Architecture of Subversion: Distorting Holocaust Memory in the Digital Age

Dr Shlomit Lir

International Holocaust Remembrance Day is intended to serve as an anchor for moral commitment to historical truth and collective responsibility, as summarized in the phrase "never again." Yet in the post-truth era, Holocaust memory faces more than the natural erosion of time or the persistent efforts of outright Holocaust deniers like David Irving or Ernst Zündel. It is increasingly subject to systematic distortion, flattening, and political appropriation. This process often unfolds on digital platforms frequently perceived as apolitical, most notably Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that presents itself as a neutral vehicle for advancing human knowledge. Wikipedia shapes public consciousness, influences the training data of large language models (LLMs), and attracts nearly 10 billion monthly visits to its English-language articles alone.

Contemporary antisemitism increasingly operates through Holocaust distortion and the instrumental deployment of concepts drawn from the genocide of the Jewish people, often under the guise of anti-Zionism. These concepts are weaponized to equate the deliberate, state-orchestrated, industrial genocide with the Nakba (framed as a contingent historical event); to compare Israel with Nazi Germany; and to undermine Israel's right to exist by delegitimizing the Zionist movement, with potentially serious implications.

On English Wikipedia, this is done through the framing of topics related to Zionism and the conflict, as can be seen in the following examples: The title of the article "The Holocaust and the Nakba" in itself can indicate the willingness to forgo accuracy and discuss a narrative that juxtaposes two events that bear no substantive relationship to one another. The article opens by pointing to a single remote source stating that "Some scholars have regarded the Holocaust and the Nakba as related events in discussions of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, both historically and in the way these two events have influenced perceptions of the conflict by both parties".

By leading with this cautious formulation from a minority of scholars and presenting it as the article's central premise, Wikipedia lends encyclopedic authority to a linkage that flattens the unparalleled scale and intent of the Holocaust, an industrial genocide aimed at total extermination, against the tragic but contextually distinct outcomes of the 1948 war for Palestinians. This approach

risks normalizing a comparative framework that undermines the Holocaust's historical uniqueness while advancing a politicized narrative of equivalence.

Another example is the antisemitic article "Comparison between Israel and Nazi Germany," which, together with the article "Weaponization of antisemitism," contributes to role inversion in contemporary discourse. The first opens by asserting that such comparisons "occur frequently in the political discourse of anti-Zionism and part of the broader criticism of Israel", a framing that normalizes controversial analogies despite their potential antisemitism per the IHRA definition. The second similarly serves to normalize and legitimize dismissal of antisemitism concerns as tactical "weaponization," often invoking tropes of Jewish over-sensitivity or manipulation, such as "crying wolf" or "playing the victim card", in a way unequaled for other persecuted groups. This unequal scrutiny effectively inverts victim and perpetrator roles, amplifying politicized narratives that undermine genuine efforts to combat rising antisemitism. Moreover, it serves as a reservoir for antisemitic discourse by quoting and repeating defamatory claims, portrayed as efforts to "silence" legitimate criticism, that collectively target Jews as exploiting accusations to stifle dissent and preserve power.

Another tactic on English Wikipedia that can enhance antisemitism involves undermining the Zionist movement's role in securing a homeland for Jews fleeing persecution. In various articles, Zionism undergoes de-historicization: severed from its Jewish roots, it is framed as a foreign colonial project that exploited European guilt over the Holocaust to "seize" land, recasting a national liberation movement as

opportunistic aggression. Editors push to insert "supremacism" into Zionism related articles, cherry-picking sources and deliberately echoing "white supremacy" and Nazi ideology, to portray Jewish self-determination as inherently racist.

Similarly, the article Gaza genocide presents the debated accusation of genocide as an established and ongoing event, while relegating counterarguments that the conflict involves no genocidal intent and constitutes lawful self-defense against Hamas to a minority, irrelevant viewpoint. At the same time, to reinforce this narrative of unilateral aggression, English Wikipedia often downplays or erases Jewish persecution in Arab countries, such as the Farhud in Iraq, making Zionism appear as an artificial European intrusion rather than a response to global antisemitism.

Articles such as "Gaza genocide denial" and "Nakba denial" further entrench the platform's inherent bias by framing skepticism toward certain narratives as illegitimate "denialism", a term carrying the heavy moral weight of Holocaust denial, while presenting an interpretation as an unquestioned historical fact. This loaded terminology effectively marginalizes dissenting scholarly views and enforces a one-sided narrative under the cover of encyclopedic objectivity.

These are just a few examples of an extensive body of articles that have become highly biased. As generative AI advances, the risk escalates: trained on biased Wikipedia and social media data, these models reproduce distortions as authoritative, objective facts, embedding flawed history into seemingly

unassailable technological truth. Online Holocaust discourse exemplifies a broader assault on Jewish historical legitimacy. Such distortions are not mere errors but deliberate efforts to disrupt Jewish continuity and collective memory.

On this International Holocaust Remembrance Day, it is essential to remember that the Holocaust occurred due to the rise in antisemitism. This phenomenon is exacerbated in our era through digital spaces, where Wikipedia plays a key role. The imperative to remember now demands defending historical accuracy against the capture of Wikipedia by radical forces that have manipulated and polluted this collective knowledge reservoir. Measures must be taken and changes implemented, as we know from experience that unchecked distortion of history paves the way for the resurgence of the very hatred that made the Holocaust possible.

Vigilance in the digital realm is no longer optional. It is a moral obligation to ensure that "never again" remains more than a slogan.

*__Dr. Shlomit Aharoni Lir__ is an award-winning scholar and a research fellow at the University of Haifa and Bar-Ilan University. She specializes in the politics of knowledge, focusing on gender, culture, and technology. She is a founding member of the Deborah Forum and an editor and author who has published eight books. Dr. Lir presented her report on bias against Israel on the English Wikipedia at the United Nations in April 2024. Her exhibition, "Manipulated History," which compares Wikipedia entries before and after October 7, was presented in Europe, the US, and Israel.

This article was written in Dr. Lir's capacity as an academic advisor to Here4Good's Wikipedia initiative, which operates within the organization's broader effort to address knowledge poisoning and large-scale narrative manipulation targeting the history of the Jewish people and Israel.