

Israel, Netanyahu and Misuse of Holocaust

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Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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*The iron hand crush'd the tyrant's head,
And became a tyrant in his stead.
— William Blake, The Grey Monk*

The use of historical suffering is standard fare for the descendants. The descendants of history's victims tend to be the modern day avengers. History's record is not so much to be righted as washed, cleansed and made anew.

When the political reserves are empty, forms of credit have to be found. In the historical context, the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has often had an enormous reserve to draw upon: the terrifying, seemingly bottomless legacy of the Holocaust, the negative gearing of history's financiers he can resort to when he finds himself in a tight spot.

The latest example of this came on Wednesday, when his office quoted the prime minister's reaction to the removal of Hamas from the terrorist list by the General Court of the European Union.

"In Luxembourg, the European Court removed Hamas from the list of terrorist organisations, Hamas that has committed countless war crimes and countless terror acts" (Ynet News, Dec 17). From that, he could draw a rather long bow in reasoning that, "It seems that too many in Europe, on whose soil six million Jews were slaughtered, have learned nothing."

The Court itself would have been surprised by Netanyahu. After all, its judgment had nothing to do with reviewing the merits of Hamas being classified as a terrorist group or otherwise. "The Court stresses that those annulments, on fundamental procedural grounds, do not imply any substantive assessment of the question of the classification of Hamas as a terrorist group." Furthermore, asset freezes will still be kept in place for three months pending further EU actions.

The use of the Holocaust has been extensively covered in writings that remind one how easy commemoration can slide into endless pieties and historical manipulation. The creation of "memorial days", for instance, tends to be rooted in political calculation and chance – Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain, for instance, proved to be one striking example (*The Independent*, Jan 25, 2005). What mattered was selecting the most supreme atrocity for commemorative reflection.

It seems somewhat distasteful to keep badgering and hectoring your allies with such necrophilic reminders, but Netanyahu knows no other way. He knows that history is getting away from him, that the Israeli machinery keen on promoting the facts of a tolerant Israeli

state is coming apart at the seams. Adding to that the canter at which nations are recognising a Palestinian state, and he is clearly proving to be at wits end. His political opponents know it.

When he has the chance to use the Holocaust, he will. He will use the all too neat wrapping of appeasement to suggest that European states and institutions have, within them, a soft, wobbly centre susceptible to placating. He cites, in this year's Holocaust Memorial Day Ceremony address at Yad Vashem, a resolution by the Oxford University student organisation proclaiming that, under no circumstances would they "fight for their King and country."

Rather than extolling the virtues of a resolution encouraging a lack of bloodiness and fitful war mongering, Netanyahu sees it as the ultimate, delusionary betrayal. "This example illustrates the West's feeble attitude vis-à-vis the rise of Nazism."

No where does the Israeli prime minister see fit to explain the haunting memories of millions of European dead from the 1914-1918 war, the extinct generation, the fears of going on another round of self-annihilation and industrial immolation. Appeasement was the logical consequence of preventing war, a Falstaffian cowardice born of a desire to avoid the forfeiture of life. After all, "To die is to be a counterfeit". That it was waged by the Axis powers with genocidal purpose was a brutal reality that came later. The rest is tarot reading gibberish.

A refusal to understand the effects of World War I on Europe in the 1930s is almost as significant as a refusal by the Israeli government to understand the implications of various historical decisions to dispossess, control and monitor the Palestinian population. Historical blindness, however, is a tonic, and a useful one when in a bind. It is a love note one severs, rewords and readjusts to explain a past relationship. "I thought I knew you..."

Netanyahu follows the most disturbing of lines when it comes to using Holocaust reminders. He speaks in the manner of a lecturer who thinks his history students have flunked. "In retrospect," claimed Netanyahu at Yad Vashem for his Holocaust Memorial Day Ceremony address this year, "there is a direct line connecting the racial laws and the gas chambers" (*The Times of Israel*, April 27). That Israeli politics continues to flirt, and indeed discuss laws on racial identity openly, is the cruellest of ironies. But irony and blackmail often clink glasses and openly celebrate in festive spirit.

Not only has Israel received over the decades assistance from numerous European countries, it has capitalised on donations, funding and armaments from a range of allies keen to see its position shored up in the Middle East. The political landscape is changing, but Netanyahu insists on using historical blackmail to generate immediate political gains. He has his enemies and his dislikes, but he is happily sordid in making use of the past to manipulate the present. Such is the manner of those who crush a foe in order to become one.

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