

Holocaust Denial: A prototype for scientific denialism

Deborah E. Lipstadt

There is a children's game called "What's wrong with this picture?" They are shown a drawing of some scene where one thing is "off," for example twelve chairs where one chair only has three legs, while all the others have four. So too, in relation to this conference. Were anyone to look at the program of lectures for this conference, they would be perfectly justified to look at the title of my lecture and wonder – in the spirit of "what's wrong with this picture" – what is *she* doing here? And yet rarely have felt that my work is in its proper place. For what I have experienced in my encounter with deniers, sadly replicates what so many of you have encountered with the deniers who haunt you and question your work. What I shall do in this presentation is examine the tactics, strategies, premises, and *modus operandi* of Holocaust deniers. I shall leave it to you to draw the parallels.

* * * *

When I first heard about Holocaust denial, I laughed and dismissed them as the contemporary equivalent of flat-earth theory and beyond the parameters of logical thought, something unworthy of research, much less discussion.

Once I began working on this topic, my views changed. I began to take them more seriously. They have the means to work their way into the broader

public's understanding of events. The second reason that they are worthy of our attention is that deniers rely on a *modus operandi* that can easily camouflage their true intentions. They present themselves as neutral investigators whose only objective is to correct mistakes in history. Because of their skills at hiding their actual goals, many laypeople may well find it hard to identify their arguments as Holocaust denial and, *ipso facto*, false. The third reason why deniers are worthy of our attention is because they have become particularly adept at the use of social media. It has given them a new "lease on life" and allowed them to spread seemingly rational arguments about the Holocaust to a vast audience.

The Basic Premises of Traditional Hard-Core Denial

Though not all Holocaust deniers propound the same arguments, certain claims are common to most of them.

1. There was no attempt by the Third Reich to wipe out the Jews of Europe. Any notion of an organized effort to annihilate the Jews is false.
2. Some Jews may have suffered and even been killed, but they were not singled out for mass annihilation. They, together with millions of other people, were the victims of war-related privations. Efforts to single out Jewish victims is a malicious distortion of history.

3. Hitler's Germany was not the instigator of World War II. Responsibility for the war must be shared with the Allies and, even more so, with the Jews.
4. Those Jews who were incarcerated in concentration camps were placed there by the Germans for their own protection, to save them from the righteous anger and hostility of German "Aryans."
5. The number 6,000,000 is an exaggeration which was fabricated by Jews in the postwar period. The number of Jews actually killed by the Nazis and their allies is at most equal to, but probably smaller than, the number of Germans civilians who were killed in Allied bombing raids.
6. Gas chambers are a scientific impossibility. Therefore, the claims that they existed are false. This calumny is used to blacken the Third Reich's and even contemporary Germany's reputation.
7. The reason Jews created this myth was to convince the world to give them a state and to win tremendous sums of money from the Germans in the form of reparations.

Explaining Away the Evidence

Because the Holocaust has the dubious distinction of being the best documented genocide in the world, deniers must find a means of explaining

away evidence that leaves no doubt about the existence of a genocide. In face of “indisputable” evidence they offer an array of non-sinister explanations. These include, among many others:

1. The supposed gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau, for example, were, in fact, air raid shelters. This claim, of course, makes no sense. They were not large enough to accommodate even a fraction of the inmates and they were practically a kilometer from where they SS lived so they could not be for them.
2. The cans of Zyklon B gas found in places such as Auschwitz-Birkenau after the war were used for fumigation only and not for genocidal purposes. This claim by deniers illustrates how they take a fact -- Zyklon B was used for fumigation – and twist it so that it supports their argument. The fact that Zyklon B was used for fumigation, does not preclude its being used for other purposes, in this case the poisoning of people. It is striking that there was a tremendous spike in orders for the gas exactly at the precise time when the killings were at their height. The increase in orders for the gas can be dovetailed with the rate of killings.

Deniers' Tactics

Deniers demand that they be shown one particular document, particularly an order directly from Hitler authorizing the Holocaust. Ignoring the reams of

other evidence attesting to the Holocaust, deniers insist that the “truth” of the Holocaust is totally dependent on this one document. Unless such a document is produced, deniers argue, there is no proof of the Holocaust.

