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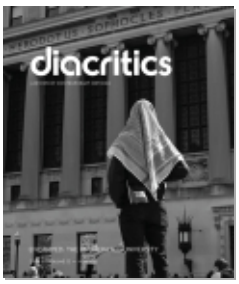

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THE UTILITY OF COMPARISON IN RESISTING THE GAZA GENOCIDE

REBECCA RUTH GOULD

Abstract: This essay examines the pro-Palestine student encampment movement of 2024 within the framework of political debates concerning comparisons between Palestinian and Jewish historical experience. I turn to recent efforts to compare Gaza with the Warsaw Ghetto to look more deeply at the concept of comparison and to inquire broadly into what it means to compare Jewish and Palestinian experience. Since these histories are fundamentally linked, we can learn more by exploring these interconnections than by censoring them. From this perspective, comparison itself, pursued strategically, can become a means of resisting the genocide of the Palestinian people in Gaza.

On April 18, 2024, Colombia University became the site of the most intense violence directed at students that the United States had seen since the 1960s. Earlier that day, the university had set up an encampment of approximately fifty tents on campus and called on the university to divest from Israel. On the morning before that fateful day, Colombia University President Minouche Shafik was scheduled to testify before U.S. Congress's Committee on Education and the Workforce, where she would face the same questions that Congress had directed at her counterparts from Harvard University and the University of Pennsylvania the previous year. Those interrogations had been conducted in an atmosphere of suspicion toward academic freedom and contempt for student protest. Both sessions were followed by the resignation of these university leaders.

At the core of the questions that shaped the debate was the matter of defining antisemitism. As Congresswoman Lisa McClain put the question while bungling the key terms: "Are mobs shouting from the River to the Sea Palestine will be free or long live the infitada [sic] . . . antisemitic comments?"[1] Any question that hinges on the definition of antisemitism also hinges on the matter of comparison. To define is to compare, to say that X does or does not resemble Y. University presidents had to speak to questions that politicians keen to demonstrate their allegiance to Israel were posing for public consumption: Does the call "From the river to the sea / Palestine will be free" resemble or compare with an antisemitic comment? And does a Palestinian-led uprising against occupation—which is the meaning of *intifada*—possess the core characteristics of an antisemitic act?

Their questions were not just ill-informed and misplaced; they were also wrong at the level of logic, in their efforts to conflate speaking out against a genocide with antisemitic acts. In these pages, I hope to show what was wrong with these politicians' understanding of comparison, and suggest how we might do better than our university leaders in rising to the challenge posed by the congressional committee and their efforts to stigmatize and criminalize pro-Palestine speech.

>> Suppressing Comparison

The university presidents who testified to Congress would have done well to reflect more deeply on the cognitive assumptions that the questions posed by members of Congress made about the act of comparison. In the belief that keeping their jobs required them to supress the impulse to compare, and to silence the voices which insist that we contextualize the Gaza genocide alongside its precedents, they did not challenge the questions that were posed. In at least one respect, these leaders' instincts were right: comparison can be dangerous, and even politically revolutionary. Comparison marks the moment when we stop accepting received narratives and begin to think for ourselves. Yet thinking for oneself was not what the hostile members of the House Committee were after. Rather, they wanted to demonstrate the subservience of U.S. universities to their authoritarian political agendas. The presidents who were summoned focused on what they needed to say in order to keep their jobs rather than the truth.

Rebecca Ruth Gould is a writer and scholar who examines the intersections of politics and culture across the Middle East and the Caucasus. She is the author of *Erasing Palestine: Free Speech and Palestinian Freedom* (2023) and *The Persian Prison Poem* (2021), among other books. Currently, she is Distinguished Professor of Comparative Poetics and Global Politics, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Email: rg52@soas.ac.uk

Having had the benefit of coming third in this series of show trials, Shafik demonstrated intermittent awareness of the contingency of definitions and comparisons with her timid acknowledgment that "it's a difficult issue because some hear it as antisemitic, others do not."[2] Yet, she eventually acceded to the governmental narrative just as her predecessors had done, in (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to keep their jobs. Meanwhile, the politicians who interrogated these university leaders did not face pushback regarding their assumption that all calls for a free Palestine and for *intifada* were ipso facto antisemitic.

