist struggle for liberation from Soviet domination. In L’viv in 2019, hundreds of men marched through the city streets in SS uniforms worn by members of the Ukrainian collaborationist division of the Waffen SS during World War II as part of a city-approved event. At least three Ukrainian municipalities in recent years have unveiled statues of Bandera’s deputy, Yaroslav Stetsko, who during the Holocaust openly called for “the extermination of the Jews.” The local Ukrainian officials have renamed or erected more than 70 streets, statues, and plaques in honor of Bandera and some of his OUN comrades, despite the well-documented connection between the Bandera-led faction of the OUN-B and the mass murder of Jews, Poles, and Roma and Sinti.

These individuals or groups are not honored **because** they contributed to the persecution of Jews, but the disregard for or minimization of the significance of their crimes results not only in their exoneration for those crimes but obliterates the value of Jewish lives.

Holocaust distortion is not just a national phenomenon. The trends of distortion and those who spread it reach across national boundaries. Conflicts over Holocaust-era history also contribute to transnational tensions between several European countries. Disputes and tensions over memory have international implications. This requires international solutions built on dialogue between and across governments and international organizations.

National events involving Holocaust distortion have transnational implications. For example, the march honoring Hristo Lukov (described above) that was held in 2019 in **Bulgaria** included participants from Bulgaria, Germany, France, and Sweden. This fits a pattern in which groups and individuals from many European countries—West and East—have swelled the ranks of participation in recent far-right and extreme nationalist events in **Ukraine, Poland, Romania, and Hungary**.<sup>14</sup>

Contested history that touches on the Holocaust has contributed to flare-ups in tensions between and among European nations. Distorted historical narratives around the Holocaust often relate to transnational issues that linger from the World War II era or even before, typically involving the treatment of one national group while under occupation by another, or exacerbating present-day tensions between neighboring states.

- **Hungary-Romania:** From 1941 until 1944, Hungary ruled northern Transylvania as a benefit of its membership in the Axis alliance; after World War II, the Allies returned this territory to Romania. Official Hungarian and Romanian narratives of the history of the Holocaust in Transylvania differ dramatically. The Hungarian narrative obfuscates the wartime record of the Horthy regime, which deported some 130,000 Jews from the region to Auschwitz; the Romanian narrative emphasizes

<sup>13</sup> This matter remains the subject of court proceedings as of this writing.

<sup>14</sup> See also examples from **Ukraine** (participants from Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Italy reportedly in attendance at an October 2019 far-right rally), **Poland** (annual independence day celebrations since at least 2014 have drawn extreme nationalists from Italy, Sweden, Hungary, Slovakia, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere), **Romania** (November 2019 annual gathering commemorating Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the interwar leader of the Romanian Legionary Movement, was attended by extreme nationalists from France and Bulgaria), and Hungary (including the 2020 “**Day of Honor**” gathering and the efforts of **Legio Hungaria** to build an alliance with right-wing extremist and neo-Nazi organizations in the region—e.g., from Ukraine, Serbia, Bulgaria, Czechia, Poland, and Germany).

these crimes, combining them with a focus on the regime’s brutalization of Romanians in northern Transylvania. Nationalist politicians from both the Fidesz and Jobbik parties in Hungary have sought to exert greater influence in contemporary Transylvania, which includes a large number of ethnic Hungarians, by rehabilitating prominent World War II–era Hungarian fascist cultural figures from the region.

