Holocaust Denial: What It Is and Why Evangelical Scholars Must Categorically Reject It

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Dr. Richard Pierard, Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Indiana, reviews and refutes the views of those who deny the reality or scope of the Holocaust, categorizing such arguments as "pseudohistory" and as a vicious form of antisemitism.

Holocaust Denial:

What it is and why evangelical scholars must categorically reject it

Richard V. Pierard

The Holocaust, the effort of the German Nazis to wipe out the entire Jewish population of Europe, is the greatest tragedy that the Jewish people every faced. It is also a Christian problem because most of the perpetrators of the Holocaust were baptized church members, and the bystanders, those who did nothing to halt it or even to assist their beleaguered Jewish neighbors, as well were members in good standing of Protestant and Catholic churches. Unfortunately, there are people out there who claim the Holocaust never happened. For them to say that the Jews imagined or invented their tragedy is the most vicious and virulent form of anti-Semitism imaginable. It negates the shared experience of the Jewish community today and lays the groundwork for the possibility of another attempt at total destruction. Although Holocaust deniers may try to infiltrate our ranks, we as evangelicals must sound forth a firm and deliberate “NO” to all efforts of deniers to spread their pernicious ideas among us.

Introduction

I would like to begin with three illustrations: The first is Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who in his memoir, *Crusade in Europe* (p. 409), related his visit to the Buchenwald concentration camp on April 13, 1945.

I visited every nook and cranny of the camp because I felt it my duty to be in a position from then on to testify at first hand about these things in case there ever grew up at home the belief or assumption that “the stories of Nazi brutality were just propaganda.” Some members of the visiting party were unable to go through the ordeal. I not only did so but as soon as I returned to Patton’s headquarters that evening, I sent communications to both Washington and London, urging the two governments to send instantly to Germany a random group of newspaper editors and

representative groups from the national legislatures. I felt that the evidence should be immediately placed before the American and British publics in a fashion that would leave no room for cynical doubts.

The second illustration comes from a feature article by writer John Sack entitled “Daniel in the Deniers Den,” in *Esquire* magazine, February 2001. He is describing his experiences at an “international conference” of the Institute for Historical Review at a hotel in Orange County, California. There he dined with a man from Alabama, Dr. Robert Countess, a Presbyterian minister and scholar of classical Greek and Hebrew who was a self-proclaimed evangelical. He had taught briefly at Covenant College in Tennessee and is a member in good standing of the Evangelical Theological Society. Countess was wearing a shirt that read: NO HOLES? NO HOLOCAUST! (This referred to a claim by the French denier, Paul Faurisson, that he had examined the ruined roofs of the infamous gas chambers at Auschwitz concentration camp and did not find any holes through which the cyanide pellets could have been dropped to kill the people in them. He therefore concluded that the Holocaust was a myth.) Earlier, Countess had declared in a letter to the editor in the March 1988 issue of the Seventh-day Adventist church religious freedom magazine *Liberty* that “current scholarly research” on the Nazi era revealed “the extreme exaggerations” of Jewish deaths. The number of Jews “not accounted for during the war period was at most between 300,000 and 1.5 million.”

The third illustration is an article by Herman Otten in his magazine *Christian News*, dated May 7, 1990. The outspoken Lutheran fundamentalist proclaimed: “The time has come for Christians to stop believing and promoting one of the biggest lies and slanders of the Twentieth Century.” This was the idea that the Germans exterminated six million Jews during World War II and planned to kill all Jews in Europe. He said he was challenging “one of the most sacred doctrines in the world,” the “Holocaust religion.” Promoting this “hoax” as truth was lying and was a violation of the Commandment not to bear false witness.

These illustrations reveal in stark tones the problem we are up against. The American military leader wanted to insure that people would never come to consider the horrors of the German concentration camps as propaganda myths, while the two evangelical writers, an educator and a journalist, were already downplaying and belittling what the Nazis had done.