Every single person who was involved in these congressional hearings, whether they were being interrogated or doing the interrogation, sidestepped the question of comparison. They avoided comparison for obvious reasons: it would have undermined their status quo. They did not ask under what conditions it might be permissible and even ethically mandatory to call for a free Palestine. Instead, they immediately assented to the proposition that calling for a genocide of the Jewish people was in direct violation of their speech codes.

Of course, a prohibition on calling for genocide is hardly objectionable. Yet, for the entire duration of the campus protests, no one was calling for a genocide of the Jews. The politicians' shifting of the framework for comparison compels us to ask precisely what work is done by the unstated equivalency between calling for a free Palestine and calling for a genocide of the Jews. If these two acts could be demonstrated to be equivalent, then the politicians who organized the U.S. Congress Hearing on Antisemitism (Representatives Virginia Foxx and Elise Stefanik, who was nominated by the incoming Trump administration to U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations in November 2024), would have succeeded in their efforts to stigmatize pro-Palestine speech. But these two acts are manifestly *not* equivalent, and no responsible approach to comparison could accept that they are. The failure of university presidents to interrogate the false and malicious equivalency perpetrated by these politicians was an abdication of their roles as intellectual leaders and a severe failure of intellectual integrity.

>> Evading Comparison

When it comes to Gaza and antisemitism, intellectual integrity requires that we compare with deliberation. It requires that we think seriously about what we mean by what we say, by what our comparisons assume and take for granted, by what goes unspoken, and what is said as a matter of course, to placate those whose vested interests lie in perpetuating, defending, and concealing genocide. By teaching us how to overcome censorship, deliberate comparison can strengthen our movement and enhance our ability to resist. My remarks here address what may be the most controversial comparison in recent political debates, whereby key events in the history of antisemitism—notably the Holocaust—are compared to key events in the history of the Palestinian dispossession, including the Gaza Genocide.

Comparisons are not risk-free, and they are not always felicitous. Sometimes they are pernicious and even genocidal. The point is not simply to embrace comparison as such but to interrogate it. Comparisons are inevitable; they ought not so much be avoided as they should be carefully conceived. Comparisons have ethics and politics. They act as conveyers of truth and of falsehood, and the measure of a successful or ethical comparison is not always necessarily correlated to its conformity with facts on the ground. Comparisons are exercises in thought, acts of critical reflection. They should be assessed, not just according to how they describe an existing reality, but in terms of what they do to bring other realities into being. Comparisons should be evaluated according to the histories they evoke and the futures that they make possible.

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The day after Shafik testified to Congress, she authorized the New York Police Department to forcibly dismantle the Columbia University encampment. This was the first time that the NYPD was authorized to enter the university campus since 1968, when they were called in response to a student protest against the Vietnam War. Even the police acknowledged that the students did not present a clear and present danger to the university. The backlash that university support for police coercion unleashed sent a shock around the world. Students and faculty at university campuses around the globe rose up in solidarity with the protestors at Columbia University and against the Gaza Genocide. Even Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank added their voices, sending gratitude and support to those protesting on their behalf in the U.S. and in Europe.[3]

As soon as student encampments arose spontaneously across U.S. universities and eventually around the world, accusations of antisemitism began to proliferate. The toxic dynamics of the congressional hearings were reproduced internally on campuses, in the media, and by politicians. The mere description of Israel's aggression in Gaza as a genocide was treated as an antisemitic act. Yet again, the political potential of comparison was neglected while Israel advocates elevated a logic based on guilt by association—in which a call for Palestine to be free is interpreted as genocidal—over the rigor of critical reflection, which grasps the potential of comparison to open new vistas on contested contexts. Lazy contiguity (guilt by association) was preferred to a more challenging, yet ultimately more useful mode of comparison: contextualizing the Gaza Genocide within a century of colonial geopolitics. Had the counter-protestors and suppressors of free speech pursued the comparison between Palestinian and Jewish history to its logical conclusion, they would have found that the most relevant forms of antisemitism originate in Europe, and learned that Zionism was racialized from its very inception, long before the creation of the State of Israel.[4]

In such a repressive atmosphere, with protests against genocide broadly stigmatized and even criminalized by the state and by university leaders afraid to stand up to those in power, researchers and teachers who, by the nature of their profession, are expected to pioneer new methods of comparison, are left with a new mandate. Alongside acting in the present, in defense of our students, our colleagues, and Palestine, we must find ways to turn a critical gaze on the past. We must use our skills and our mandate to understand the political history of efforts to delegitimize comparison when it comes to the critique of Israel and the struggle for Palestinian liberation.