- **Poland-Ukraine:** The law of each country generally disfavors expression of the “rival” historical interpretation of the other; heroes in one country may be deemed war criminals in the other. In 2018, Ukrainian far-right Svoboda party representatives flew the flag of the wartime OUN on official buildings in at least nine Ukrainian towns. This was purportedly in response to the enactment of a Polish law criminalizing denial of the crimes of Ukrainian nationalists during World War II and characterizing groups such as the OUN as Nazi collaborators.<sup>15</sup>
- **Russia-Ukraine:** The Russian government and its allies have used distorted World War II and Holocaust history as part of their disinformation campaigns in connection with Russia’s illegal seizure of Crimea and its proxy war in eastern Ukraine. During Soviet rule, Stepan Bandera and the UPA were portrayed exclusively as fascist collaborators. Today, Russian media builds on this legacy by referring to Maidan protesters in Ukraine as “Banderites” and fanning fears in Crimea and eastern Ukraine that “gangs of Banderites” are threatening ethnic cleansing of Russian residents of those regions.<sup>16</sup> Ukrainian nationalists have for many years glorified the past of some individuals and groups—despite their participation in crimes against Jews and collaboration with the Nazis. These include Bandera himself and serve to support the purported effort to rally national sentiment in opposition to Russian intervention.
- **Austria-Croatia:** Tensions have been heightened by the commemoration of the “victims of the Croatian Holocaust” in the Austrian border town of Bleiburg. In this area, Josip Tito’s Partisans killed thousands of Croatian troops after they surrendered in May 1945. Former members of the Croat fascist *Ustaša* movement and the World War II–era Croatian Home Guard established the annual event during the 1950s in order to keep alive the memory of the wartime independent Croatian state. In recent years, the event has grown into a mass gathering of up to 15,000 people, attracting neo-Nazis and far-right activists from all over Europe. It has been sponsored by the Croatian parliament with the cooperation of local Austrian officials. Some Austrian politicians in 2018 denounced the event as a “platform for extremists,” and Austrian police arrested several Croatians at the 2018 event—including a former county representative from the governing Croatian Democratic Party—for illegal display of Nazi and fascist symbols.<sup>17</sup> In July 2020, Austrian parliamentarians passed a resolution calling for a ban on the ceremony in Austria.<sup>18</sup>
- **Russia-Poland:** Major diplomatic tensions erupted in late 2019 and early 2020 between Russia and Poland in connection with the 75th anniversary of the Soviet liberation of the Auschwitz–Birkenau killing center: the dispute centered on the question of Soviet responsibility, together with Nazi Germany’s, for the dismemberment of Poland at the start of World War II. Russian President

<sup>15</sup> The provisions of the 2018 Polish law concerning certain crimes committed by Ukrainian nationalists were declared void by Poland’s Constitutional Court in 2019. See <https://www.polskieradio24.pl/5/1222/Artykul/2247655.Ekspert-orzeczenie-Trybunalu-Konstytucyjnego-ws-nowelizacji-ustawy-o-IPN-moze-otworzyc-droge-do-dyskusji>.

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/ukraine-decommunisation-law-soviet>.

<sup>17</sup> In advance of the 2019 event, Austrian law was changed to specifically ban the display of certain Croatian fascist symbols in Austria. The local Austrian Roman Catholic diocese also for the first time distanced itself officially from the commemoration and withdrew permission to hold a mass. Negative publicity around the event prompted a strong complaint from the Croatian Foreign Ministry. A Catholic mass to the victims of the Bleiburg massacre was held in Sarajevo in May 2020.

<sup>18</sup> See <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/09/austrian-mps-vote-for-ban-on-croats-bleiburg-wwii-gathering/>.

Vladimir Putin has accused Poland of cooperating with Nazi Germany in 1938, while minimizing the Soviet Union's role in starting the war, and its own cooperation with Nazi Germany. These statements drew a sharp rebuke from Polish leaders, as this most recent episode of the long-running rhetorical conflict between the two countries played out on the international stage.

Disputes and tensions over memory have international implications, and therefore require international solutions built on cooperation between governments and NGOs across borders.

## GROWING INFLUENCE OF THE PROPONENTS OF HOLOCAUST DISTORTION

The proponents and enablers of Holocaust distortion include governments, political leaders, and non-state actors. They have increasing political power and societal influence, and are bringing ideas once considered to be unacceptably extreme into the mainstream of political and public discourse.

**Growing Political Influence:** Following the end of the Cold War, political parties and leaders who advanced Holocaust distortion were relatively marginal to the political process in many European countries. Yet today, those who have enabled or promoted Holocaust distortion can be found in government (e.g., in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland),<sup>19</sup> or in the leading opposition party (France, Germany).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in **Germany**, individuals previously expelled from mainstream parties (e.g. Martin Hohman from CDU/CSU) for inflammatory statements about the Holocaust (as well as more generally about Jews) have found a new home in the increasingly successful top opposition party, AfD.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the political parties enabling Holocaust distortion today have, in the past, sheltered purveyors of outright Holocaust denial and antisemitic rhetoric in their leadership ranks. The current tendency of these parties as they compete in elections is to downplay or suppress public expression of those more extreme ideas—including by condemning, investigating, and at times expelling party members who engage in such behavior. For example, in **France**, Marine Le Pen has for several years increased the popularity of her opposition party National Rally (formerly National Front). In doing so, Le Pen (1) sidelined her father, the former party leader, who was notorious for denying the Holocaust, and (2) disciplined party members for making blatantly antisemitic statements, yet (3) promoted Holocaust distortion in the name of promoting French national pride. If outright Holocaust denial and blatantly antisemitic speech are politically unpalatable, more subtle distortion can be a way to signal support to voters who hold antisemitic and racist views.

