

INQUIRY INTO CRIMES AMENDMENT (DISPLAY OF NAZI SYMBOLS) BILL 2021

Organisation: Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and
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Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors & Descendants Submission to the Inquiry into the Crimes Amendment (Display of Nazi Symbols) Bill 2021

Introduction and Background:

In 1982 a small group of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust gathered to discuss the formation of an Association so that they may have a formal voice within the Jewish and wider community. Thus, the Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors was established and has been represented survivors and their families in various capacities since that time. The Association also aims to perpetuate the memory of the martyrs and heroes of the Shoah; to cooperate with and support other organisations, such as Sydney Jewish Museum, Child Survivors of the Holocaust Group, JewishCare, NSW Jewish Board of Deputies and Jewish Centre on Ageing.

The Association organised a highly successful International Gathering of Survivors in 1985 to mark the 40th anniversary of Liberation. And this was followed up in 1993 by the Descendants' Committee organising an equally successful Descendants Gathering. Both important functions brought attention to the needs and successes of survivors and their families. Following the Descendants Gathering, it was decided to add the words, "and Descendants", to the name of the Association in recognition of the children of survivors who continue to contribute to the ongoing success of the Association and to hand the legacy of the Holocaust on to the following generations.

Since its inception, the Association has been involved in various projects, including the establishment of a social and cultural group for Survivors together with JewishCare; playing a major role in the establishment of the Sydney Jewish Museum; partnering with the NSW Jewish Board of Deputies and the Sydney Jewish Museum in the organisation of various commemorative events on a regular basis including annual Commemorations such as the Liberation of Auschwitz-

Birkenau and UN Holocaust Remembrance Day, and at Yom Hashoah designated by the State of Israel as the Jewish Community Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The Association remains an important organisation within the Jewish and indeed wider community and serves as a reminder of the atrocities committed against the Jewish people during the Shoah. It is gratifying that the community recognises the bravery of the survivors and the significant part they have played in all aspects of the Jewish communal life and the contribution they have made to the wider Australian community.

History of the Swastika:

The swastika is one of the oldest and most widespread of humankind's symbols and can be found on artefacts thousands of years old in many cultures. These include Indian, Chinese, African, native American, and European. Amongst the early Germanic peoples the swastika was closely tied to the sun-wheel and Thor's Hammer and appears to have had much to do with luck, prosperity, power, protection, and sanctity. The swastika was the classic and greatest Germanic "good luck charm," and took its bearer from a state of chaos and weakness to that of sacred order and strength.

European interest in the cultures of the Near East and India in the nineteenth century led to a resurgence of the swastika as a symbol of good luck and auspiciousness. In the early twentieth century diverse *völkisch* (often anglicized as "folkish") and racist groups adopted the swastika as a symbol owing to its prominence in ancient Germanic society and spirituality. The Nazis often utilised the superficial trappings of pagan Germanic society for propaganda purposes eventually seeing it as a symbol of that which was specifically German and "Aryan". Thus, believing that the German people were descended from the "Aryan" culture, the Nazi Party adopted the swastika or *Hakenkreuz* (Ger., hooked cross) as its symbol in 1920. This altered the ancient meaning of the swastika, and it finally became the most recognisable symbol of Nazi propaganda, appearing on the Nazi flag, election posters, arm bands, medallions, and badges for military and other organisations.

The Misuse and Abuse of the Nazi Analogy and Nazi Symbols:

The Holocaust and by extension, the Nazi regime from 1933 to 1945, has become a symbol of absolute evil in Western society. As such many images and symbols from the Holocaust and the Nazi era have become easily recognizable, such as the swastika, the yellow star of David and the SS insignia amongst others as well as analogies to concentration camps and famous stories, for example that of Anne Frank. As noted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, "The ubiquity and currency of these visual icons reflects: The horror evoked by the crimes committed in the era of the Holocaust, an enduring fascination with Nazi propaganda and imagery, and the diffusion of awareness about the Holocaust through educational efforts, mass media, and popular culture" as well as a profound misunderstanding and distortion of the history of the Nazi era and the genocide of the Jewish people and indeed the murder of others such the Sinti and Romani peoples and the mentally and physically disabled.

Ilana Yurkiewicz on April 19, 2012, in her article in the *Scientific American*, *In Honor of Holocaust Remembrance Day: the misuse and abuse of the Nazi analogy in modern bioethics*, noted that: "The use of the Nazi analogy spans academic and political worlds, ivory towers and radio talk shows, and cuts across both sides of the political aisle." Indeed, it prompted author Michael Godwin to coin the informal "law" bearing his name: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1." Some examples of such misuse include environmental problems, abortion, the slaughter of animals, the use of tobacco, and human rights abuses. The Jewish Center for Public Affairs points out that: "Those who abuse Holocaust comparisons for their ideological purposes wish to exaggerate the evil nature of a phenomenon they condemn". The perceived evil to which they compare the Holocaust, however, does not share its major characteristics which include the systematic defamation, exclusion, torturing, and destruction of specific people, the Jewish people, in society. It is important to note that such trivialisation abuses the memory of the murdered victims which is particularly hurtful to the survivors who managed to live through this horrific time.

The danger posed by the misuse of Nazi imagery and Holocaust comparisons is that they also distort the historical memory and are often frequently misused to attack Jews and Jewish institutions and to criticise the government of Israel by equating its actions to those of Nazi Germany or denying its legitimacy by saying that the Holocaust is a lie used to justify the existence of a modern Jewish state. Egregious examples of such attempts to attack and delegitimise Israel include cartoons equating the Gaza Strip with the Warsaw Ghetto thus closing off debate by

equating Israel's policies with Nazi genocide, and signs used at public protests depicting a distorted but recognisable version of the Israeli flag in which a swastika dripping with blood is replaced by the Star of David.