This is a document which, virtually all historians in the relevant fields agree, probably does not exist. Hitler did not want to affix his signature to such an order especially after the German public was so critical of the T4 program, the killing of those whom the Nazis considered to be “unworthy of life,” i.e. handicapped or those afflicted with a genetic disease.

But one not be familiar with the historical data to recognize that reputable historians rarely, if ever, base their conclusions about an event on one document alone, particularly when the event is of this magnitude and when a cache of evidence — from perpetrators, bystanders, and survivors — attest to the event’s reality. Deniers also ignore the fact that, given the Nazis intent on maintaining secrecy regarding the “final solution,” no incompatibility exists between the actuality of the genocide of European Jewry and the absence of any written orders from Hitler calling for that destruction. Finally, there is, of course, a logical fallacy in this contention by the deniers. Deniers insist that Jews forged the various documents that document the Holocaust. Why then did “the Jews” not simply forge this one document and make sure it was planted in a place where it

would be “discovered” as proof of the existence of a killing program? Doing so would have deprived deniers of their pivotal argument.

Another tactic on which deniers rely is what I call “*immoral equivalencies*.” The “myth” of the Holocaust, deniers contend, is a means of camouflaging Allied wrongs. Deniers argue that, not only did the Third Reich not commit this genocide, but the Allies were guilty of crimes of the same, if not more severe, magnitude, than those which Germans are accused of committing. For example, deniers equate the Third Reich’s concentration camps with the camps Americans had for American citizens of Japanese descent. As wrong, immoral, and illegal as the latter were, they do not compare in any manner, shape, or form with a Dachau, Buchenwald, Treblinka or Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Deniers often use neutral “evenhanded” language. They will subtly choose language which in and of itself reinforces their claims. For example, deniers will use the word “died,” rather than were “murdered,” at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Consider Irving’s comments in a television documentary that was screened on November 28, 1991. “Look at Auschwitz. About 100,000 people *died* in Auschwitz. Most of them *died* of epidemics, as we now know....” This choice of a verb – died instead of murdered – suggests, of course, that the victims’ demise was benign and not part of a genocidal effort.

Ultimately, according to deniers, the Germans were the victims. They endured wartime starvation, invasions, victors’ vengeance at Nuremberg, and

brutal occupation by both Soviet and Allied occupiers. Then, in the ultimate miscarriage of justice, it was the Germans who were forced to bear, not just the historical shame, but the financial burden of having committed an act that has become emblematic of the concept of genocide.

Another tactic employed by deniers is to attack sources including those that, in the context of the global history of this genocide, seem relatively insignificant. For example, they argue that the *Diary of Anne Frank* is a bogus document written in ballpoint pen (and therefore written after the war). All their arguments about the *Diary* have been extensively and conclusively answered by Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation and published in *The Diary of Anne Frank: The Critical Edition*. The question remains: why do they place such emphasis on a young girl's diary? Because the *Diary* is, not only the entry point for so many young people into the history of this genocide, but has become as emblematic of the Holocaust as the gas chambers at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Deniers are convinced that, if they can somehow create doubts about the authenticity of the *Diary*, they can then create doubts about the entire historical event. Similarly, they try to sow seeds of doubt around the experiences endured by other survivors, finding small flaws in their rendition of events.

EXTREMISM POSING AS RATIONAL DISCOURSE:

At the outset of this presentation, I noted that, though I initially laughed when I learned that there was such a thing as "Holocaust denial," I changed my

opinion after delving into a study of deniers. The reason for this change was not due to the arguments they make. I knew those were false. Nor, did I fear deniers because they were making tremendous inroads on public opinion and were convincing broad numbers of people that the Holocaust was a myth. It was their tactics, that convinced me to consider a serious threat. I noted how their tactics had evolved from the period immediately following World War II until the late 1970s. Holocaust denial has been extant since the immediate aftermath of the war. In the initial years after the war most deniers were overt neo-Nazis – or just plain Nazis -- who celebrated Hitler’s birthday with cake and ice cream and openly sought his rehabilitation. Their denial was linked to their adulation of Hitler and the Third Reich. These deniers were so far on the fringe of the political spectrum as to appear to most people to be complete outliers. In the 1970s deniers began to adopt a different approach, one that enhanced their potential impact. This new approach allowed deniers to camouflage their true intentions. Gone were the SS-like uniforms, the *Siege Heil* salutes, and meeting halls bedecked with swastikas in the halls where they meet. In their stead were institutions, publications, and individuals, all of which projected a balanced academic veneer. Their preferred name, “revisionists,” was designed to suggest that they simply wish to revise “mistakes” in history. The institute they established had a name that suggested it was a dull scholarly enterprise, the Institute for Historical Review. The name of their journal did the same, the *Journal for Historical Review*. The programs for their gatherings and

conferences suggested that these were mundane academic confabs. But when one looked beneath the surface, one found there the same extremism, antisemitism, and racism. Nothing in the names or their external demeanor suggested their real agenda.

