From socially motivated lay historians to lay censors: Epistemic conformity and defensive group identification

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Abstract
This article examines why people cooperate with the silencing and censorship efforts of authorities that deprive them of historical knowledge. We analyze two motivational factors that account for people’s adherence to the “official” historical narrative and their willingness to serve as lay censors silencing and suppressing alternative historical narratives of the group. The first factor is epistemic conformity which is the motivation to believe in the veridicality of the consensual ingroup’s historical narrative. The second factor is a defensive form of identification with the group in glorifying and narcissistic ways. Polish and Israeli examples are discussed to illustrate societal backlash to historical discoveries that present the national ingroup in a negative manner.

Keywords
collective narcissism, defensive identification, epistemic conformity FENCE, historical censorship, Israel, Poland

Introduction
The dismissal, suppression, and silencing of noncompliant historical accounts, and the harassment and persecution of their proponents are commonly identified with totalitarian and authoritarian regimes (e.g. Stalinist Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Nazi Germany, see De Baets et al., 2011) or church dogma (e.g. the Inquisition, see Bethencourt, 2009). However, a compendium published in 2002 entitled “Censorship of Historical Thought: a World Guide, 1945–2000” by historian Antoon De Baets suggests that the repression of unwanted historical accounts is a worldwide phenomenon. De Baets painstakingly recorded hundreds of cases of
historical censorship, harassment and persecution of proponents of alternative histories in no less than 130 countries in the post–World War II (WWII) period (i.e. 1945–2000). Although this list includes countries under dictatorial and/or authoritarian regimes (such as the USSR and the Eastern Bloc countries, China, some African and East-Asian countries, Greece, and certain South American countries during periods of dictatorship), it also includes almost all democracies (e.g. Australia, Belgium, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Mexico, The Netherlands, Norway, post-Franco Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States). The information most liable to censorship and repression deals primarily with colonial eras or the history of wars, and the most sensitive areas are those intended for school textbooks. The nearly universal spread of historical censorship and the wide range of topics it encompasses clearly indicate that this is more than the whim of tyrannical rulers, governments, or special interest groups.

In this article, we look at the ways in which ordinary members of groups acting as “lay historians” and sometimes as lay censors can support, sustain, and at times actively initiate historical censorship. More specifically, we present, in this article, two social motivations, namely epistemic conformity and defensive identification that are conceived to be implicated in historical censorship. In doing so, we apply an individual-differences approach to historical cognition, exploring the relations between the levels of these two motives among individual group members and their endorsement of and participation in historical censorship. Such a social psychological perspective may add to the existing broader historical and political understanding of historical censorship.

From lay historians to socially motivated lay historians

Lay historiography is generally a collective rather than individual endeavor (Halbwachs, 1992). Hammack and Pilecki (2012) recently noted that

As opposed to residing within the mind, these narratives exist in the material world, such as school textbooks … and are embodied in cultural practice, such as commemorative celebrations … Individuals engage with these collectively constructed stories through their own cultural participation. (p. 78)

Liu and Hilton (2005; see Liu and Hilton, this issue) developed the notion of “group charter” to account for the ways in which group members strive to depict their group history in a distinctive, positive light. With regard to the group’s proclaimed origin, they tend to portray their group as an integral, coherent, and continual (and in many cases also primordial and ancient) entity (Kahn et al., 2016; Sani et al., 2007). Furthermore, they depict their group as having a special historical mission or role in the world (see also Smith, 2003) which makes them morally superior to other groups (Brewer, 2001). Within this glorifying outlook, the group is sometimes victorious and sometimes the victim or martyr, but it is always just and justified (Klar, 2016; Noor et al., 2012; Volkan, 2001). Historical content that coincides with these elements of the picture acquires the status of “wanted histories.” These will be readily engaged and endorsed by the group members. These wanted historical accounts are also solicited by group authorities and their institutions (e.g. the education system, the army, the media, arts, museums, and commemoration sites), and are widely propagated, transmitted to newer generations, and celebrated (e.g. Bhabha, 1990; Müller, 2002; Zerubavel, 1995).