**Amplified Online and through Social Media:** Over the years, social media and the Internet have greatly expanded the availability of accurate information about the Holocaust. More recently, Holocaust distortion

<sup>19</sup> Bulgaria: United Patriot Coalition (UP) (composed of the Bulgarian-supported International Macedonian Revolutionary Movement (IMRO), the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria (NFSB) and Ataka); Hungary: Fidesz; Poland: Law and Justice (PiS).

<sup>20</sup> France: National Rally (RN); Germany: Alternative for Germany (AfD); Hungary: Jobbik.

<sup>21</sup> For example, German politician Martin Hohmann was expelled from the Christian Democrats/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) faction in 2003, yet returned to the parliament with the AfD party in 2017.

(like Holocaust denial) has proliferated on these digital platforms.<sup>22</sup> Some recent studies describe the prevalence of Holocaust denial and distortion online (as part of larger studies looking at antisemitism more broadly). In the last few years, there have been several steps taken at the level of the European Union and at national levels to address the obligations of Internet providers and social media companies to respond to the presence of Holocaust denial and distortion on their platforms (largely in the context of hate speech).<sup>23</sup> These initiatives would be enhanced by further in-depth research into how, in individual cases, Holocaust denial and distortion are introduced and spread in cyberspace.

Proponents of distorted Holocaust narratives have amplified their influence through these platforms, spreading their ideas to wider and younger audiences that rely increasingly on the Internet for news and information.<sup>24</sup> For example, the youth-oriented Identitarian movement is very active in **Austria, Germany, and France**, with links across the globe. The group uses the Internet and social media, employing themes from modern pop culture, memes, and graffiti images with allusions to historical fascism and familiar antisemitic tropes, to attract the attention of young people previously beyond the reach of far-right extremist groups. These techniques are used to steadily push racist and xenophobic conspiracy theories and policy proposals into the political mainstream.<sup>25</sup> A prominent example of this is the increasingly popular set of conspiracy theories regarding the “replacement” of white Europeans by non-white migrants through the purported efforts of “international elites” (such as philanthropist George Soros). Some of these ideas have been promoted by political parties, and some governments as well, in Europe and beyond.<sup>26</sup>

## DEEP-SEATED AND UNRESOLVED TENSIONS OVER HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

Holocaust distortion is fueled by a climate of resurgent, aggressive nationalism in several parts of Europe, coupled in Eastern Europe with the legacy of Soviet- and post-Soviet-era distortions of the Holocaust and World War II.

**A Nationalist Backlash against Confronting History:** The trend across Europe is toward the reassertion of national control over Holocaust memory, often couched in terms of (1) ensuring that memory supports rather than undermines national pride, and other interests and/or (2) protecting national memory from

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g. World Jewish Congress, “Anti-Semitic Symbols and Holocaust Denial in Social Media Posts,” January 2018 (<https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/holocaust-denial-and-anti-semitism-on-social-media-up-30-percent-in-january-2018-compared-to-2016-wic-report-finds-2-3-2018>) (finds large increase in number of conversations denying the Holocaust were recorded between January 1 and 24, 2018, in comparison to the same period in 2016). Internet sites and social media still provide outlets for outright Holocaust deniers when, because of legal restrictions, other outlets such as film, television, mainstream press, and book publishing are unavailable to them. Examples include Holocaust deniers pushed outside the mainstream discourse yet with active presence online and in social media in France (Robert Faurisson, who died on October 21, 2018, at the age of 89, had a blog where he continued to publish inflammatory posts up until his death; another Holocaust denier, Vincent Reynouard, who has served time in jail because of his writing, continues to post videos on YouTube); Italy (Italian Holocaust denial has considerable reach through online forums, including dozens of websites, discussion boards, and social networks); and Romania (notorious Romanian Holocaust deniers such as Ion Coja or Vasile Zărnescu are largely neglected by mainstream media, but are both very active on certain websites).

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g. EU Code of Conduct at [https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en).