Recent examples of the misuse of Nazi imagery and holocaust distortion have occurred during the Covid pandemic with protestors using the swastika to portray their anger and opposition with government Covid relate policies including lock downs, mask-wearing, stay-at-home orders and vaccination mandates. In addition, right wing extremist groups have used the opportunity to promote various conspiracy theories particularly about perceived "Jewish power and influence", blaming the Jewish people for creating the virus and using it to further their nefarious ambition to rule the world. Of course, these are small groups, however, their influence and ability to infiltrate those with legitimate grievances is a great concern.

Misuse of the memory of the Holocaust has driven the Auschwitz Memorial Project, run by the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and State Museum in Poland, to put forward a rare condemnation: "Exploiting the tragedy of people who became victims of criminal pseudo-medical experiments in Auschwitz in a debate about vaccines, pandemic and people who fight for saving human lives is shameful. It is disrespectful to victims & a sad symptom of moral and intellectual decline."

Holocaust Survivors, Their Children, and Psychological Trauma:

It is well known that survivors of the Nazi Holocaust endured unimaginable trauma and hardship with the daily fear of death and having lost their family members who were, in many cases, shot and killed in front of their eyes or simply disappeared. Often, they would later learn that their dear ones had been gassed in the gas chambers of the death camps and their bodies incinerated. The vast majority of survivors have been left with a conglomerate of psychopathological symptoms once referred to a Survivor's Syndrome or Concentration Camp Syndrome. In today's nomenclature this would be called Chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The most prominent features of this Syndrome are anxiety with fears of renewed persecution, sleep disturbances and characteristic "re-run" nightmares; problems with memory and concentration, chronic depression, "survivor guilt"; a tendency towards isolation and withdrawal; alterations of personal identity and psychosomatic conditions including ulcers and other gastro-intestinal symptoms, hypertension and headache and perhaps some suppression of aggression. Some survivors tend to be emotional blunted whilst others are more overly expressive.

Most commonly, Holocaust survivors respond with habitual panic when exposed to triggers that in some way symbolise the Holocaust. Such Holocaust associated triggers may include any or all the following: crowded trains, train stations, medical exams, a knock at the door, uniforms, extermination (of insects), yellow colour, selections, gas, barbed wire, discarding food (especially bread), fences, cruelty, barking dogs, any major disaster or discrimination, separation from loved ones, the smell of burned flesh, closed spaces, an oven, standing in line, the freezing cold, music by Wagner, the German language and German products in general. In the current context, this also includes any Nazi symbol and in particular the swastika. Any of these stimuli may create a violent emotional response in the survivor who, at that moment, is thrown back to a life-threatening situation during the Holocaust.

The phenomenon of transgenerational transmission of trauma has been well documented in the families of Holocaust survivors. Whilst this mainly encompasses the relationship between the survivor and their children, transmission of feelings of anxiety, fear, depression and anger are often seen in the children. The families of survivors will attempt to shield their parent from further trauma and thus also react to the various triggers described above including the wanton display of Nazi symbols in inappropriate settings.

I have included two attachments which outline in more detail the psychosocial issues which affect Holocaust survivors and their families.

Conclusion:

The Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors and Descendants supports the proposed legislation criminalising the display of Nazi symbols particularly the swastika. The display and misuse of such symbols reveals a lack of understanding of the horrific history of these symbols within living memory. It also highlights a lack of compassion for those who suffered under Nazi rule as well as being disrespectful to survivors of the Holocaust and their families. Of course, at times the display of the swastika is deliberately aimed at the Jewish people both in the context of an egregious and false comparison with Israel and also giving voice to underlining antisemitic conspiracy theories.

To paraphrase Sarah E Bond in her 1 June article in the Washington Post, “Anti-vaxxers are claiming centuries of Jewish suffering to look like martyrs”: The dubious power of false analogies

and the misuse of Nazi symbols relies on making you think the Holocaust has an equal weight as such things as an optional vaccine or a mask mandate does. The more insidious work of this false equivalence is how easily it can erode the gravity of the original evil. When non-Jews appropriate the Star of David or the swastika for their own aims, they contribute to the erasure of the historical suffering of Jews — from medieval to modern times. The problem here isn't just the gross misuse of a historical symbol, it's the impact on the explicitly Jewish suffering associated with that symbol. Of course, in the case of Nazi symbols this could also be extended to include the Allied Forces who fought and died in the war against the Nazis.

There are, of course, circumstances in which the display of Nazi symbols should be permitted. The swastika remains a sacred symbol in Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Asian religions and is a common sight on temples or houses in India or Indonesia. Swastikas also have an ancient history in Europe, appearing on artefacts from pre-Christian cultures. Obviously, their use in education, the arts and museums amongst other areas usually has a more socially acceptable purpose and should be specifically excluded from the proposed legislation. However, in this area context matters. As noted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: It is one thing to show antisemitic cartoons from the Nazi newspaper *Der Stürmer* as part of an educational curriculum on the dangers of propaganda. It is another entirely, when the same cartoons or ones that adopt similar visual analogies are used to attack opponents today. Those who co-opt recognisable icons of the Holocaust in the service of contemporary political causes simultaneously trivialise the memory of the murdered millions and degrade the level of contemporary debate.

I would like to thank the Standing Committee on Social Issues for the opportunity to lodge a submission to the Inquiry into the Crimes Amendment (Display of Nazi Symbols) Bill 2021. I would be pleased to answer any further questions the committee may have, and I look forward to hearing the outcome of the inquiry and the passage of the legislation.

Yours sincerely,

Dr George Foster

President

Australian Association of Jewish Holocaust Survivors & Descendants

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