In contrast to “wanted” pieces of historical knowledge, “unwanted” pieces that negate the group charter or suggest alternatives to it are rejected, denied, suppressed, censored, or silenced. The variety of ways by which this is done is described elsewhere (see Bilewicz, 2016). However, such information may nevertheless surface or appear as a result of negligence through sources outside the group or via noncompliant group members. When this happens, socially motivated lay historians group members may turn into lay censors.


Challenges to historical narratives and lay censorship in Israel and Poland

Our research efforts on these issues grew out of the social tensions that trouble our respective societies, Israel (Klar) and Poland (Bilewicz), which stem from challenges to specific components of the ingroup’s hegemonic historical narrative. These challenges have been met by much public resentment and outrage, and have led to vociferous demands to take restrictive measures against them. We discuss some of these societal disputes below. It is noteworthy that these social controversies concern either the “origin” or the “historical mission” element of the charter.

Challenges to “origin” and “historical morality” elements in Israel

A central pillar of the Jewish–Israeli historical narrative is its continued existence and continual relations to the Land of Israel. This makes the current group members the direct descendants of the ancient Israelites and, therefore, the true indigenous and rightful people of the land (see Klar, 2014). This narrative is most eloquently expressed in the May 1948 Israeli Declaration of Independence:

The Land of Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people. Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped … After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration in it of their political freedom.

Challenges to particular parts of this narrative that from archeologists, historians, and other academics can be highly troubling to many group members. For example, were the three biblical patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, real historical figures? Did the enslavement of the ancient Hebrews in Egypt and their exodus actually take place? Were David and Solomon magnificent biblical kings presiding over the powerful and glorious united kingdom of Israel and Judea, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Arabian Desert and from the Red Sea to the Euphrates River? (e.g. Finkelstein and Silberman, 2001, 2006)? Is it possible that most contemporary Jews are not the direct descendants of the ancient biblical and Second Temple Jews (who according to the dominant narrative were dispersed throughout the world but retained their Jewish identity and genealogy throughout the generations (e.g. Sand, 2008)?

The second challenge to the dominant Israeli narrative comes from the opposing Palestinian narrative, which also claims that the Palestinians are the indigenous people of the land, as in the 1988 Palestinian Declaration of Independence:

Palestine, … is where the Palestinian Arab people was born, on which it grew, developed and excelled. The Palestinian people was never separated from or diminished in its integral bonds with Palestine.

The debate between the two opposing narratives extends to the interpretation of historical and archeological data (e.g. Abu El-Haj, 1998; Rothberg, 2006). However, one of the thorniest issues in this “narrative war” concerns morality and humanity in the conflict. More specifically, the 1948 War led to the establishment of Israel and the forced exodus of more than 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and created the Palestinian refugee problem. Who was David and who was Goliath in this war? Did the Palestinians flee from their homes voluntarily based on the poor advice of their leaders, or was this exodus perpetrated (at least in part) by Israeli intimidation and expulsion? (see Karsh, 1997; Morris, 1987, 2001; Pappé, 2006).
Group members as lay censors. These historical disputes are sources of considerable tensions and strife within Israeli society. They have led to the formation of several vocal groups and organizations in Israel whose purpose is to fight narrative-challenging academics. These groups publish blacklists of Israeli professors and researchers who “hate the country,” encourage students to file complaints against “anti-Israeli” professors and student groups, and initiate public campaigns directed at the government, university governing bodies, and university donors to pressurize Israeli universities to only hire “patriotic” professors. More recently, patriotic censorship attempts were directed against a small nongovernmental organization (NGO) of veteran soldiers called “Breaking the Silence” that collects and publishes testimonials of Israeli soldiers concerning observations of unethical acts during their tours of duty in the occupied Palestinian territories (e.g. the West Bank). A public campaign sponsored by narrative protector organizations labeled them “plants, moles and traitors.”

Challenges to historical morality element in Poland

The dominant voice in Polish national history celebrates historical martyrdom, heroism, and innocence. Several survey studies on the topic have shown that most Poles believe that their nation acted more justly and morally in the past than other nations, and that Poland was more often victimized than other nations (Bilewicz and Stefaniak, 2013; Krzeminski, 2002). This leads to obvious biases in historical perceptions, such as underestimation of Jewish suffering in WWII (Ambrosewicz-Jacobs, 2013).