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g. “Rightwing populist AfD dominates German Twitter, new study shows,” *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/760fbd14-9c5f-11e7-8cd4-932067fb946>. (Oxford University research in connection to 2017 elections in Germany shows that AfD party drives more Twitter traffic than any major German party). According to the Pew Research Center, most Americans get their news from social media despite concerns over accuracy: <https://www.journalism.org/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/>. Majorities in most European countries do the same: <https://www.journalism.org/2018/05/14/many-western-europeans-get-news-via-social-media-but-in-some-countries-substantial-minorities-do-not-pay-attention-to-the-source/pi-2018-05-14-western-europe-5-01/>.

<sup>25</sup> Anne Applebaum, “How Europe’s ‘Identitarians’ are mainstreaming racism,” *Washington Post* (May 17, 2019): [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-europes-identitarians-are-mainstreaming-racism/2019/05/17/3c7c9a6e-78da-11e9-b3f5-5673edf2d127\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/how-europes-identitarians-are-mainstreaming-racism/2019/05/17/3c7c9a6e-78da-11e9-b3f5-5673edf2d127_story.html). The Identitarian organization in Austria (IBO) has links in Europe in Italy (Casa Pound, Generazione Identitaria, Identitäre Bewegung Südtirol), Germany (Blaue Narzisse, Deutsche Burschenschaft, Ein Prozent e.V., Identitäre Bewegung Deutschland, Institut für Staatspolitik/Zeitschrift Sezession, PEGIDA Dresden), Hungary (Jobbik), France (Génération Identitaire), Poland (Ruch Narodowy) and Slovenia (Generacija identitete Slovenija). See also <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/new-zealand/2019-04-01/global-language-hatred-french>.

<sup>26</sup> See “Hungary: Europe’s Champion of Conspiracy Theories,” <https://www.dw.com/en/hungary-europes-champion-of-conspiracy-theories/a-46689822>; see also <https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/10/whos-afraid-of-george-soros/>.

purported “outside interference.” This reassertion of national control is often accompanied by expressions of distorted historical narratives that downplay responsibility for and participation in the persecution and mass murder of Jews as well as try to erase the reality of local, regional, and nationwide antisemitism at the time. It has also led to a backlash—from both official and unofficial sources—against scholars, journalists, educators, and others who have challenged national myths. For example, between 2015 and 2019, law enforcement authorities in **Poland** were investigating Polish-born American historian and sociologist Jan Tomasz Gross for a statement he made, in a German publication, asserting that Poles had killed more Jews than they had killed Nazis during World War II.<sup>27</sup> The investigation, which was launched to determine whether Gross had intended to insult the Polish nation, was closed without further action in 2019. A well-known figure in Poland, Gross published a groundbreaking study in 2000 on the participation of Polish residents of the small town of Jedwabne in the mass murder of their Jewish neighbors in 1941.

Moreover, some Eastern Europeans have expressed resentment over what they view as the European Union’s effort to make them adopt a “Western European” interpretation of World War II history, which presents 1945 as a time of liberation rather than as the opening of a new period of brutal occupation. They view Western countries as minimizing the trauma of Soviet domination, and in the minds of a certain subset of this group, the West’s attention to the Holocaust and local collaboration in it exacerbates this sentiment. In this context, some proponents or enablers of Holocaust distortion position themselves on a variety of other political, social, and economic issues as defending their nation and standing up to the anti-nationalist tendencies emanating from Brussels.<sup>28</sup> The pushback against Europe-wide standards and guidelines related to Holocaust memory is growing—at a time when European unity is under strain.

**The Legacy of Communism:** Holocaust distortion in the Soviet Union and its satellites obscured the Jewish identity of victims. Official narratives generally played down the extent of local collaboration with the German occupation authorities, identifying collaborators—even those who assisted in the annihilation of the Jews—merely as enemies of Soviet communism. In contrast to the common theme of Soviet heroism in defeating Nazi Germany, the Holocaust was in many countries largely a taboo subject in public discussion or education.

