

Insult to Injury: The use of yellow badges by Anti-vaccination Protesters

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“I cannot think of many things more disgusting than comparing vaccines that will save countless lives to the industrial slaughter of the Jew in the Holocaust”, so said Imran Ahmed, to the BBC in response to the use of the Star-of-David Yellow Badge by anti-vaxxers in an anti-lockdown protest in Prague, in 2021. Holocaust denial is an attempt to deny or distort the established facts of the genocide of the European Jews by the Nazis; and the use of the Yellow Badge by the anti-vaccination movement is a form distortion that trivializes the experience of Jewish people during the Holocaust. The United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), who contributes to worldwide peace and security by promoting international cooperation in education, sciences, communication, culture and information, published a report entitled, “History under attack: Holocaust denial and distortion on social media” (UNESCO, 1, 2022). The report found that Holocaust denial and distortion remains a significant cause for concern in social media, across all platforms, and nearly half of all content published denies or distorts the facts of the Holocaust (UNESCO 2, 2022). Although Holocaust denial has been ongoing since the beginning of the Nazi’s attempted extermination of the Jews, recent events such as the anti-vaccination/anti-lockdown protests during the Covid Pandemic, have increased the use of anti-Semitic and Holocaust denial memes to further their cause in social media. This paper will discuss the use of a variation of the Star-of-David Yellow Badge, used by the Nazis to identify Jews during the Holocaust, by anti-vaccination/anti-lockdown protesters as a means to liken themselves to the victims of the Holocaust and further their cause.

The Star of David is a symbol of Judaism like the Cross is a symbol of Christianity. The six-pointed star represents the protection of David from God on all six sides and symbolizes the eternal Jewish faith, no matter the adversity (Judaism Online, 2022). This adversity could not have been more poignant than during the Second World War, beginning in 1939, when Hitler

forced the Jews to wear a yellow badge with the Star of David emblazoned in it, to segregate and control their movements (Appendix 1). Nazi Propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels presented the idea of a “distinguishing mark” for the Jews in a 1938 memo; and the idea was reiterated by the security police chief, Reinhard Heydrich, in a November 1938 meeting, following Kristallnacht (United States Holocaust memorial museum Holocaust Encyclopedia, 2022). The badge, which began as a white armband embroidered with a blue six-sided star, was ordered to be worn on the right upper sleeve by Jews over 10 years old in German-occupied Poland (Goda, 2022, p55). The use of the badge expanded into other countries taken over by the Germans and was consistent in that they contained the Jewish Star-of-David. However, on September 1, 1941, Reinhard Heydrich declared that all Jews in the Reich (Germany and German-occupied countries), over the age of six, be required to wear a yellow Star-of-David on a black field on the chest, inscribed with the word ‘Jew’ in German or the local language (United States Holocaust memorial museum Holocaust Encyclopedia, 2022). Compliance in German-occupied countries varied, however, severe punishment by the Nazis for non-compliance was universally threatened. A variation in the colour of the star was used in Nazi concentration camps to define prisoners (Goda, 2022, p 55, 109). The Yellow badge was used by the Germans as a symbol to identify and isolate the Jews, as well as a method to mark them for persecution. It was abhorrently offensive because it not only took a treasured symbol of the Jewish Faith and attempted to taint it, it served to isolate and alienate the Jews from the rest of the population (Shoah). To add insult to injury, not only were Jews required to wear the badges, they had to use their limited funds to buy and distribute the badges (Shoah). Although some Germans found the use of the yellow badge barbaric, many citizens avoided Jews like they had the plague, or tormented them and the easy identification via the Yellow Badge assisted them in doing so. (Goda, 2021, p124).

During the Covid Pandemic, a meme of the Star-of-David Yellow Badge has been posted on social media and used in various protests to further the cause of anti-vaccine activists. In particular, the activists are likening their struggles as anti-vaxxers, to those endured by the Holocaust victims. The pseudo-badge uses the black Star-of-David design on a yellow background, with stylized “No-Vax” writing, in a similar font to the original Yellow Badge used by Hitler (Appendix 3). In April 2019, Del Bigtree, a film producer and an anti-vaccination group leader of Informed Consent Action Network (ICAN), wore a yellow star at a rally in Austin-Texas (Appendix 4) to promote the anti-vaccination movement (Dalston, 2019). It appears that not a lot of thought was put into it because the ‘badge’ is a rudimentary design of two opposing triangles, with a handwritten scrawl. Bigtree had previously produced a documentary, entitled *Vaxxed: From Cover-Up to Catastrophe* (2016), arguing a coverup by the CDC of the (unsubstantiated) link between autism and vaccinations, a cause initiated by Andrew Wakefield, a discredited researcher who was later stripped of his medical license (Rao & Andrade, 2011). The film was controversial and served to undermine public confidence in vaccines, even though the study has been long since discredited (Dalston, 2019). The production and promotion of the film helped to establish Bigtree as an activist in the anti-vaccination movement, which naturally evolved into representing the Covid anti-vaccination movement. As head of ICAN, and earning an annual salary of \$221,000, Bigtree hosted a regular anti-vaccination webcast, which attracted 174,000 subscribers, prior to being shut down (Smith & Reiss, 2020). In July 2020, YouTube closed Bigtree’s channel and Facebook removed certain anti-vaccination videos from his account. Bigtree continues to spread his cause on Twitter and Rumble (Smith & Reiss, 2020). In May 2021, a supermarket chain allowed vaccinated employee’s not to wear masks while working in their store. A sticker on their name badge would

