

Spring 2003

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Recommended Citation

Bergschicker, Barbara (2003) "Revising Radicals' Ridiculous Rumors: Contesting and Containing Holocaust Deniers," *ESSAI*: Vol. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol1/iss1/10>

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Revising Radicals' Ridiculous Rumors: Contesting and Containing Holocaust Deniers

by Barbara Bergschicker

(English 103)

The Assignment: Students were assigned to write eight-twelve page research essays on Holocaust-related topics that explored controversial aspects of this area of study.

"... [A] little omission and distortion here and there, and how easy it is to rewrite history. There are subjects, however, that should be exempt from such practices. The Holocaust is surely one of them. It should not be a subject for propaganda exercises, for demagoguery, for smugness, for flippancy."

– Walter Laqueur

A close friend of mine recently interviewed some of Naperville, Illinois' "swashbuckling" students of Neo-nazism, or new Nazism. She informed me of her fear that just because she was interested in hearing their reasons for believing that the Holocaust never happened, they thought she might actually want to expand her interest and knowledge (which was forced since her research was on exposing Neo-Nazi's naivety and stupidity). Thankfully, she declined the invitation.

These young adults buy into an age-old concept that unfortunately will never be contained as long as there is bigotry and hatred. One female follower said that, "I think that the Holocaust never happened. It's just the Jewish people's way of getting sympathy. There might have been some death, but nothing significant" (Connell 1) The Holocaust never happened, right? It was not the genocide where in twelve million plus Jews, Russians, Poles, Gypsies, homosexuals, etc. died from starvation, hypothermia, countless diseases, gunshots, burns, and most significantly, gas chambers? (Gottfried 12). Denial of such a monumental historical event is incredible, but this society does exist. George Santayana proclaimed a powerful maxim when he said that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (13). The complete containment of Holocaust deniers might never be achieved, but through tolerant discussion, validators of this historical cataclysm can contest the liars.

The history of denial is confusing and debilitating. Deniers claim that they are "revisionists" (www.ihr.org). This title originates from the group of people upset with the United States' involvement in World War I; they called themselves revisionists. These revisionists, however, use historical accounts to revise history into their own version, while deniers' evidence springs forth from their own imprudence. The deniers deny while the revisionists revise. Revisionists do not deny blatantly obvious truths; they mix and match. Deniers, however, insist on the following three ridiculous arguments:

...there was no German program to exterminate Europe's Jews, that numerous claims of mass killing in 'gas chambers' are false, and that the estimate of six million Jewish wartime dead is irresponsible exaggeration. (www.ihr.org)

Obviously these claims are unreasonable. First, these deniers claim that there was no German program to exterminate Europe's Jewish population. What about the name "Nazi Party"? That name never has reflected anything but a German program. The Nazi exterminated them; therefore, they are the program responsible. The second argument is that "mass killings in 'gas chambers' are false". Deborah Lipstadt, Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies at Emory University, purports that, "...denial relies on pseudoscience" (32). Historians, who typically have not background in science, try to use this subject as proof of their narrow-minded beliefs. Gas chambers were called a "propaganda exercise" (Lipstadt 8). To try and prove their theory, the deniers used samples taken from gas chamber cramps such as Auschwitz to get them chemically analyzed. However, the conclusions met were false, and the judge

overseeing this experiment labeled the main “engineer” Fred Leuchter’s opinion as “of no greater value than that of an ordinary tourist” (163). The last argument states that “the estimate of six million Jewish wartime dead is an irresponsible exaggeration”. The author of The Myth of the Six Million, the book that “undertook to disprove all the evidence of the murder of the European Jews and to discredit all eyewitness testimony”, claimed to be a “specialist in political and diplomatic aspects of the Second World War”, while all this time the writer was only an editor of a magazine that organized British neo-Nazis (Gottfried 30). These deniers’ attempts always fail. Their arguments are not legitimate and their so-called “specialists” are average anti-Semantic Joes. Deniers’ history transpires as a means to continue the bigoted opinions of these men.