Historical Controversies

The Holocaust can be defined as the occurrence in history, in which approximately six million Jews were killed, in an intentional, systematic, and bureaucratically administered fashion by the Nazis and their collaborators, using a number of different technologies, including gas chambers. This concise definition was provided by Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman in *Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. xv. During the 1960s the term Holocaust came to be universally accepted as a term for this process. The meaning of the Greek original of the word is “destruction by fire” and its original meaning was the burnt offering of an animal on an altar. The Hebrew term is Shoah.

To be sure, there are legitimate controversies surrounding the topic. Historians have debated various details of the Holocaust, and mortality figures have been fine-tuned, revised upward or downward depending on the situation. Some matters have been rejected as myths — for example, the production of soap from Jewish corpses is now regarded as an unsubstantiated rumor — and a few survivor accounts have been exposed as inaccurate or even spurious, such as the 1996 book *Fragments*, by Binjamin Wilkomirski, which purports to be the author’s childhood experiences at Auschwitz but actually he had never been there.

Others have raised questions about the political and cultural exploitation of the Holocaust,

including Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,1999), Hilene Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler, How History Is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York: Routledge, 1999), and Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (New York: Verso, 2001). Issues identified here include: museums that edit out the sufferings of non-Jewish victims of Nazism such as the Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) and homosexuals; the propagation of Holocaust education programs that take the topic out of history where it belongs and transport it into realms of mysticism and identity definition; distortion of the Holocaust by transforming it into an "American" experience which glorifies the camp liberators, overlooks the U.S. unwillingness to help Jews prior to and during the war, and ignores the sufferings of other "victim" groups like African Americans and Native Americans; Holocaust speakers and writers who profit through large lecture honoraria and book royalties; and various economic pressures — reparations from Germany, American financial support for Israel, and Swiss banks surrendering dormant accounts of World War II Jewish victims. In the same vein, Jewish scholar Marc H. Ellis, *Beyond Innocence and Redemption: Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), suggests that Israel has gone down the wrong track by utilizing the Holocaust to justify state power without acknowledging the moral costs of so doing.

An important controversy is that of the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, a question that is examined by various contributors to the symposium edited by Alan S. Rosenbaum, *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001). Is this genocide of such unique quality that it can only be the experience of the Jewish people, and it may not be analyzed or explained but simply viewed as the Tremendum, something so awesome and terrible that non-Jews cannot identify with it? Can other genocides such as in Armenia, Cambodia, or Rwanda-Burundi be regarded as holocausts? If so, does that relativize and trivialize the Jewish Holocaust? Is the term even further trivialized by the pro-life (anti-abortion) movement in the U.S. which speaks of the holocaust visited on the "unborn" and by African-Americans who label slavery as "our holocaust"? If it is relativized in any way, does it lose its braking force on the age-old tradition of anti-Semitism that has so plagued the world?

A long-running disputation is that between the functionalists and intentionalists. The central issue here is: Did the Holocaust result from Hitler's intention to kill all Jews and was supported from the outset of his rule by the deep-seated anti-Semitism among the German people? Or did it evolve in a step-by-step manner over time, logically from the anti-Semitism of National Socialism and through the enthusiasm of Hitler's accomplices, especially Goering, Goebbels, Heydrich, Himmler, Bormann, et al., who carried out what they believed were the Fuehrer's wishes, and thus the Nazi regime implemented the policies of destruction in an unplanned but bureaucratic and at times haphazard fashion? This controversy was given a new impetus by the unabashed intentionalist Daniel J. Goldhagen in *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Random House, 1996), and his work was challenged in the symposium edited by Franklin H. Littell, *Hyping the Holocaust: Scholars Answer Goldhagen* (East Rockaway, NY: Cummings & Hathaway, 1997), and Norman G. Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn, *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998).

However, in all of these disputations, absolutely none of the protagonists deny that the Holocaust actually occurred. Historians poring through the mountains of documents from World War II may refine some details about the Holocaust, such as reducing the total number of victims of the gassings, but at the same time revising upward the number of deaths resulting from the SS mobile killing units that operated on the Eastern Front. But no responsible historian of World War II maintains that the Holocaust is a myth or says that it never happened.