The first part of this mandate—action in the present—cannot be accomplished by words on a page. The second mandate does however transpire, inevitably, through texts. I therefore turn to the past, to two "exhibits" that demonstrate the inevitability of Holocaust-Gaza comparison from the 2010s and the 2020s respectively, in order to better understand how we got here. I do so in the hope that a better understanding of the interconnected political and aesthetic potential of comparison at this political juncture will help us dislodge ourselves and the institutions where we teach and research from the toxic stagnation that permeates intellectual discourse relating to Palestine/Israel.

In the pages that remain, I pursue two productive yet controversial comparisons between Palestinian dispossession and the Holocaust. These are the types of comparisons which politicians seek to supress because they pose a radical threat: of equality between Palestinians and Jews, equality of a sort that undermines U.S. hegemony and calls into question the entire U.S. imperial project.

>> The Inevitability of Comparison, Exhibit 1

In his seminal study of multidirectional memory in relation to the memory of the Holocaust, literary scholar Michael Rothberg argues: "even if it were desirable—as it sometimes seems to be—to maintain a wall, or cordon sanitaire, between different histories," it is impossible to do so.[5] Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg acknowledge that both the history of the Holocaust and of the Palestinian Nakba rely "on the simultaneous and forceful negation (explicit or implicit) of the catastrophe of the other."[6] Yet time and time again the trajectories of Holocaust memory and the Palestinian Nakba intersect, making the complete negation of any grounds for comparison a logical absurdity.

Repeatedly, the Holocaust and the Nakba are brought forcefully into comparison, whether stakeholders and commentators like it or not, because they are inextricably linked in history. There is a direct and irrevocable line of causality leading from one to the other. So long as the issues and claims that the Holocaust and the Nakba gave rise to persist into the present, the impulse to place these two atrocities into comparison will only increase in intensity over time.

In 2010, a wall near the location of the Warsaw Ghetto, a highly symbolic site of Holocaust memory where 400,000 Jews died prior to being transported to the Treblinka extermination camp, was spray-painted with graffiti.[7] Two activists claimed responsibility for the graffiti: an Israeli pilot who served in the Israel Defense Forces,

Yonatan Shapira, and Polish-British journalist Ewa Jasiewicz.[8] On a wall that Jasiewicz described as a "site of creative expression near the site of the Warsaw ghetto,"[9] these activists spray-painted two phrases, the first in Hebrew and the second in English: ישוחררו כל הגטאות ("Liberate all Ghettos") and "Free Gaza + Palestine" (Figure 1).

The incident received negative media coverage at the time of its occurrence, in mainstream Israeli newspapers as well as on Israel advocacy blogs. Shapira explained his act to Israeli Army Radio as an effort to "wake up" the Israeli public, and added: "I am not saying there is a comparison with the monstrosity of Nazi death camps, but I am saying we must talk about the silence in Israel and the world when people are confined in a ghetto-like place."[11] While Shapira negated a possible equivalence been the two situations in this interview, his words do shed light on his intentions. Yet these words, which entered the Israeli public sphere in 2010, wer erased when the images of the graffiti were repurposed by the UK media several years later to accuse Jasiewicz of antisemitism.[12]

>> The Inevitability of Comparison, Exhibit 2

To get a better sense of how fungible contexts are, and how the same comparison can have an entirely different impact five years later, consider the case of Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen. Shortly before Gessen was due to be awarded the Hannah Arendt prize in the German city of Bremen, they published an article in *The New Yorker* entitled "In the Shadow of the Holocaust."[13]

Gessen begins this article by narrating Germany's efforts to memorialize the Holocaust, which they describe as "static, and glassed in," like "an effort not only to remember history but also to insure that only this particular history is remembered—and only in this way." They conclude the article with a startling comparison between Gaza and the Warsaw Ghetto. Gessen writes: "For the last seventeen years, Gaza has been a hyperdensely populated, impoverished, walled-in compound where only a small fraction of the population had the right to leave for even a short amount of time—in other words, a ghetto." They then sharpen the comparison: "Not like the Jewish ghetto in Venice or an inner-city ghetto in America but like a Jewish ghetto in an Eastern European country occupied by Nazi Germany."