Several legacies of this record continue to shape manifestations of Holocaust distortion in former Eastern Bloc countries. One legacy, which has been discussed above, is the impulse to elevate certain wartime figures as heroes because they fought the Soviets, even if they actively collaborated with the German occupation authorities. Another is the persistence of the myth of “Judeo-Bolshevism” (i.e., that Soviet communism was a tool of Jewish domination), a trope that was used to justify the mass murder of Jews during the Holocaust.<sup>29</sup> A third equates Soviet and Nazi crimes, facilitating the popularity and acceptance of the concept of the “double genocide.” This idea holds that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union bear complete and equal responsibility for all the crimes of the wartime era, leaving the other states of Europe free of the obligation to examine in a historically-sound manner their own behavior during World War II

<sup>27</sup> See Jan T. Gross, “Eastern Europe’s Crisis of Shame,” September 14, 2015 (<https://www.socialeurope.eu/eastern-europes-crisis-of-shame>). In his 2000 work, *Neighbors*, Gross challenged the prevailing national view by arguing that Poles were not just victims and heroes, but also perpetrators of anti-Jewish killings during the Holocaust.

<sup>28</sup> Many of the influential political parties and leaders promoting or enabling Holocaust distortion also reportedly advocate rolling back aspects of their nation’s commitment to European unity (for example, National Rally (France), had advocated leaving the Eurozone and blames the EU for mass immigration to Europe; AfD (Germany), began as an anti-Euro party; Fidesz (Hungary), questions deeper institutional integration, disputes common EU policies, e.g. on migration; Jobbik (Hungary), disputes common EU policies, e.g. on migration; PiS (Poland), questions deeper institutional integration, disputes common EU policies, e.g. on migration; FPÖ (Austria), opposes greater European integration, as well as an EU focus on the rule of law and its trade liberalization initiatives; The League (Italy), anti-Euro, disputes common EU policies, e.g. on migration; United Patriots (Bulgaria), opposes Article 7 process regarding Hungary, disputes common EU policies, e.g. on migration).

<sup>29</sup> For example, Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister Simeonov of the United Patriots told the private Skat television station, which he owns, that the 2018 exhibition “Country of the Rescued Jews” (discussed above) did nothing else but “pay tribute to all those Bulgarians of whom a large part were killed after September 9 [1944 Communist takeover]. Unfortunately,” he added, “no small part of them suffered precisely from the actions of the Jews, who had become part of the government of Communist Bulgaria.” In Poland, in July 2017, following his conviction for burning a Jewish effigy at an anti-immigrant rally held by the small National Radical Camp party, Piotr Rybák declared that “*Zydokomuna* still rules in our homeland. For the past 28 years the most important positions in our country have been occupied by the Jewish nation.”



and the Holocaust era. A manifestation of this third legacy is the effort to establish official, joint commemorations of the victims of Nazism and communism in several countries, as well as at the European level. For example, in 2009, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on European conscience and totalitarianism, calling for the proclamation of August 23 (the anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact) as a Europe-wide day of remembrance for the victims of Stalinism and Nazism.<sup>30</sup> This impedes understanding of either of these eras, as it equates the legacies of the crimes of Nazism/fascism and communism and can facilitate the shifting of blame for Nazi-era crimes to others in an effort to whitewash national narratives.<sup>31</sup>

## HOLOCAUST DISTORTION AND OTHER PROBLEMATIC TRENDS

Current trends in Holocaust distortion do not exist in a vacuum. Growths in distortion have occurred parallel to other troublesome trends, such as the erosion of democratic norms and institutions, the intensification of antisemitism, and the rise of aggressive nationalism and xenophobia. Although all nations try to control their historical narratives, in democracies, free speech and academic inquiry foster open, robust public discourse. Absent these democratic norms, history can become a political tool to promote authoritarian ends and to justify the targeting of Jews and other minorities.

### CONTEMPORARY ANTISEMITISM IN EUROPE

Official statistics from national and international bodies show that antisemitic harassment, violence, and discrimination are at high levels and increasing in many parts of Europe.<sup>32</sup> This finding is supported by NGO studies and surveys of European Jews, which also suggest that such incidents are under-reported.<sup>33</sup> NGO monitors have found intensifying levels of antisemitic hate speech online and in social media as well.<sup>34</sup> While there are differences from country to country, the rise in violence and other manifestations of antisemitism in Europe occur from points across the political spectrum from the far right to the far left, and from those espousing radical Islamist and other extremist religious and nationalist views. European government leaders have denounced antisemitic violence and hate speech, and some have upgraded security assistance to protect Jewish communal property and/or created government structures with specific mandates to monitor and confront antisemitism; even so, the atmosphere is such that large segments of the Jewish population have considered leaving Europe.<sup>35</sup> We must also note that antisemitism is a global problem: for example, in 2018–19, there were two deadly synagogue shootings in the United States.

