Chapter 2

Effect of Holocaust Consciousness in General and the Journey to Poland in Particular on the Fighting Spirit in the IDF: A Comparative Study of Commanders and Combat Soldiers – Participants and Non–Participants of the Journey to Poland

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the effect of Holocaust consciousness in general and of the journey to Poland in particular on the fighting spirit in the IDF. With the purpose of exploring to what extent Holocaust consciousness in general and the journey to Poland in particular influence the fighting spirit of former soldiers and career soldiers in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces), the authors examined two major relationships between variables, on the ethical, emotional, and cognitive level: (1) the association between the soldiers’ fighting spirit and their Holocaust consciousness; (2) the association between participating in the journey to Poland and the perceived fighting spirit in the IDF. They conclude that Holocaust consciousness was found to have an effect on the fighting spirit. The journey itself, however, was found to have no effect on the fighting spirit. These research findings may illuminate one of the important projects of the IDF, “Witnesses in Uniform,” with regard to its purposes and efficacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Starting from 2001, delegations of IDF officers have been travelling to Poland every year. By 2016, some 35 thousand people had already taken place in these delegations, in which mainly officers visited death camps, ghettos, death sites, cemeteries, and synagogues. According to Ben Amos and Hoffman (2011), there is a symbolic and pedagogic association between the IDF and the Holocaust. The IDF represents for Israeli society the promise that the Holocaust will not recur, and at the same time uses the memory of the Holocaust as an educational tool in the process of training commanders. In their study, Avner Ben Amos and Tammar Hoffman analyze all the stages of the officers’ journey to Poland. The analysis of these journeys leads to the conclusion that they constitute an event that is a combination of a journey of pilgrimage and a symbolic act of conquest, intended to blur the differences between the officers and the victims of the Holocaust, to convince participants of the justification for the military, and to expand the IDF’s symbolic capital (Ben Amos & Hoffman, 2011).

Brigadier General Eli Schermeister, Chief Education and Youth Officer, posted on the “Witnesses in Uniform” website:

Instilling the memory of the Holocaust is a major component of the education that the IDF imparts to its commanders and soldiers, and the Witnesses in Uniform journey is a commendable educational enterprise that strengthens our Jewish identity and our personal and national values. The atrocious events in which more than one third of the Jewish people was eradicated has no equivalent in human history. We must study, investigate, experience, and learn as much as we can. The journey strengthens our ties with our roots and our recognition of the significance of military service and of the need for a sturdy nation and a strong army.

Accordingly, In Valley of the Shadow of Death: Experience of the Holocaust from a Multidisciplinary Perspective, Davidovitch and Soen (2015), studied soldiers’ sense of mission and leadership, and the findings show that this goal is mostly realized as more than three quarters of delegation participants report that the experience helped strengthen their sense of authority and mission. Nonetheless, the distribution of the effect by military roles indicates that the beneficiaries are mainly soldiers in combat support roles and non-commissioned officers, rather than combat soldiers and officers. This finding might be explained by the disparate point of departure of these groups, i.e., combat soldiers and officers have a higher level of sense of mission and affiliation with leadership values, in comparison with soldiers in combat support roles and non-commissioned officers who receive different training. Combat soldiers and officers are exposed, as an integral part of their training, to the
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