Figure 1: "Yonatan Shapira and Ewa Jasiewicz hold a Palestinian flag beside the graffiti written on the grounds of the old Warsaw Ghetto (photo by Anna Łapińska)."[10]

Most striking about Gessen's comparison between Gaza and the Warsaw Ghetto is the way in which it proceeds and where it occurs in the article. When interviewed on *Democracy Now!* and *CNN*, Gessen insisted that this controversial comparison was the article's point, and the rest of the discussion about Holocaust memory in contemporary Germany was just paving a path for the comparison of Gaza with the Warsaw Ghetto.[14] Yet the comparison that according to Gessen is the article's point does not arrive until the end, and it is not until five paragraphs from

the end that the most explosive comparison, that between Israel's war on Gaza in 2023 and the annihilation of the Warsaw Ghetto, is actually made explicit.

Like every effective extended comparison, Gessen's article carefully contextualizes the Gaza-Warsaw Ghetto comparison, and context is but another word for comparison. That the concept of comparison was at the forefront of Gessen's mind throughout the writing of the article and in addressing the controversy that followed is suggested by the title of their follow-up commentary, which addresses the backlash to the original article: "Comparison Is the Way We Know the World." Far from being incidental, the task of comparison was central to Gessen's endeavor from the beginning.[15]

Everything has a context, but that context does not always crystallize into a comparison. Gessen's carefully calibrated approach to comparison linked Gaza and the Warsaw Ghetto in a way that is arguably more durable—and more likely to affect the otherwise unpersuaded—than the graffiti on the walls of the Warsaw Ghetto that juxtaposed these two realities without offering the necessary context. Gessen's connection was contextualized more elaborately, and in a more deliberative way. There is a place for both kinds of comparisons, and certainly there are circumstances in which a less heavy-handed approach than Gessen's would be more effective. Yet when one wants to make a controversial political point, contextualized comparisons are often more effective.

And yet even Gessen's greater degree of scrupulousness did not prevent people from taking offense. Gessen had been scheduled to receive the Hannah Arendt Prize in an award ceremony in Bremen in Northern Germany on December 16, 2023. When the *New Yorker* article was published on December 9, the prize ceremony was immediately cancelled by the Green Party's Böll Foundation, which sponsored the prize.

Bremen city authorities issued an open letter accusing Gessen of having "a deep-seated and fundamentally negative prejudice against the Jewish state."[16] Ultimately the ceremony was relocated to a private venue and Gessen still received the prize. The controversy attests to a prevailing perception across much of Europe and North America—and Germany in particular—which considers any comparison of the Warsaw Ghetto to Gaza as inherently sacrilegious, antisemitic, and to be avoided at all costs.

Following the cancellation of the award ceremony, Gessen went on to write an essay reflecting on the purpose of comparison, which they used as their acceptance speech during the private ceremony for the Arendt Prize. The Holocaust, Gessen points out in the essay, has become at once a universal signifier for the world's greatest atrocities and an event which is seen as incommensurable with every other atrocity, as if it were outside history. As Gessen writes, the ubiquity of Holocaust memory has "made it easy for one another to conjure up common images and even memories of the Holocaust."[17] And yet, despite making it a foundational event with which every other atrocity is necessarily compared, modern European and American societies have also placed the Holocaust beyond the pale of any legitimate comparison. In Gessen's words, "we imagine the Holocaust in great detail, but we conceive of it as fundamentally unimaginable."

>> Three Kinds of Comparison

Making the Holocaust incomparable is also a form of comparison. As such it should be considered alongside the two other types of comparison already discussed: juxtaposition (graffiti on the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto) and contextualization (Gessen's article and speech). This rhetorical strategy of placing something beyond the scope of comparison resembles the bad-faith decontextualizations that dominated the congressional hearings on antisemitism. Bad-faith decontextualization takes these atrocities outside the realm of history and human agency and turns the dictum "Never Again" into what Gessen calls a "magic spell." Instead of magic, Gessen argues, we need politics. Under the Biden Presidency and now a second Trump term, the most relevant and necessary political comparisons have been stigmatized, delegitimized, and banished from the public sphere.