What Is Holocaust "Revision" or Rather "Denial"?

The so-called “Holocaust revisionists” are really “Holocaust deniers,” since they reject the three key components that were mentioned above: 1) the killing of the six million; 2) the use of gas chambers; and 3) direct, systematic actions by Nazis to carry out the process. An illustration of this point is the comment by Bradley Smith, the self-appointed head of the Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust, made in 1992: “Revisionists deny that the German State had a policy to exterminate the Jewish people (or anyone else) by putting them to death in gas chambers or by killing them through abuse or neglect.” (Shermer and Grobman, *Denying History*, p. xv)

Genuine historical revisionists are people who work with primary documents and sources and through these reexamine and reinterpret some historical event. They revise our understanding of the occurrence on the basis of new sources and new insights applied to existing sources. They refine the detailed knowledge we have about an event, but rarely deny that it as such actually took place. It is the modification of history based on new facts or new interpretations of old facts. Genuine scholars play by the rules of logic and reason. They put forth their claims as testable hypotheses, which others can weigh against the evidence and accept or reject in relation to other interpretations.

Holocaust revisionism, on the contrary, is really Holocaust denial. It is pseudohistory, the denial of the past or rewriting the past for present political or ideological reasons. Such misuse of history occurs all too frequently, for example, the Japanese textbooks that omit any discussion of the 1937 “rape of Nanking” in China, or the Afrocentric historians who claim Aristotle stole his ideas, which became the foundation of Western philosophy, from the library of Alexandria where Africans had deposited their philosophical works. Never mind the fact that many reporters and others witnessed the horrors at Nanking, or that the Alexandrian library was founded after the time Aristotle had lived. Ideology determines what is true or false.

The Holocaust deniers constitute a vast, interlocking network. They maintain a strong presence on the internet and their sites cross-reference one other. This is illustrated by the well-known story of the high school teacher who had assigned her students to write a term paper using the World Wide Web. One young person chose the Holocaust and wrote a horrible paper denying its historical validity, having drawn on material from the denier web sites. The teacher had failed to explain that not everything on the internet can be trusted.

Holocaust denial is a stock in trade of Ku Klux Klan, Neo-Nazi, Skinhead, and Identity church movements, and one also finds it in black hate groups like Louis Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam, some Afrocentrist writers, and in Arab anti-Israel rhetoric. The common thread running through all these manifestations is anti-Semitism, that is, hatred or dislike of Jews. There is also an international coterie of deniers, but in many countries, such as Canada, Austria, and Germany, hate crime laws prevent the open expression of these ideas, either orally, in print, or on the internet. To be sure, some deniers who are seeking respectability eschew the fringe-group sectarians.

The best-known group in the United States that advances the cause of Holocaust denial is the Institute for Historical Review, a body founded in California in 1978 by Willis Carto. Born in 1926, he is the leader of an ultra-right group called the Liberty Lobby, perhaps the foremost anti-Semitic organization in the country. According to its statement of purpose, the IHR would be a “voice for historical truth” and “champion of historical knowledge.” It began publishing what purported to be a scholarly periodical, the *Journal of Historical Review*, and in 1980 it even bought the mailing list of the prestigious *Journal of American History* and sent free copies of the magazine to all its subscribers, an action which greatly embarrassed the journal’s sponsor, the Organization of American Historians, which issued an apology and adopted a new policy on the use of its membership list.

The IHR claimed to be a research institute with a broad historical agenda, and it even published

revisionist articles on topics that had no connection with World War II, such as the American Revolution, Civil War, and World War I. However, a content analysis of the journal in Shermer and Grobman, *Denying History* (pp. 76-80) shows that its primary focus was on Jews, regardless of the historical time period involved, and the treatments were invariably negative. The IHR writers called the Holocaust "the Greatest Lie" in all history, and labeled those who believed in its truth as "exterminationists." It was the main rationale for "America's dog-like devotion to the illegal state of Israel." One IHR figure, Tom Marcellus, said the Holocaust Lie not only served as a "justification" for the commission of genocide by Israel but also affected the rights of American citizens in their own country. Americans' constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech was suppressed to protect the interests of "Israel-firsters."