indicate that they were mask-less because they had chosen to get the Covid vaccination. Marjorie Taylor Greene, a Republican politician in Georgia, likened the sticker to the Star-of-David (Yellow) Badges that Jews were forced to wear in the Holocaust (Bond, 2021). Prior to that, in an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network, Greene challenged House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, on social media, who was advocating for masks to be worn in the House, as offensive as the abuse suffered by the Jews forced to wear a gold star by the Nazi's (Bond, 2021). Shortly thereafter, a Nashville millinery, called Hatwrks, began to sell gold stars for \$5 that quoted "Not vaccinated" (Villarreal, 2021). The Instagram post (Appendix 2), which was 'liked' by at least 192 others before it disappeared, claimed that the patches had strong adhesive backs and boasted that Hatwrks would soon be selling truckers' caps (Villarreal, 2021). The post was later deleted. Facebook anti-vaccination protesters have also used the Yellow Badge meme to promote their cause (ADL, 2022). These are only some key examples of the use of the Yellow Badge to promote the Anti-Vaxxer's cause.

Lest we think Canadians are exempt from the offensive trivialization of the Star-of-David Yellow Badge, in August 2021, Francois Amalega Bitondo, a Quebec protester supporting the anti-vaccination movement, wore a mock bright yellow six-sided star, with the printed words, *unvaccinated* on his black t-shirt, likening his "oppression" as an unvaccinated person as similar to that experienced by the Jewish people from the Nazis (Sales, 2021). Bitondo specifically likened the date of September 1, 1941, as the German decree for the Jews to wear the Yellow Star with the September first inception of Quebec restrictions he and fellow Canadians were experiencing.

The anti-vaccination movement, while under the auspices of arguing for the choice to remain unvaccinated, are in reality incensed about the restrictions imposed due to their unvaccinated status. In Canada and the United States, and elsewhere in the world, people are not being held down and vaccinated against their will nor are they being corporally punished or jailed or killed for being unvaccinated. Instead their unvaccinated status limits their access to certain public venues and travel, arguing that they are higher-risk individuals. While Covid-19 is still very new and research is ongoing to ascertain the exact risk of spread for vaccinated-versus-unvaccinated individuals, public health measures tend to err on the side of caution for the greater good. Furthermore, regardless of vaccination status or the anti-vaxxers cause or beliefs, it is morally and ethically wrong to use such a universal symbol as the Yellow Badge from the Holocaust, representing the attempted extermination and persecution of an entire race of individuals for a cause such as the anti-vaccination movement. It trivializes the Holocaust and the Jewish experience. The Jew's were forced to wear the Yellow Badge, as a means to identify them for extermination and deportation and to segregate and humiliate them. Anti-vaxxers are choosing to wear the badge; and their restrictions and treatment in no way compares to the experience of the Jews. It is their choice to remain unvaccinated. The Jews were given no choice. The use of the Yellow Badge by the anti-vaxxers to serve their political agenda, in my opinion, only serves to highlight the ignorance of those that use it to further their cause.

Jewish and Humanitarian organizations around the world have taken offence to the use of the Yellow Badge to further the anti-vaxxers cause. Jonathan Greenblatt, the CEO of the Anti-Defamation league, an organization concerned with fighting antisemitism, extremism and preventing hate crimes, stated, "It is simply wrong to compare the plight of Jews during the Holocaust to that of anti-vaxxers. Groups advancing a political or social agenda should be able to

assert their ideas without trivializing the memory of the six-million Jews slaughtered in the Holocaust.” (ADL, 2022) Facebook ultimately announced that they would no longer promote or support anti-vaccination news stories and ads. In Bitondo’s case, after connecting with a local holocaust museum, Bitondo indicated he understood why Jews around the world objected to the use of the symbol in the anti-vaccination cause. He agreed not to wear the mock Yellow Badge to further his cause, acknowledging that he understood why it was offensive to some (Sales, 2021).

Social media memes related to the Holocaust and in particular, the anti-vaccination memes that mock or distort, are an insult to the victims of the Holocaust and ought to be banned. Throughout the Holocaust, the Nazis used euphemisms and secrecy to hide and distort the truth of what they were doing to innocent victims of the Holocaust. Despite our modern age of enlightenment, Holocaust denial and distortion has been allowed to continue to flourish in mainstream media. The use of the Yellow Badge by the anti-vaccination movement is an offence to the Jewish people that survived and many more that did not survive the Holocaust, and humanity itself. The regulators of media and companies that host the websites where this type of abhorrent use of memes that insult the history of the Holocaust, should delete and ban the use of offensive memes such as the use of the Yellow Badge and other offensive Holocaust memes. They have a responsibility not to promote hate. As stated by UNESCO’s Report, *History Under Attack*, only by pursuing truth, remembering and educating, can we “build a better world of peace, dignity, and justice for all.” (UNESCO 2, 2022)

Appendix 1
'Yellow Badge'

<https://museeholocauste.ca/en/objects/george-ehrmans-yellow-star/>



Appendix 2
hatWRKS Nashville

<https://www.newsweek.com/tennessee-hat-shop-blasted-selling-nazi-style-jewish-stars-proclaiming-not-vaccinated-1596081#slideshow/1809946>



Liked by derekcaleballdredge and 192 others

hatwrksnashville patches are here!! they turned out great. \$5ea. strong adhesive back we'll be offering trucker caps soon.

Appendix 3

No Vax Yellow Badge Meme

<https://www.adl.org/blog/anti-vaccine-protesters-misappropriate-holocaust-era-symbol-to-promote-their-cause>



Appendix 4

Del Bigtree

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/anti-vaxxers-using-holocaust-era-yellow-stars-to-promote-their-agenda/>



Anti-vaccination activist Del Bigtree holds a Star of David at a rally in New York. (YouTube screenshot)

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