COUNTERING DENIERS' CLAIMS

There are a number of approaches to countering deniers' claims. The most obvious one is to rely on the myriad of documents that prove their claims to be utterly false. One can also use basic logic to demonstrate the basic fallacy in Holocaust denial. For deniers to be correct in their contention that the Holocaust was a myth, who must be wrong? The victims, those who say, "*This is my story; this is what happened to me.*" But it is not only the victims who must be wrong in order for deniers to be right. The bystanders, including the Poles in villages near the camps, watched the trains enter the camps day after day filled with people and leave empty. There were Germans such as the industrialist Eduard Schulte, the head of a mining company that had a branch near Auschwitz-Birkenau and who learned from SS officers what was taking place in the camp. He gave the information on the gassing to the representative of the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland, Gerhard Riegner. But these were not the only eyewitnesses. Scores of eyewitnesses on the eastern front, where the German *Einsatzgruppen* together with local militia murdered approximately 1,000,000 Jews, have given precise and detailed testimony about the genocide.

Who also would have to be wrong? The thousands of historians who work on this topic, including North American, European, Israeli, South American, Australian, and Asian, among others. They would all have had to either been duped or they would have to be part of the very conspiracy itself. It beggars the imagination to think that these historians and other scholars have all been fooled by this charade.

And yet, there is one additional source that must be wrong in order for the deniers' assertions to be right. I speak, of course, of the perpetrators. In fact, from a deductive or forensic perspective, this last source may be the most critically important. The perpetrators are, of course, those best situated to challenge or to buttress the deniers' claims. In fact, their testimony is more powerful than that of the victims because, as in all legal systems, the perpetrator's admission of guilt has more clout than the victim's accusation. How can deniers explain that, in not one war crimes trial since the end of World War II has a perpetrator of any nationality denied that these events occurred? They may have said "I was forced to kill," but not one asserted that it did not happen. In fact, not only have perpetrators not denied that it happened, but they have provided some of the most critical historical detail about the killing process. Deniers attempt to shed doubt on these German admissions of guilt by arguing that these perpetrators were in Allied hands as prisoners of war when they admitted to the crime of genocide. According to deniers, the Allies, acting at the behest of the Jews, forced the German POWs to make these admissions. But

what precisely could the Allies have threatened them with that was worse than the punishment they would have faced as a result of their admissions of guilt? (Did their captors say, "I will kill you unless you admit to having committed mass murder"?) Had the perpetrators confessed to such wrongdoings it would have guaranteed that they would be severely punished. In short, there was nothing their captors could do to them. Conspiracy theorists are, of course, not interested in being bound by such logic.

Why, if Germany was innocent of this massive crime, did it accept this financial and moral burden after the war? Deniers contend that Jews were so successful in spreading the myth of the Holocaust and in planting evidence, that Germany had no choice but to accept the burden of guilt despite being innocent. The Jews, deniers will argue, made it clear to Germany that acknowledging guilt for this horrific crime was the only way it could be readmitted to the family of civilized nations. Here too there is a logical fallacy in deniers' claims. German leaders surely must have recognized that, admitting responsibility for an unprecedented genocidal attempt to wipe out an entire people from one end of a continent to the other and beyond, would impose upon their country a hideous legacy. They would be admitting, falsely according to deniers, to having committed an unprecedented criminal act. And this is precisely what happened. In order to be accepted into the family of nations, the Germans accepted responsibility for a horrific and unprecedented crime, one, that deniers argue, they did not do.