The IHR received a great deal of notoriety when in 1980 it offered a $50,000 reward to anyone who could conclusively prove that Jews had been gassed at Auschwitz. Mel Mermelstein, a survivor living in Long Beach, California, took up the challenge and submitted voluminous materials as well as his own eyewitness testimony. When the IHR rejected his evidence, he sued. In the trial he used the same evidence that he provided to the IHR, and in 1985, after protracted litigation and an earlier preliminary ruling in his favor in 1981, a judge of the Los Angeles Superior Court declared: Jews had been gassed to death in Auschwitz was not "subject to dispute" but was "simply a fact." He ordered the IHR to pay the $50,000, plus another $40,000 for pain and suffering. The defendant also had to send a formal letter of apology to Mermelstein for the emotional suffering they had caused him and all other Auschwitz survivors. In 1990 his story was made into a TV-movie starring Leonard Nimoy.

After the initial defeat in 1981, Carto fired the director, William McCalden, and replaced him with Tom Marcellus, formerly a field staff member for the Church of Scientology. In 1993 following an internal struggle over funding (including the disposition of a $15,000,000 bequest from the granddaughter of Thomas Edison), Carto was ousted from the IHR. In 1995 Marcellus left the institute, and Mark Weber, the editor of the *Journal of Historical Review*, took over as director. He is currently its leading light, along with his associate, Greg Raven.

In recent years the IHR along with several other deniers have attempted to become more respectable and distanced themselves from the extreme hate-mongers. One result of this is their effort to produce professional-looking books and monographs complete with footnotes, pictures, and bibliography. This is certainly the case with the guru of denier historiography, the British self-taught historian David Irving, who has generated a long list of books on World War II, including biographies of Churchill, Rommel, Goering, and Goebbels, accounts of the Nazi atomic program and the bombing of Dresden, and a two-volume work on Hitler's war. In April 2000 he lost a celebrated court case in London in which he had sued American writer Deborah Lipstadt, for labeling him a denier in her book, *Denying the Holocaust*. Although Irving's books are full of references to unpublished letters and documents, many of which he claimed to have discovered himself through his assiduous labors, and some of them have even received favorable reviews, scholars who have looked at his works carefully have found them to be riddled with errors and inconsistencies.

A few scholarly types have given a small measure of respectability to the movement. One was the late Dr. Austin J. App, an obscure professor of medieval English literature at La Salle College in Philadelphia. He published a tract, *The Six Million Swindle* (1973), that argued the Holocaust was a plot jointly inspired and nurtured by Communists and Jews to blackmail Germany. More significant is Arthur R. Butz, a graduate of MIT, holder of a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota, and an associate professor of electrical engineering at prestigious Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. In 1976 he authored a lengthy book, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*, that maintained the Holocaust was a Jewish propaganda hoax designed to discredit Germany. The volume attracted considerable press attention and was a great embarrassment to Northwestern. The school's administration was under considerable pressure to fire Butz, but he was a tenured

faculty member and the risks of such an action becoming entangled in academic freedom issues were too great. Another luminary is Fred Leuchter, a so-called “execution engineer” living in Massachusetts who made and sold execution equipment. He traveled to Auschwitz to see if he could find any evidence that cyanide gas had been used in executions there. Of course, he didn’t.