When assessing the scale of Jewish and ethnic Polish victimhood during the Nazi occupation, Poles consider that their own suffering equaled that of the Jews (Winiewski and Bilewicz, 2014). The number of Poles who consider Jewish wartime victimhood as more pronounced is systematically decreasing compared to those who consider Polish suffering more pronounced. The idealized visions of wartime reality are presented in popular culture (Haska, 2010), in Polish historical writings (Libionka, 2008), and in schools (Witkowska et al., 2015).

The dominant historical narrative after 1989 has been systematically challenged by more recent historical discoveries on the killing of Jews during the Warsaw Uprising by armed members of the Polish underground (Cichy, 1994), the murder of Jews in Jedwabne (Gross, 2001), crimes committed by Poles against Jewish survivors after the Holocaust (Gross, 2006), the theft of Jewish property by Poles during the German occupation (Gross, 2012), and massacres committed by the Polish underground (Engelking, 2011; Grabowski, 2013). In addition, historical crimes against other national groups (e.g. the killing of Ukrainians in the Pawlokoma area, Magierowski, 2016) pose a threat to the established narrative about Polish history.

Group members as lay censors

Public reactions to such discoveries are often mixed. The evidence presented by historians are often questioned by other Polish authors, including both journalists and academics (Polonsky and Michlic, 2009). In a nation-wide survey conducted a few months after the 2001 commemoration of the Jedwabne massacre, we asked Polish citizens about their explanations for the crime. The dominant responses were negations, shifting of responsibility (blaming the Germans), and defensive attributions (explaining the act in terms of external rather than internal causes; Bilewicz, 2004; Bilewicz et al., this issue). The new, critical historiography has never affected education: teaching curricula and programs are still dominated by the “innocent narrative” (Bilewicz et al., 2013; Bilewicz et al., in press). In 2006, there was a parliamentary attempt to change the penal code to include punishment of up to 3 years for “public accusations against the Polish Nation for
participation, organizing or being responsible for Communist and Nazi crimes,” which was rejected by the Constitutional Court. Ten years later, a similar bill was presented to the Minister of Justice by the Law and Justice Party (McChrystal, 2016).

Social psychological origins of lay censorship: epistemic conformity and defensive group identification

Why are group members so inclined to exercise censorship of charter-challenging historical knowledge? To appreciate their rationale, we draw on two key bodies of social psychological theorizing and research, namely *epistemic conformity*, the wish to concur with the others in the group, and *defensive group identification*, the desire that the concurred knowledge would vindicate and glorify rather than condemn and depreciate the group. These two closely related motivations are highly prevalent and robust among group members but clearly they vary in intensity among group members. In this article, we adopt an individual differences approach, exploring the relations between the extent to which individual group members are committed to each of these motivations and their participation and support of historical censorship.

Epistemic conformity

Group members generally seek common ground with others in their group regarding physical, metaphysical, and social reality (e.g. Festinger, 1954; Kruglanski et al., 2006). Such epistemic conformity can be either nonintentional (Sherif, 1936) or intentional (Asch, 1951). Concurrence seeking and concealment of views discordant with those of the remainder of the group have been found in a variety of group settings, even when highly consequential issues were at stake (for a review, see Kruglanski et al., 2006). Yielding to the dominant group consensus may be especially ubiquitous when the challenged views are related to key elements of the group charter, such as the group’s historical integrity, its morality, or its competence.

Based on the social need to cling to truths held by the group and fellow group members, Klar and Baram (2016a) recently proposed the notion of *FENCE* in the realm of lay historiography: the group members’ motivation to uphold a *Firmly Entrenched Narrative Closure* (*FENCE*). *FENCE* is a motivation to shield the accepted historical group narrative and protect it from alternative, opposing, or counter-narratives. *FENCE* can stem from two intertwined rationales. First, some group members more than others truly believe that the accepted group narrative represents the whole truth and nothing but the truth (e.g. Bar-Tal, 1990; Hoffer, 1951). Second, some group members more than others aspire for ingroup epistemic unity and perceive disagreement as posing a dangerous threat to group integrity and survival (e.g. Kruglanski et al., 2006; Sani and Reicher, 1998).

