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Noxious Comparisons. The Holocaust in Israeli Political Discourse

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It is taboo in Israel to compare the suffering of the Palestinians with that of the Jews in the holocaust. Anyone who does so is at once ostracized. The latest is film director and producer Yonatan Segal: in a marketing document for his *Odem* (Lipstick), which is currently being filmed, he wrote that "the occupation is more terrible than Israel has ever admitted, and it is possible to compare it with the holocaust." The Israeli Film Fund, which has been backing the project, responded by freezing the money. The issue even reached the Knesset, to which Segal was summoned to explain. He is only one among many who have been pilloried for the comparison.

Currently a play called *The Third Generation* is running in German cities. The actors are Israelis, Palestinians and Germans. The work appears under the aegis of Israel's National Theater, known as Habima, and Berlin's Schaubühne. It slaughters all the sacred cows, subjecting the tragic history of the three peoples to satire, criticism and discussion. Despite a brilliant monologue called "Don't Compare," delivered by one of the Israelis, comparison is of the essence throughout.

The Israeli Occupation *invites* the comparison. Yet the invitation must be declined. Those who accept it act, I suspect, more from ignorance than from any intention to falsify the historical truth or diminish the suffering of the Jewish people. The younger generation in Israel has little interest in history. Theodore Herzl and David Ben Gurion are largely just names to our young. They know little, too, about what took place in Europe in the 1930's and 40's. This ignorance exposes them to cynical manipulation where the holocaust is concerned. Youth trips to Auschwitz, for instance—organized by the Ministry of Education—are intended not just to inform but to convey messages, explicit and implicit, justifying the Jewish state and its policies.

Fifty million people died in World War II, including twenty million Soviet citizens. To the death camps were sent not only the Jews, but also the German Communists and Social Democrats, as well as Gypsies and homosexuals. But the liquidation of the Jews was the cruelest of all, the most systematic and barbaric, and the least comprehensible. Here was Germany, the most advanced nation in Europe, perhaps the world, demonstrating how deeply human beings can sink. Culture, science and technology put up no resistance before a racist, nationalist ideology.

Yet precisely those who raise the banner of the holocaust, claiming to preserve the memory, have become the big falsifiers, using it to achieve their goals and justify their acts against the Palestinians. Among the worst is Binyamin Netanyahu, who has no shame about standing at Auschwitz and comparing Hitler to Ahmadinejad and Iran to Nazi Germany. The clear intent is to equate the victims of the holocaust with the State of Israel. According to this distorted view, Israel is the victim, and occupying the Palestinians is nothing but a defensive act against those who want to exterminate us.

There is no basis for this comparison. The European Jews who perished were, for the most part, poor and persecuted, lacking all rights and means of defense. They were Diaspora Jews who spoke Yiddish, a culture that has been erased by Israel. The only thing that Israel preserved from it is the holocaust, which has been transformed from a horrible historical event into the mythic bedrock of the nation. Its victims are evoked to justify every outrage. With Torah in one hand and holocaust in the other, the Israelis established their state while disinheriting another people. The factors behind Nazi aggression—namely, the will to expand the nation's borders by force, racism, hatred of outsiders, a sense of superiority, and indifference to the suffering of others—are values adopted by Israeli society. That is why the critics of Israel doggedly compare the occupation and the holocaust—for if the Israeli Prime Minister is permitted to draw analogies, why not they?

The holocaust cannot be compared with anything humanity has known. In contrast, what Israel is doing in the

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Occupied Territories is comparable to much else that has happened. It invents nothing new. When the first Intifada broke out in 1987, the IDF distributed to its officers Alastair Horne's book, *A Savage War of Peace*, on the French occupation of Algeria. The apartheid regime in South Africa also invites comparison, as do all the varieties of colonialism that marked the 19th century and the first half of the 20th. But colonialism has passed from the world, and only the Israeli brand persists ad nauseam. The world has tired of this intractable conflict.

In order to condemn the occupation, to expose its full inhumanity, there is no need to compare it with the holocaust. It is bad enough as is. Those who fear a return of fascism ought not to seek the root of all evil in the caves of Toura Boura, nor in Tehran. Fascism continues to fester in the same western societies where it first developed. It sprouts up in the US, Switzerland, Italy, France, Holland, Britain and Austria. Its common denominator is hatred of strangers, nationalism, racist supremacy, scorn for democracy, and the attempt to renew the greatness of declining empires. Here is where the real danger lurks. To this danger, however, the State of Israel remains indifferent, aiming its arrows eastward. Netanyahu's comparison is worse than false: it is harmful.

Post-scriptum :

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