<sup>30</sup> European Parliament, "Resolution on European Conscience and Totalitarianism," (April 2, 2009) [P6\\_TA\(2009\)0213](#); see also European Parliament, "Resolution on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe," (September 19, 2019) (2019/2819(RSP)), [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021\\_EN.html](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html).

<sup>31</sup> The situation in Russia differs from other former Communist countries. Russia today rejects any equalization of the crimes of Nazism and the crimes of communism, instead promoting the narrative that the Soviet Union "saved" Europe from Nazism while simultaneously downplaying any collaboration between the Soviet Union, Russians, and Nazi Germany.

<sup>32</sup> See Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union, *Antisemitism: Overview of Data Available in the European Union 2008–2018*, November 6, 2019, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2019/antisemitism-overview-data-available-european-union-2008-2018>; OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Understanding Anti-Semitic Hate Crimes and Addressing the Security needs of Jewish Communities: A Practical Guide* (2017) 5, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/317166?download=true>.

<sup>33</sup> See e.g. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/2nd-survey-discrimination-hate-crime-against-jews>.

<sup>34</sup> See, e.g. Anti-Defamation League, *Quantifying Hate: A Year of Anti-Semitism on Twitter* (2018) <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/quantifying-hate-a-year-of-anti-semitism-on-twitter#holocaust-denial>; World Jewish Congress, "Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism on social media up 30 percent in January 2018 compared to 2016," <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/holocaust-denial-and-anti-semitism-on-social-media-up-30-percent-in-january-2018-compared-to-2016-wjc-report-finds-2-3-2018>.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g. Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union, *Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism/Second Survey on Discrimination and Hate Crime against Jews in the EU* (December 10, 2018) [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2018-experiences-and-perceptions-of-antisemitism-survey\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-experiences-and-perceptions-of-antisemitism-survey_en.pdf).

## THE ALARMING RISE IN ANTISEMITISM

Opinion surveys show that negative stereotypes about Jews in connection with the Holocaust persist among significant portions of the European population. The views that Jews focus too much on the Holocaust, for instance, or that Holocaust memory is a Jewish effort to justify undeserved compensation in the form of reparations or the creation of the State of Israel, is widespread.<sup>36</sup> Thus, antisemitic statements frequently multiply when tensions rise regarding responsibility for the Holocaust. In 2018, the international backlash following the enactment of the amendments to the law on national memory in **Poland** touched off an unprecedented rise in overtly antisemitic statements in Polish mainstream media and by political figures in connection with Holocaust issues.<sup>37</sup> In spring 2019, a deputy mayor of Bucharest, **Romania**, in the face of criticism over decisions regarding the location of Romania’s first national museum on Romanian Jewry and the Holocaust, called a Romanian Jewish leader “a stranger to this nation [and] to the history of the Romanian people” and told this Romanian citizen, “Go back where you came from.”<sup>38</sup> The deputy mayor also announced his intention to install a commemorative bust of the wartime Romanian Fascist leader Ion Antonescu in the city center.

Some governments have bolstered Holocaust commemoration and education as part of their official response to intensifying antisemitism in their countries. Ironically, in some circumstances, this has had unintended consequences. For example, in **France**, some public voices promoting a self-declared “de-colonial ideology” decry government proposals to intensify Holocaust education as demonstrating Jewish control of French politics. They contrast this effort with French policies that are seen as ignoring certain aspects of history, such as colonialism and slavery, which touch more closely communities of immigrants to France and their descendants. In general, the recent European migration crisis has intensified a long-running discussion about the appropriate role of Holocaust memory in the cultural and social fabric of the countries where the Holocaust took place and that are now home to substantial postwar immigrant communities from outside of Europe.

## AGGRESSIVE NATIONALISM AND XENOPHOBIA

Holocaust distortion is often a vehicle to express antisemitic ideas, or incite antisemitic feelings. Holocaust distortion also can promote negative views about other groups perceived to be “outsiders.” Many political leaders who are proponents or enablers of Holocaust distortion are also at the forefront of campaigns against Roma and LGBTQ+ people—who were persecuted during the Holocaust—as well as refugees and migrants, Muslims, and people of color. These campaigns contribute to social divisions. They advance homogeneity and “restore national pride” by (1) relieving a nation of historical, moral, or financial responsibility for what is one of the largest crimes in history perpetrated against its own minority populations, and (2) reinforcing a narrative of the in-group as victims of “foreign” influence (in the past, Nazis, Soviets; in the present day, the European Union, the United States, Jews). This perceived need to