Deniers claim that many of the myriad of documents that attest to the mass killing of Jews were forged. But forging and planting those documents would have been an exceptionally difficult, if not impossible, task. Official German documents from the period bear identification numbers, file designations, and a series of other extensive markings. A forged document would have had to bear a number that corresponded to those that preceded it and followed it in the file. The forged document would have had to be in the same typeface and have the same strength typewriter ribbon. (Most people under the age of 40 have no conception of what that is.) Moreover, copies of the same document would have had to have been planted in other files. For example, a letter would have had to have been placed in the recipient's file and a copy of the letter in the sender's file. In short, documents of this nature cannot be created out of thin air and produced *en masse*.

The list of illogical arguments goes on. Deniers contend that had the Third Reich, a regime they consider to be the epitome of efficiency and power, wished to murder all the Jews it would have ensured that no witnesses remained alive to attest to the existence of death camps and the genocide. Therefore, deniers conclude, the very fact that there were "survivors" alive at the end of the war, constitutes proof that there was no genocide. Had there been a genocide, the Nazis would never have allowed witnesses to survive. One need not be familiar with any of the documentary evidence to identify this argument's inherent fallacy. The deniers' argument is premised on the notion that the Third Reich succeeded

at all it attempted to do and it would never have been so slipshod as to leave witnesses alive. The problem with this claim is Germany was also intent on winning the war. Yet, it lost. Therefore, the assumption that the Third Reich succeeded at all it set out to do is an entirely false premise. Anything that follows from that premise is equally false.

Responding to Holocaust Deniers: Forensic Strategies

In defending the libel charges against me brought by David Irving, my legal team had the option of two different forensic strategies. Here too, we had to choose the most efficacious way of countering deniers' spurious arguments. We could have set before the court the massive documentary, material, and testimonial evidence of the Holocaust in order to conclusively prove what happened. I call this the affirmative approach, i.e. one is affirming the facts of the Holocaust. However, that strategy would have created a level playing field, a debate about the Holocaust. The historical documentation we submitted to the court would have been poised against Irving and other deniers' lies and distortions. We did not doubt that we could demonstrate that these documents were genuine. However, that effort would have turned the courtroom into a venue for a debate about the existence of the Holocaust.

My lawyers and I agreed, that, while there is much to debate *about* the Holocaust, there is no room to debate whether it happened or not. The Holocaust itself should be a matter of extensive research. That research should

be and is the subject of debate among scholars. But the existence of the Holocaust itself is not a matter of debate. We do not debate whether World War II happened or whether the earth is flat.

Unwilling to allow the court to become the venue for such a debate, we chose another route. Since the UK legal system placed the burden of proof was on the defendant, we had to prove that what I said about him was true, i.e. that he was a denier and a falsifier of history. We did this by following his footnotes back to the sources and demonstrating that virtually every claim he made about the non-existence of the Holocaust was predicated on some sort of invention, distortion, or outright lie. He changed dates, altered the sequence of events, quoted incorrectly, and engaged in all sorts of other evidentiary distortions. In sum, rather than prove to the court *what* happened, we conclusively proved that what David Irving said happened *did not* happen. We pulled the ground out from his and, by extension, other deniers' major claims by showing that their so-called proofs were based on lies, inventions, and distortions.

We won a decisive victory. The judge found David Irving to be a liar and denier, who promulgated a tendentious view of history. The judge was convinced that Irving's account of history "flies in the face of the available evidence." It was so "perverse" and "egregious" that his claims could not be "inadvertent" mistakes on his part." In other words, these were not the type of errors that all authors make when writing books. They were deliberate falsifications designed to cast the Holocaust as a myth.

We also proved that he was also a neo-Nazi, racist, and antisemite. We did so for two reasons. Firstly, to demonstrate to the judge the kind of bigoted and racist people with whom he keeps company and to whom he speaks. More importantly, we wished to demonstrate to the court that his denial was not *ex nihilo*, that it was rooted in his bigoted and racist *Weltanschauung*. In his judgment, the judge found him to be a “neo-Nazi polemicist,” a racist, and an antisemite.

Ultimately, when it concerns deniers, we cannot speak of just facts and opinions. We must speak of facts, opinions, and lies. Deniers contend that their arguments constitute “opinions” and they should be part of the discussion about the Holocaust. But, as we conclusively showed the court, these opinions are lies, lies that deniers hope will encroach upon the true facts. One does not enter into a debate with a liar. We must expose their lies but not treat them as an “other side.”