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Conference on Internet Anti-Semitism: Ancient Hatred, Modern Medium

US State Department, October 2020

When Germany volunteered to take on the Presidency of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, we knew that 2020 would be an important year. In the field of Holocaust education, remembrance and research, 2020 had long been seen as “the” anniversary year: 75 years after the liberation of Auschwitz and the end of the Second World War, 20 years after the adoption of the IHRA’s Stockholm Declaration. We knew there would be much to commemorate, to reflect upon. We also knew there would be much work to be done.

Antisemitism was on the rise worldwide, so was anti-Roma racism, sites of remembrance needed to be safeguarded, and Holocaust education promoted. The pledges made during the 2020 IHRA Ministerial meeting in Brussels needed to be implemented. We had also announced, as one of the priorities for the German Presidency, a plan to initiate a Global Task Force Against Holocaust Distortion. From the very beginning, we knew our plate would be quite full.

But what we didn’t realize – what we couldn’t have realized – was that the quality of our work during this anniversary year would take on an undeniable urgency. The pandemic threw into sharp relief what we knew had existed for years: antisemitism and other hateful ideologies were gaining traction in mainstream society. We saw how quickly age-old antisemitic conspiracy myths were repurposed for this moment. We saw how they were popularized. We saw how anti-coronavirus measures were compared to Nazi Germany’s murderous policies, in a perverse distortion of the Holocaust. We saw how all of this was spread online and how easily it bled into the off-line world.

The coronavirus has not only affected the health of countless individuals, but also that of our democratic, pluralistic value systems. If we are to ensure that our democratic institutions emerge from this challenging time intact, we must take action. Addressing internet antisemitism – which poses a threat not only to Jews, but to all of society – is an essential piece of this puzzle.

The IHRA’s Working Definition of Antisemitism can provide an essential starting point in this regard – both for discussion and for action. This educational tool can help to sensitive individuals, policymakers, and institutions to the existence of antisemitism in its various forms. It can help to better identify antisemitic incidents as well as the mechanisms behind them. The IHRA Working Definition of Antisemitism should be viewed as one tool – an essential tool – in a robust toolbox



of projects, educational guidelines, policy recommendations, research, and memorials and museums. When taken together, these tools can help construct a world where the facts of the Holocaust are abundant. In such a world, antisemitism simply cannot thrive, neither online, nor off.

Of course, we still have much work to do. A recent survey commissioned by the Claims Conference, an IHRA Partner, showed that nearly half (49%) of American Millennials and Gen-Z had seen Holocaust denial or distortion posts on social media or elsewhere online. This should give us all pause.

These posts take on a variety of forms. They might glorify complicit individuals who provided support to the Nazis or their auxiliaries or collaborators. They might minimize the impact of the Holocaust or the number of victims, blame Jews for their own genocide, cast the Holocaust in a positive light, or blur responsibility for the establishment of concentration and death camps.

No matter the form, efforts to distort the Holocaust chip away at what we know to be historical truth. Holocaust distortion desensitizes people to hate. It paves the way for outright Holocaust denial. And Holocaust denial *is* an expression of antisemitism. It exonerates National Socialism and antisemitism from guilt or responsibility, making Jews culpable and antisemitism once again legitimate. The different manifestations of distortion and denial all work together to further the goals of antisemitism – and we know that these are thriving online.

As antisemitism and other hateful ideologies inch towards the mainstream, it is nevertheless promising to see that efforts to counter these are picking up speed. The same survey I mentioned also found that nearly two-thirds (64%) of young Americans believe Holocaust education in schools should be compulsory. This is encouraging. So, too, is the effort here to organize and begin to address antisemitism online in a holistic manner. Doing so, truly, has become more urgent than ever.