<sup>36</sup> See, e.g. Fundamental Rights Agency of the European Union, *Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism/Second Survey on Discrimination and Hate Crime against Jews in the EU* (December 10, 2018) [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2018-experiences-and-perceptions-of-antisemitism-survey\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2018-experiences-and-perceptions-of-antisemitism-survey_en.pdf); 2018 CNCDH: *Report on the Fight Against Racism, Anti-Semitism and Xenophobia* [https://www.cncdh.fr/sites/default/files/english\\_essentiels\\_rapport\\_racisme\\_2018.pdf](https://www.cncdh.fr/sites/default/files/english_essentiels_rapport_racisme_2018.pdf); CNN, *Anti-Semitism in Europe* (November 2018) <https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2018/11/europe/antisemitism-poll-2018-intl>; *Dec 2018 Eurobarometer: EU Perceptions on Anti-Semitism* <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip-18-2220>; Pew Research Center, *Negative stereotypes about Jews are largely rejected in France* (March 2019), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/13/negative-stereotypes-about-jews-are-largely-rejected-in-france/>; Anti-Defamation League, *Global Survey of 78 Countries* (November 2019), <https://global100.adl.org/about/2019>.

<sup>37</sup> See Rafal Pankowski, “The Resurgence in Anti-Semitic Discourse in Poland,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* (2018) [https://www.nigdywiecej.org/docstation/com\\_docstation/20/r\\_pankowski\\_the\\_resurgence\\_of\\_antisemitic\\_discourse\\_in\\_poland\\_israel\\_journa.pdf](https://www.nigdywiecej.org/docstation/com_docstation/20/r_pankowski_the_resurgence_of_antisemitic_discourse_in_poland_israel_journa.pdf). See also Anti-Defamation League, *Global 100 Index* (2019) <https://global100.adl.org/about/2019> (“Political discourse influences anti-Semitism. Holocaust remembrance and restitution issues have been prominent political topics in Poland over the past few years. Asked whether ‘Jews still talk too much about what happened to them in the Holocaust,’ the number of Poles who agreed rose from 61 percent in 2015 to 74 percent in 2019.”).

<sup>38</sup> See <https://www.ipost.com/Diaspora/Antisemitism/Bucharest-deputy-mayor-wants-to-erect-statue-of-WWII-fascist-leader-586996>.

restore pride provides a rationale for mandating a particular view of national history, identity, or core values.

It is important to note that Nazi Germany and several of its Axis partners specifically targeted Roma and Sinti in Europe for annihilation, and that neo-Nazi groups and extreme nationalist figures, often using rhetoric that echoes that of the World War II era and forms of Holocaust distortion, target Roma and Sinti with intensifying hatred, discrimination, and violence today. Recent examples of violence and hate speech targeting Roma and Sinti communities have occurred in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, and Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> Minimization and the failure to explore fully the genocide of the Roma and Sinti are factors in contemporary anti-Roma and Sinti prejudice, a phenomenon that transcends national borders.<sup>40</sup>

### EROSION OF DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS

An honest engagement with history is a key element of, and flourishes best in, a healthy democracy. Former Romanian President Ion Iliescu, in his country's first official recognition of the role that Romanians played in the Holocaust, said in 2004: "Assumption of one's own past, with its goods and evils, is not just an exercise in honesty but also the proof of democratic conscience...."<sup>41</sup> Open and well-informed public debate and education about a nation's history—the positive and the negative—can moderate political and ideological extremism and undermine stereotypes and conspiracy theories. The reverse is also true: Holocaust distortion is detrimental to freedom and democracy. The European Court of Human Rights has determined that the denial or rewriting of the historical facts of the Holocaust is "a serious threat to public order. It [is] incompatible with democracy and human rights."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, Holocaust distortion is more effectively entrenched through antidemocratic methods, such as state control over the media, academia, and civil society organizations, as well as government interference with the independence of the judiciary. These methods allow the state to control the means to promote these narratives and limit or discredit alternative ones.<sup>43</sup>

The increasingly influential Holocaust distortion and other misuses of history described in this background brief are occurring at the same time as an erosion of democratic norms and institutions in many European countries.<sup>44</sup> Further inquiry is needed as to the precise relationships among these trends. Although not specifically citing distortion of Holocaust history, Hungary and Poland have been censured by EU institutions for deterioration in the rule of law, including, among other concerns, the weakening of judicial

<sup>39</sup> See examples cited in USHMM, "Museum Statement on International Roma Day" (April 8, 2019); USHMM, "Museum Statement on 2018 Roma Genocide Remembrance Day" (August 2, 2018). For an example from Hungary, see <http://szentkoronaradio.com/blog/2020/02/10/torockjai-laszlo-mindenkire-szuksege-van-a-ciganybunozokkel-szemben/?fbclid=IwAR18L7iEdxcm6usSMn-gHtVZax9QRDoilWFknzhxu9QS5v6X3UzLspwa4>.