Bradley Smith, the bookseller from California referred to earlier, gained notoriety for placing ads in college newspapers calling for “open debate” on the Holocaust and he howled about “censorship” when the ads were rejected. He tagged on to the political correctness debate and said that the Holocaust story had been “put off limits by America’s thought police.” He claimed this went against everything for which the university stood — free inquiry, open debate, confronting intellectual taboos. There are many other names that could be mentioned — the Canadian deniers James Keegstra, Malcolm Ross, and especially Ernst Zündel; French figures Paul Rassinier, Henri Roques, and Robert Faurisson; Louisiana politician David Duke; the American neo-Nazi Gary Lauck; the self-proclaimed atheist Jew David Cole who worked with the IHR (and apparently has recently recanted his denier views); the British far rightist Richard Verrall (who wrote under the pseudonym of Richard Harwood); and a variety of Germans, including Wilhelm Stäglich, Ditlieb Felderer and Udo Walendy. But enough with the names — this list could go on indefinitely.

The Deniers’ Arguments

Space precludes the possibility of going through the arguments of the deniers and systematically refuting them, and besides numerous writers on Holocaust denial have already done this. (See the appended bibliography.) It is, however, useful to point out the nature of denial argumentation. These people utilize a number of approaches to negate the clear facts of this incredible tragedy. One is to explain the deaths of Jews in the camps as the result of wartime exigencies — Allied bombings, spread of disease, food shortages, overcrowding, and overworked prison labor. As for the gas chambers and crematoria, they were for delousing the clothing of inmates and disposing of those who had died naturally, and the latter were many because of the difficult wartime conditions and unanticipated overcrowding of the camps. To be sure, many Jews did perish in the camps but their mortality rate was in proportion to that of the other peoples incarcerated there, and the capacity of the crematoria could not have accommodated the number of alleged Jewish corpses. After the war most Jews went to Israel or the United States, and that explains why there were so few of them left in Europe. The deniers peck away at inconsistencies in eyewitness accounts to discredit them, and exploit errors made by researchers and historians to suggest that all their conclusions are wrong. They twist the debates among scholars regarding specific interpretive questions of the Holocaust (mentioned above) to call into question the entire veracity of the Holocaust. In every case, they use facts selectively in their arguments and ignore any information that might be contradictory.

Another approach is that of moral equivalency. Some deniers maintain that what Nazis did to Jews was no different than what other nations did to their enemies. The United States dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities and placed Japanese-Americans in concentration camps. The British systematically destroyed German cities through their area bombing campaigns. Stalin and the Chinese Communists killed far more people than the Germans did. Deniers also refuse to accept eyewitness accounts and label these as falsehoods. If the account came from a Nazi figure, they say the testimony was extracted by torture or the person made it up in an attempt to escape punishment. Written Nazi documents are dismissed as being too vague or outright forgeries. Some even suggest that Jews and others were placed in concentration camps to protect them from public anger or to enable their rehabilitation.

Serious historians know that the thousands of pieces of evidence gathered from the thousands of events that occurred in thousands of places throughout continental Europe during the period 1933 to 1945 provide us with a complete and irrefutable picture of what happened. (Shermer and

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Grobman, *Denying History*, p. 256) We do not need one single source, one "smoking gun," [i.e., a direct, written order from Hitler, something which researchers are unlikely ever to find because of Hitler's tendency to issue orders orally or to express what he would like to see happen] to prove that the Holocaust happened. The composite of the evidence is simply overwhelming. As a result, holocaust denial is a cruel mockery of history.

It would be enlightening to reflect on what would result if one used the same methodology to assess the Bible. Such people would quickly relegate Scripture to the status of another ancient document reflecting the power and class interests of its writers and one that was full of errors and inconsistencies. This surely could not be the unique, inerrant, and authoritative Word of God. Or how would they treat the resurrection of Christ? Obviously the evidence is contradictory, the eyewitnesses are biased, and such a miracle could not possibly have happened in the real world.

Why Holocaust "revisionism" is not an acceptable option for Christian scholars

I would argue that Holocaust "revisionism" or "denial" is completely off-limits for us as Christian scholars, and in fact it is quite dangerous in even the most general sense.