Klar and Baram (2016a) constructed a 10-item *FENCE* motivation scale to represent these two rationales. Their survey found *FENCE* to correlate with a *behavioral lack of openness to counter-narratives* (*BLOC*) which assesses the willingness to be exposed to informational sources that potentially challenge the ingroup narrative. *FENCE* was also related to a zero-sum perception of the intergroup conflict and had cognitive consequences; it reduced the subsequent recall of narrative-contradicting information. Klar and Baram (2016a) presented Jewish participants with historical details about an alleged massacre that Israeli soldiers committed in the Galilee during the 1948 War. About an hour later, participants were asked to reconstruct the text. The higher the participants ranked on *FENCE*, the fewer the number of details they recalled and the lower the accuracy of these details in the group-incriminating text.

Klar and Baram (2016b) interviewed 94 Jewish–Israeli psychology undergraduates who also completed *FENCE* and political orientation measures. These students were asked whether they
would oppose or object to inquiries by the university into whether professors are teaching material critical of the state and its history, whether they were for or against encouraging students to complain about such professors, and whether such professors’ teaching materials should impact hiring practices. Participants were asked about the teaching of dual narratives (i.e. Israeli and Palestinian) in Israeli textbooks and their opinion regarding a law banning of Naqba commemorations. Klar and Baram (2016b) found that FENCE and Right Wing political orientation made significant and sizable independent contributions to each of these issues. This suggests that the FENCE scale accurately reflects the motivation to protect and defend the group’s narrative by censoring and suppressing views and voices that are critical to this narrative.

**Defensive identification with the group**

Perceiving the ingroup in a positive light and feeling united with it is a principal way in which group members can gain and maintain their positive self-concept (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). This perception shapes group members’ representation of history and how they transmit it to younger generations. In relation to past and current intergroup conflicts, the ingroup is almost always portrayed as the just victim rather than the perpetrator or villain (see Liu and Hilton, this issue). This leads to idealization of the ingroup’s history and to a motivated denial of the “dark sides” of its past (Bilewicz, 2016). Defensive portrayals also affect attitudes toward historians, journalists, or politicians who are depicted as attempting to revise the dominant narrative by presenting the group in a negative manner.

People who strongly identify with their group seem to be more inclined to oppose narratives that portray the ingroup in a negative light. Such undesirable narratives about the group’s past clearly pose a threat to social identity. The group identification literature shows that strongly identifying people are more reactive to such threats, and that their reactions are more collective (Spears et al., 1997). Upon hearing about ingroup misdeeds, highly identifying people may express fewer moral emotions, such as guilt, shame, or regret (Doosje et al., 1998; Imhoff et al., 2012), and their dominant response may be denial and silencing of uneasy facts (Kurtis et al., 2010; Leach et al., 2013). When explaining negative historical events, highly identifying group members more often show biased patterns of attributions (Bilewicz et al., this issue; Doosje and Branscombe, 2003).

However, the link between ingroup identification and the rejection of information that challenges the portrait of the ingroup as morally untainted may be more complex than previously assumed. For example, Klein et al. (2011) found that the relationship between identification and reactions to threatening historical information is curvilinear: people who identified strongly with their group and those loosely identifying with their group expressed less guilt and intention to compensate for the ingroup’s misdeeds than those whose identification was moderate. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that when highly identifying people hear a counter-narrative about the group from ingroup members (as opposed to outgroup members), they react with more guilt than those loosely identifying with their group (Doosje et al., 2006).