Holocaust denial often masks hatred towards Jewish people that has unfortunately transcended the years. David Kirk translates the work of Dr. Eberhard Jackel, professor of Modern History at the University of Stuttgart, in which he asserts, “Aim and tool of the attempted rehabilitation of Nazism is Holocaust denial” (7). Fascists from the past such as Maurice Bardeche, the most prominent French fascist, were for Germany and against Jews, but deniers today claim none of the above; they vow to only wish to revise history into the truth (Lipstadt 51). The deniers profess peace, blaming the British and French for getting the United States involved in the war, when all that the Germans offered were “reasonable and statesmanlike proposals” in order to avert war” (Lipstadt 33). Once again, the deniers deviate from the core of their arguments. They can blame the outbreak of war on whomever they desire. However, the outcome of war directly correlates to their involvement. The fact is that war happened, and millions of innocent men, women, and children were killed by the hands of countless German Nazis. Yet again, the Nazis blame someone else for their own actions. Bardeche says that soldiers and officers should not be responsible for any orders they took, because these men “had to defeat the Communists in order to survive” (Lipstadt 50). The Nazi/Soviet argument is completely false, considering the shared history of these two countries. It ultimately comes down to the fact that Germany and Russia were cordial until Hitler decided that since he had wiped out all of the forces surrounding Russia, it was time to squash his Russian comrades as well (Whisenhunt). Germany’s survival did not depend on defeating Russian Communists. If it did, then why were they able to lose the war and still survive? The only unfortunate happening in this situation was that Stalin was fooled by Hitler’s game, because it cost his country the valued lives of at least one million Russian Jews. Stalin was a man of trickery as well, and his foolhardiness towards Hitler explains the degree of Hitler’s power. Many were fooled it and, disappointingly so, some are still fooled today.

Veteran deniers open a Pandora’s Box for the many phony accounts made to support modern Holocaust denial. Apparently, Jews were responsible for starting the war because they supported the Treaty of Versailles, or the treaty to end World War I. David Irving, arguably the most “intellectual” Holocaust denier, states in his book about Hitler’s Germany called The War Path that, “[Hitler’s] agitation pivoted on the terms dictated to Berlin’s ‘craven and corrupt’ representatives at Versailles; he tried to convince his audience that defeat in the World War had been inflicted on them by... the Jew-ridden politicians in Berlin” (Irving xii). Not only did the Jewish population help instigate the war, but they had motivations behind their sly attacks on the Germans as well. Paul Rassinier, the father of modern European denial (or as they claim- revisionism), argues that Jewish leaders made up the Holocaust to further their powers in finance and rally support for Israel (Lipstadt 65). Also, Arthur Butz, another self-professed denier, insists that, “Jewish people had the power to control the government, media, and foreign policies all to further their own cause” (Lipstadt 125). He calls this the “hoax of the twentieth century.” Since the Jewish population was so reportedly power-hungry, why did an Austrian take over the country and establish the most frightening totalitarian rule known to mankind? Butz tried hard to spread his accounts, but managed to put up a great intellectual façade (Lipstadt 124). With his constant use of the word “legend”, one wonders why Butz cannot move on to studying a new stance: the art of eliminating redundancy. His lies lose appeal through their constant similar phrasing.

One modern denier masks himself as a minor player in denial, while many are certain of his key role in this movement. Irving’s previously complicated message perfectly portrays the hatred Hitler had for Jewish people, and it is understood why Irving has been called “the most historically sophisticated of

the deniers” (Shermer 49). It is important to notice this, because Irving is a figure used to confuse many people that are on the verge of accepting these lies or that do not even understand what the “whole fuss is about anyways” (which unfortunately usually derives from ignorance). Irving works to clear Hitler’s plate, which has to be the most extreme apologetic move ever taken. Irving does not deny the devastation of certain Holocaust beginnings such as *Kristallnacht*, or “the night of broken glass” where churches were burned, men sent to concentration camps, and families interrogated. Instead, he blames the onset of these events on another person. Irving claims that Goebbels, one of Hitler’s right-hand men, ordered the slaughters (Kirk 11). Otto Dietrich, Hitler’s former press chief, disagrees with Irving’s account, stating the following in his memoirs:

Early in November 1938 there took place...the burning of synagogues and the smashing of Jewish shops... These demonstrations were supposed to have been spontaneous; as I learned the following day, they were staged. The inspiration for them was attributed to Goebbels. In reality they had been instigated by Hitler himself... (Kirk 11).