In such a suppressive environment, the task of the intellectual is to insist on the very comparisons that censorious politicians have banished from view. Particularly in the context of Palestine/Israel, effective and durable comparison presumes historical awareness. This prerequisite for thoughtful comparison is all too often missing from discussions of the Gaza Genocide in the public sphere. Adapting Gessen's point to my argument, we need a structure for assessing and applying context—for crystallizing context into comparison and situating it in a feedback loop so that any given context can be perpetually revised in light of new realties on the ground—in ways that clarify rather than obscure. Deliberate comparison is exactly what Gessen's linkage of Gaza to the Warsaw Ghetto achieves.

As Gessen notes, we compare things precisely *because* they are different, not in spite of what separates them. We compare because we hope an example from the past will shed light on an otherwise incomprehensible situation in the present. The major difference between people who observed the Holocaust unfolding during the 1930s and 1940s and those of us who observe the Gaza Genocide is that we know that the Holocaust is possible. Yet the knowledge that an atrocity is possible does not carry with it an innate ability to prevent its repetition. Unfortunately, the fact that something unthinkable occurred is irrefutable proof that it can happen again, unless we develop the tools to resist it.

The Nazi Holocaust is only one of many proofs regarding the logical untenability of "Never Again," since many genocides have occurred between the 1940s and 2024 across the world. What makes the comparison between the Warsaw Ghetto and Gaza *uniquely* challenging as well as uniquely fruitful relative to other potential comparisons are the links that bind these two historical events together, with the perpetrators justifying their acts in the present with reference to a genocide from the previous century. The comparison possesses a narrative continuity that other comparisons lack. However imprecise, hyperbolic, or inaccurate this comparison may be said to be, it cannot be dismissed as arbitrary.

Comparisons are not magic spells. They will not always work the same way in all times and places. Some political struggles are more likely to evoke certain kinds of comparisons than others. A more thoroughly developed typology of different comparisons, one that includes greater awareness of the contexts in which they are most likely to be politically effective, can become a crucial tool in our political struggles. Comparisons can help us learn from the past and strategize for the future. And they can show us the connection between different struggles around the world that otherwise would be obscure.

No struggle for justice for Palestinians can remain neutral toward antisemitism. Opposition to antisemitism and support for the Palestinian cause are more than compatible; they are mutually implicated and depend on each other. Failure to support one will inevitably compromise the integrity of our commitment to the other, as the brutal crackdown on student protests across the U.S. and Europe has amply demonstrated. Equally, any definition of antisemitism that rules out the legitimacy of Palestinian self-determination undermines the very principle of anti-discrimination it claims to defend.

Notes

1 Tait and Yang, "Columbia President Assailed at Highly Charged Antisemitism Congress Hearing."

2 Tait and Yang.

3 Hawkinson, "Thank You Students."

4 For this history, see, among other sources, Gould, *Erasing Palestine*.

5 Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 313.

6 Bashir and Goldberg, "Introduction: The Holocaust and the Nakba," 2.

7 For one account, see Hilberg et al., *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*.

8 Ewa Jasiewicz is author of the book *Podpalié Gaze* (Razing Gaza), based on her time in Gaza during Operation Cast Lead (2008/09).

9 All cited text is drawn from two statements Jasiewicz posted to Twitter/X, the first co-authored with Shapira, see https://x.com/ewa_jay/status/1039197801375322112 (September 10, 2018) and https://x.com/ewa_jay/status/1039953505652559873 (September 12, 2018).

10 Shapira and Jasiewicz, "Liberate All Ghettos."

11 Interview between Yonatan Shapira and Israeli Army Radio, quoted in Pfeiffer, "IDF Objector Sprays 'Free Gaza' Graffiti on Warsaw Ghetto Wall."

12 For a fuller discussion of this case and the other examples discussed in this essay, see Gould, "To What Shall We Compare Gaza?"

13 Gessen, "In the Shadow of the Holocaust." I cite from the online version, for which no page numbers are provided.

14 Gessen, "Politics of Memory"; Gessen, "Masha Gessen Responds to Controversy after Comparing Gaza to a Nazi Ghetto."

15 Gessen, "Comparison Is the Way We Know the World."

16 Kuhn, "Open Letter."

17 Gessen, "Comparison Is the Way We Know the World."

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