1) It leads people to be confused as to what had really happened, and it spreads doubt in the public mind. A few years ago (1992) the American Jewish Committee commissioned a survey by the Roper Organization. Of those polled 22 percent agreed with the statement: "Does it seems possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened" and 12 percent said they "didn't know." The worst figures were found in the 18 to 29 age group (24% agreed and 17% didn't know) and among those who were not high school graduates (20% agreed and 27% didn't know). Also, 23 percent of those who identified themselves as "conservatives" assented to the possibility that the extermination of the Jews may not have occurred. To be sure, some serious methodological questions have been raised about this poll, and the conclusions may be more pessimistic than the evidence justifies — see Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 271-72..

Nevertheless, the level of public ignorance makes it easy for the more "respectable" to engage in their deceptions. Beneath the surface, the deniers are bigots who hate Jews, racial minorities, and democracy in general. But they have adopted the outward appearance of the rationalist and avoided that of the extremist. They project the appearance of being committed to the very values that they in truth despise — reason, accuracy, critical rules of evidence, the honest search for historical truth. In an appeal clearly aimed at Christian intellectuals, George Brewer wrote in the first issue of *The Revisionist: A Journal of Independent Thought* (November 1999): "Whether we will be able to successfully skeet the other clay feet of the hegemonic ideology of liberal Secular Humanism depends on how well we defend the right to think differently about the Jewish catastrophe, as much as anything else."

2) Holocaust denial is at the core a threat to all who believe that knowledge and memory are keystones of our civilization. The Holocaust is not merely a tragedy of the Jews but a tragedy of civilization in which the victims were Jews. It was carried out by a highly advanced technological society, by people who were products of one of the best educational systems in the world. Thus to deny its reality is not a threat just to Jewish history but a threat to all who believe in the power of reason. Holocaust denial repudiates reasoned discussion in much the same way that the Holocaust itself repudiated civilized values. It is the ultimate glorification of irrationalism.

3) Holocaust denial reflects the direction that the intellectual climate in the scholarly world has taken in the last quarter century. The deniers are plying their trade at a time when much of history seems to be up for grabs and attacks on the Western rationalist tradition have become

commonplace. There are no objective truths; there is no one version of the world that is necessarily right while another is wrong. Every conceptual system is as good as another. One cannot dismiss out of hand even the most far-fetched notions simply because they are absurd.

Modern deconstructionist thought argues that experience is relative and nothing is fixed. Thus, this atmosphere of intellectual permissiveness makes it difficult for people to assert that anything is false or off-limits. How can one say that the Holocaust denial is a movement with no scholarly, intellectual, or rational validity? After all, no fact, no event, no aspect of history has any fixed meaning or content. Any truth can be retold. Any fact can be recast. There is no ultimate historical reality. Knowledge dissolves into nothingness.

4) Holocaust denial rehabilitates anti-Semitism in the modern world. As Walter Reich, a former director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, wrote in the *New York Times* on July 11,1993, the deniers, “by convincing the world that the great crime for which anti-Semitism was blamed simply never happened — indeed, that it was nothing more than a frame-up invented by Jews, and propagated by them through their control of the media,” make anti-Semitic arguments seem once again respectable in civilized discourse and even acceptable for governments to pursue anti-Semitic policies. Holocaust denial makes the world safe for anti-Semitism, and in effect, as historian Yehuda Bauer has said in my hearing, creates the preconditions that would deny the Jewish people the right to live in the post-Holocaust world. Or as French literary historian Pierre Vidal-Naquet puts it: “It is an attempt at extermination on paper that pursues in another register the actual work of extermination. One revives the dead in order the better to strike the living.” (*Assassins of Memory*, p. 24)

5) Finally, Holocaust denial is a deterrent to exploring the deep effects which sin has on human society. Historians, theologians, philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists have sought to explain the Holocaust by asking the most fundamental question of all about the human condition: “Why did this happen?” As we explore the matter ourselves, we as Christian scholars are prepared to include human sin as a root cause. However, the deniers respond: “It didn’t happen.” Thus, we don’t need to ask this ultimate question about human failure. But as Christian scholars, is this not the very place where we should begin our inquiry?

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