Whose word should be trusted? A first-hand account or the words of a man that lives to support a totalitarian freak? If we were at a loss, remember what another denier, Austin J. App, thinks of Hitler: “Hitler was a man of architecture and art, not of armaments and war” (Lipstadt 87). Unfortunately for App, it is a well-known fact that Hitler was denied admission to architecture schools and that at one time he tried to sell his art on the streets. These failures could have contributed to his vehement decision to ascend political power in all of Germany. If he was not a man of war in his younger life, he certainly became one. This way of life, vengeance, overpowered Hitler; no wonder it is his infamous legacy.

The most prominent argument in a modern Holocaust denier’s case is that of the gas chambers, which were briefly discussed earlier. Butz blatantly states that, “the exterminations are a propaganda hoax, i.e. we have shown what did not happen to the Jews” (Butz 205). Where did the propaganda emerge anyhow? Was technology as advanced as it is today in the Twenty-first century? Probably not. Any footage of death in the gas chambers is not enhanced, but real-life. Still, arguments against their existence persist. Continuously throughout denial literature there are statements such as “We also believe there were no Nazi gas chambers” (www.nizkor.org). Redundancy is incredible here, especially since the audacity taken to announce such a denunciation is extreme. But, on the Institute for Historical Review website, the leading Holocaust denial website, it is posted that, “Prominent Holocaust historians now claim that masses of Jews were gassed as just six camps in what is now Poland” (www.ihr.org). Minus the “just six camps” statement, there is proof that these deniers contradict themselves. Supposedly, there were no Nazi gas chambers? Their predecessor Bardeche claimed that there were gas chambers indeed, although he believed their purpose was for disinfection rather than annihilation – another appalling take (Lipstadt 50). Still, one would think these deniers could find a more reasonable miniscule tactic. This is what they get for trying to disprove what is right before their eyes.

It is appalling that even Irving himself took this argument to his court case against Holocaust defender Deborah Lipstadt in 2000 (which Lipstadt and her publishing company won). With countless documents available explaining the scientific and physical constructions of the gas chambers in Eastern Europe, it is not surprising that Irving could not withstand the assault on his lies (www.hdot.org). After losing the case, Lipstadt informs her fellow supporters that, “Irving immediately went on his web page and said that this judge was a Jew and a former communist and that was why he turned Irving down” (Lipstadt letter 1) What is true is what the judge said instead, “Irving was a ‘right-wing pro-Nazi polemicist’ who ‘deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence’” (www.hdot.org) All in favor of the judge say “Aye.” Ultimately, arguments against something as terrifying and evidential as gas chambers are foolishly used. This perfectly portrays the deniers’ ignorance in using weak examples to prove their unbelievable stance. And, after being lawfully disproved, showing an attitude like Irving’s adds to the organization’s illegitimacy.

By now the arguments seem to blend together and all that is left to do is take a deep breath and let the fallacies disappear, because “truth can stand by itself” (Shermer 17). It is our duty to respond to

Holocaust deniers, but still contain our own frustrations because that is one of their ultimate goals: to frustrate (and confuse). Accepting ignorance is a key ingredient in approaching these far-fetched accounts. David Singer, author of the article “The Anatomy of a Lie,” is right when he states that, “Any lunacy, if repeated often enough, will take on a life of its own. Second, conspiracy theories on a grand scaled and that, a bottom, is what Holocaust denial is all about – are by their very nature beyond refutation” (1). Obviously there are reasons and motivations behind Holocaust denial. When institutions such as the Institute for Historical Review, which offer a very misleading neutral name, state ideas that their organization is, “non-ideological, non-political, and non-sectarian”, remember that most deniers pledge their allegiance to Germans and Nazi-Germany. Remember where they come from and that they try their best to convey a neutral stance in order to receive as many followers as they can (www.ihr.org and Lipstadt 85). The lies continue on the website, stating, “There is a very real and growing controversy about what actually happened to Europe’s Jews during World War II.” But, Deborah Lipstadt explains the situation as it truly is when she states, “The existence of the Holocaust was not a matter of debate” (Lipstadt 1). By remembering those words, it is possible to decrease the spread of slander. Being cognizant of the historical facts and evidence makes containment of these deniers possible. By remembering the following biblical truth, hopefully future generations can stop the spread of denial: “Remember the days of yore; learn the lessons of the generation that came before you” (Deuteronomy 32:7).

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