The distinction made by a number of scholars between defensive and nondefensive identification with the group (or the nation) can help shed light on the effects of group identification on lay censorship. Adorno et al. (1950) distinguished early on between *pseudo-patriotism*, “uncritical conformity with the prevailing group ways, and rejection of other nations as outgroups” and *genuine patriotism*, “attachment to national values based on critical understanding” (p. 107). More recently, Schatz et al. (1999) distinguished between *blind patriotism*, which they viewed as a rigid and inflexible attachment to one’s country characterized by unquestioning positive evaluation, staunch allegiance, and intolerance of criticism, and *constructive patriotism*, which is defined as attachment to one’s country characterized by critical loyalty that includes “questioning and criticism of current group practices that are driven by a desire for positive change” (p. 153).
Based on these distinctions, Roccas et al. (2006) constructed a scale that measures the most defensive component of identification. *Ingroup glorification* involves viewing the national ingroup as superior to other groups and having a feeling of respect for the central symbols of the group, such as its flag, rules, and leadership. The reverse of the defensiveness is “attachment to the ingroup”; namely, defining oneself in terms of group membership, extending the self-concept to include the group, feeling emotionally attached to the group, and wanting to contribute to it. Attachment to and glorification of the ingroup are highly inter-correlated, but when statistically or experimentally separated they may operate in two opposite directions. Ingroup glorification involves the motivation to view the group in the best possible light and should lead to the silencing of any historical (or current) misdeed of the group. Those who are highly committed to the group (but do not glorify it) are likely to be driven by the desire to preserve the group’s high moral ground and to rectify—or at least acknowledge—any moral infraction. They are less able or willing to automatically dismiss, or censor, any unpleasant information about the group’s behavior. Consistent with these predictions, Roccas et al. (2006) found that when Israelis are faced with historical information on their nation’s warfare-related moral violations, high glorifiers tended to dismiss that information and use all kinds of exonerating cognitions to justify it. However, when glorification was statistically controlled, highly attached group members tended to acknowledge these immoral deeds and showed greater group-based guilt than those high on glorification.

More recently, Bilewicz and Kofta (2011) reasoned that reactions to social identity threats are not only determined by the character of group identification, but rather by the positivity of self-perception and the content of the self-stereotype. Apart from positivity of self-perception, people’s construal of their identity can take either secure (nondefensive) or narcissistic (defensive) forms (Golec de Zavala et al., 2009). A secure identification may lead to the acceptance of unflattering historical narratives and their inclusion in shared representations of the past, whereas a defensive identification may lead to censorship and denial of such information, such as anger directed at those who reveal the “dark sides” of the past.

Golec de Zavala et al. (2013a) argued that these two distinctive forms of ingroup identification have differential effects on intergroup relations. When accounting for their common variance, narcissistic identification leads to higher outgroup negativity, whereas secure identification decreases outgroup negativity. This effect was replicated in several studies on Polish and British samples. Narcissistic identification—an analog of threatened egotism in personality psychology—is highly vulnerable to any threats to self-esteem. In situations that are threatening to the ingroup image such as criticism of the ingroup, narcissists react with heightened retaliatory intergroup hostility (Golec de Zavala et al., 2013b). Thus, the narcissistic component of identity can be seen as an antecedent of historical censorship. An initial study found that people defined as having a narcissistic identification perceived a revisionist historical book as insulting and declared their willingness to hurt the author of such a book (Cichocka et al., 2015).

A recent study of 95 Polish high school students showed that narcissistic and secure forms of identity had opposite effects on these students’ attitudes toward historians who transgress the national historical narrative (Pastusiak and Bilewicz, 2015). The participants were presented with a narrative about a 1941 pogrom in Wąsocz, where local Polish militias executed more than 200 Jewish inhabitants of their town. Students who identified in a narcissistic manner considered the author of this narrative slightly less competent, and the narrative text less credible than those with less narcissistic identification. In contrast, students with high secure identification considered the article more credible and its author as competent than those with low secure identification with Poland. Such differential effects would be invisible if the two forms of identification are not distinguished; the overall identification index was not correlated with perceived credibility of the narrative or perception of its author.
Finally, the Polish Prejudice Survey, a nation-wide representative survey conducted in Poland in 2009, that included measures of narcissistic and secure identification (Golec de Zavala et al., 2013a) and secondary anti-Semitic beliefs about history (Bilewicz et al., 2013) showed that narcissistic identification led to greater anger toward those historians who revealed negative historical facts about the ingroup, whereas a secure identification did not.

Jointly these studies suggest that defensive identification (glorification and narcissism), and secure attachment and identification may have distinctive roles in shaping Poles’, Israeli’s, and others reactions to counter-narratives that present their compatriots in a negative light.