<sup>40</sup> See, e.g., <http://hungarianfreepress.com/2014/08/05/opposition-calls-for-balogs-resignation-over-revisionist-holocaust-comment/>.

<sup>41</sup> This statement reversed prior statements by President Iliescu and his government. In 2003, he and other officials stated that there had been no Holocaust in Romania and suggested that political opponents of Nazi Germany had been treated similarly to Jews. See <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5351110>. See also USHMM press release *Romania and the Holocaust* (June 17, 2003); *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania* (November 11, 2004) 37–8, <https://www.ushmm.org/m/pdfs/20080226-romania-commission-postwar.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> *Garaudy v. France* (decision of July 7, 2003), <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng-press/?i=003-788339-805233>. See also, Council of Europe, Recommendation Rec(2001)15 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on history teaching in twenty-first-century Europe (confirming that "ideological falsification and manipulation of history are incompatible with [the] fundamental principles" of genuine democracy, including individual freedom, political liberty and the rule of law; citing the Statute of the Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/1680306052>); Nils Muznieks, former Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, "Human Rights Comment: Why remembering the Holocaust is a human rights imperative," 10/18/2016.

<sup>43</sup> The government of Russia, see above, has utilized antidemocratic methods to limit debate on accurate World War II history.

<sup>44</sup> This decline has been measured over the last decade by the major indexes on freedom, democracy, and the rule of law—most substantially in Eastern Europe but also to some extent in the West—as part of a global downturn beginning in 2007, following decades of worldwide democratic expansion. The decline measured by these indices has been most significant in Russia, Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine. See Democracy Index (2010–18 scores dropped significantly for Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine); Freedom House, Freedom of the World (same); Freedom House, Freedom of the Media (significant declines in Hungary and Poland 2010–18, Russia score consistently very low); CATO Freedom Index (significant decreases 2010–18 in Austria, Hungary, Russia, Poland); World Justice Project Rule of Law Index (significant decreases between 2014 and 2017–18 in Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine); Bertelsman Transition Index (BTI) Democracy Status Index (between 2014 and 2017, scores dropped for Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary and Russia).

independence, restricting the freedom of nongovernmental organizations to operate without undue interference, and limiting academic freedom and the environment for protection of freedom of expression.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

An accurate understanding of Holocaust history is essential to grappling with some of the challenges that threaten European democracies today. The memory of the Holocaust serves as a warning against the return of group-targeted hatred within the context of an erosion of democratic principles and institutions. Moreover, the collective memory of two world wars and the Holocaust played a key role in driving the creation of global, transatlantic, and European institutions designed to protect peace, security, and human dignity. Holocaust distortion and related misuses of history for political purposes inevitably undermine the justification and the defense of these institutions and the principles on which they are based.

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<sup>45</sup> Proceedings involving both countries have been opened under Article 7 of the Treaty of the European Union to review their EU membership rights. See European Parliament, "Resolution on the Situation in Hungary" (adopted 12 September 2018) ([P8\\_TA\(2018\)0340](#)); European Parliament, "Resolution on the situation of the rule of law and democracy in Poland" (adopted 15 November 2017) ([P8\\_TA\(2017\)0442](#)); European Commission, "Reasoned Proposal in Accordance With Article 7(1) of the Treaty on European Union Regarding the Rule of Law In Poland," [COM\(2017\)835/Final Dec. 20, 2017](#). It is noteworthy that some political parties that have promoted or enabled Holocaust distortion in their own countries have also opposed the steps taken by European institutions to censure backsliding in the rule of law in others. See e.g., <https://www.euractiv.com/section/eu-elections-2019/news/bulgarian-government-sides-with-orban-against-article-7/> (United Patriots Coalition in Bulgaria in support of Hungary); <https://www.eunews.it/2018/09/12/orbans-defeat-splits-the-italian-government-of-change/108744> (The Lega of Italy in support of Hungary).

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