**Conclusion: conformity, defensive identification, and lay censorship**

Censorship of unwanted and unpleasant group history exists around the world (De Baets, 2002). It is frequently interpreted as the work of rulers, governments, and special interest groups who control the public. In Orwell’s 1984 terms “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” However, our social psychological perspective shows why group members often cooperate with, support, and sometimes initiate historical censorship when historical knowledge runs counter to the consensual view of the group’s historical origin or question the group’s historical innocence or its moral superiority. Group member’s support may explain the sustainability of censored histories more than the actions of leaders alone can do.

Epistemic conformity, the motivation to hold consensual knowledge and defensive group identification, the motivation that this knowledge would vindicate and glorify the group drive lay censorship. These two related motivations are prevalent and robust, but they clearly vary in intensity among group members. Our individual differences approach has revealed several ways that the extent of individual group members’ commitment to each motivation affects their participation and support of historical censorship. Epistemic conformity and defensive group identification are obviously interrelated. Hegemonic group narratives almost always depict group history in a positive light (see Liu and Hilton, this issue). However, epistemic conformity and defensive identification can have different consequences. Imagine, what would happen if a governing regime changed dramatically from Communism to post-Communism, for example, or if the group’s consensus shift radically, as when overseas colonies are relinquished. Epistemic conformists might then move with the popular tide and embrace the new outlook, while defensive identifiers might constitute the “old guard” and refuse to denounce any aspect of the group’s past. Recent findings on conformity among authoritarians lend weight to this argument. When dominant norms, such as those expressed by governments, are multicultural and tolerant, highly authoritarian people express less prejudice and national hatred than other people (Roets et al., 2015). However, such situations are relatively rare, and clearly much more evidence is needed to determine under which conditions epistemic conformity can counteract national historical defensiveness.

Our individual differences approach to historical cognition and lay censorship is a recent advance. **FENCE** has been mainly studied in Israel, while defensive identification has been mainly studied in Poland, Britain, and Israel. More research in more contexts is undoubtedly needed to better clarify the relationship between these two motivational constructs and their relations to lay censorship. More broadly, although the current article focused on the authors’ respective homelands, Israel and Poland, difficulties of dealing with a troubling national or ethnic past are nearly universal, and so are the societal pressures against critical voices regarding the group’s past. These include, for example, the persistent pressures in Germany to “close the chapter” on the Nazi past (Imhoff, 2010), the oppositions in Japan of depictions of Japanese WWII war crimes (Hein and Selden, 2000; Nozaki, 2008), or the great reluctance in many European countries to deal with
collaboration with the Nazis during WWII (Stauber, 2010). Historical censorship is an issue in almost any country in the world (De Baets, 2002). In addition to broadening the contexts for this research, future projects might broaden the focus to include factors that might allow such unpleasant historical revelations to be voiced and to inform group identification. Understanding self-censorship (and its termination) may also benefit from the current individual differences perspective (see Bar-Tal, 2015). Group members may turn into self-censors because they fear the indignation and sanctions of other group members and group authorities.

Can we benefit from historical knowledge? This is a reoccurring question with complicated answers. Cognitive shortcuts (see Klein, 2013) are certainly a major debilitating factor. However, history is not only studied out of a pure pursuit of knowledge but it is also a major tool for nation building. It can be a means of creating and upholding consensus among group members and maintaining group pride and self-worth. Given these diverse and sometimes conflicting goals, ordinary group members, especially those who aim to defend the accepted group narrative and the group’s positive reputation, can become socially motivated lay historians and even lay censors. Future research must inform us about how historical openness, impartiality, and objectivity can also be fostered.

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Notes

1. In particular, the chartered historical mission of many national and social groups is based on the view of the group not only as competent but also as a highly moral entity.
3. https://books.google.co.il/books?id=6TheOPfVb44C&pg=PA411&lpg=PA411&dq=Palestine,+….+is+where+the+Palestinian+Arab+people+was+born,+on+which+it+grew,+developed+and+excelled.+The+Palestinian+people+
4. For example, the platform of one of these groups, IsraCampus, is to “monitor Israel’s academic fifth column following anti-Israel extremism on the Israeli campus (see Note 1)”; the agenda of another group, Israel Academia Monitor, is to “follow the anti-Israel activities of Israeli academics (see Note 1),” and the third, Im Tirtzu is to “free the universities of anti-Zionist bias.”

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