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The Negation of the Holocaust

Introduction

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, history is defined as “a chronological record of significant events (such as those affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes.” The history of any nation is important because it outlines the successes, failures, and consequences of both. What happens to a nation, then, when it hides its history, changes the narrative of its history, or at worst, attempts to erase its history? Will history repeat itself as George Santayana, a philosopher in the 20th century, proposes? The repeat of history could be worse than the original because there is no point of reference or comparison. More important than the effect that repeating history would have on the nation is its effect on the individuals involved in its story. The negation of the Holocaust from a historical standpoint, particularly with the accounts of Jewish genocide using gas chambers, would have a negative impact on the survivors and descendants of the Holocaust.

Negationism

George Orwell says, “The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of history.” What Orwell is referring to without giving it a name is a process called Negationism. Negationism is a distortion of history usually following a certain political agenda, and it “enlists a wide variety of strategies and assumes many different forms adapted to the history and political cultures in which it operates” (Wistrich 18). Certain groups of

politically minded people are trying to use this process to discount the Holocaust, one of the most atrocious events in the history of the world. Since the 1950s, barely past the end of WWII, Holocaust deniers began questioning the validity of the claims made by the military and government officials and most importantly, the survivors. The deniers have reached an international level of acknowledgement using their “own networks, gatherings, public forums, propaganda, and pseudo-scientific journals” (Wistrich 18). This group pushes through barriers to make their voices heard throughout the world.

With all of the evidence available in support of the Holocaust, how are the deniers even able to garner support for their cause? According to Robert Wistrich in his book *The Holocaust Denial: The Politics of Perfidy*, “The ‘truths’ of the deniers were, of course, fabrications which ignored a huge mass of evidence that ran counter to their conclusions. As part of their academic façade, they would borrow freely from one another in a never-ending merry-go-round of incestuous falsehoods, while pompously cultivating a veneer of scientific objectivity” (19). Veneer is the best word to use to describe the deniers and their work as they use a thin, fragile layer of “fake” to cover up the real truth.

The main objective of the Holocaust deniers, as stated above, is to discount this period in history, to change the narrative of the Holocaust. They are trying to lessen the severity of the crimes committed against the Jews, and, as implausible as it seems, make the Jews less victim and more perpetrator. If they can manipulate the truth around the Holocaust, they can change the perspective of the entire event and the people involved. Nathan Durst, an Israeli psychologist, is quoted in *The Multiple Distortions of Holocaust Memory* as saying, “If the guilty person is bad, the Jewish victim becomes good. The moment it can be shown the latter is bad too, the ‘other’—that is, the European—is relieved of his guilt feelings. To claim that Israelis behave like Nazis

reduces the sin of the grandparents” (Gerstenfeld 47). Durst believes that this shifting of guilt equalizes the people involved, puts everyone of the same level. He goes on to say that “when one calls everything Auschwitz, you deny the Holocaust. As everything becomes terrible, there is no absolute evil anymore. This is a great relief for the heirs of guilt” (Gerstenfeld 47). This concept is the goal of negationism and at the root of the Holocaust deniers’ cause. If they can change the severity of the Holocaust, and even make the Jews guilty and deserving of the treatment they received, then where does that leave Germany, the Nazis, Hitler, and the other guilty parties?

The Claims of Holocaust Deniers

It is a known fact that “there was rampant antisemitism in Nazi Germany, and that Hitler and many of the Nazi leaders hated the Jews” (Shermer and Grobman 100). The deniers accept this as truth, along with other facts about Jew deportation, confiscation of wealth and property, and the existence of concentration camps where harsh treatment and disease were leading causes of Jewish deaths. However, these truths are where the acceptance ends (Shermer and Grobman 100).

There are three basic claims of all Holocaust deniers as stated in Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman’s book *Denying History: Who Says the Holocaust Never Happened and Why Do They Say It?* The claims are as follows:

1. *A highly technical, well-organized extermination program, using gas chambers and crematoria, among other instruments and methods, was implemented to kill millions of Jews.*
2. *An estimated six million Jews were killed.*
3. *There was an intention to commit genocide of Jews based primarily on racial ideology (100).*

For the purposes of this paper, focus is placed on the first claim. However, it is easy to ascertain that a denial of the extermination program through the use of gas chambers would greatly affect the estimated number of Jews killed and would discount any claim of genocide that history and evidence make regarding the Holocaust.

It may not be surprising to learn that the first Holocaust denier is actually Adolf Hitler, which seems counterintuitive since he is the leader of the Nazi regime during that time. With one statement, Hitler elicits doubt in the minds of the public about the true plan of what he calls “The Final Solution.” Hitler is recorded as saying, “I prophesied to Jewry that, in the event of war’s proving inevitable, the Jew would disappear from Europe...Let nobody tell me that all the same we can’t park them in the marshy parts of Russia...It’s not a bad idea, by the way, *that public rumor attributes to us a plan to exterminate the Jews*. Terror is a salutary thing” (as quoted in Rosenbaum 1) (*emphasis mine*). Hitler’s plan all along is the extermination of the Jews. Because he is never seen in close proximity to a death camp or his signature is never on a genocide order, he could claim it as a rumor, giving Holocaust deniers fuel for their cause.

The Gas Chambers Myth

The existence of gas chambers at the concentration camps is a long-lasting debate among Holocaust deniers. After Hitler casts his doubt on the public, Paul Rassinier became “one of the first and turned out to be arguably the most prominent of the Holocaust deniers” (Farmer 33). In 1943, Rassinier is placed in the Buchenwald concentration camps as a political prisoner, and upon his release at the end of the war, he begins hearing claims about gas chambers and the mass extermination of Jews. He immediately starts speaking out against these claims because Buchenwald, one of the first concentration camps, did not have gas chambers. Therefore, his conclusion is that since Buchenwald did not have them, no concentration camp has them. This

claim leads Rassinier to discount not only the gas chambers but the number of reported deaths by mass extermination. He refuses to supply evidence and does not accept any evidence that refuted his claims (Farmer 33).

Maurice Bardeche, a French fascist, is the first denier to state that the gas chambers are used “only to disinfect clothing; that the evidence, including photos, documents, and testimonials regarding the annihilations of Jews, had been falsified; and that whatever sufferings the Jews had experienced had been deserved, since they had been enemies of the German state” (Reich 33). To add to Bardeche’s claim about the purpose of the gas chambers, Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, a former commissioner for Jewish affairs, is quoted during an interview as saying, “Only lice were gassed at Auschwitz” (Gerstenfeld 38). The last French fascist worth mentioning is Robert Faurisson who believes that the existence of gas chambers and the genocide of Jews are both lies that “opened the way to a gigantic political and financial fraud of which the principal beneficiaries are the state of Israel and international Zionism, and the principal victims the Germans and the entire Palestinian people” (Wistrich 9). His goal is to transfer the guilt away from the German people, which is the goal of Holocaust deniers.

As much as the argument should have stayed in Europe, it did not, and just like WWII, America gets involved in the argument over the validity of the Holocaust. Harry Elmer Barnes is an American historian who seeks to change the narrative of the war. He claims that Germany did not start WWII and is trying to change to evidence surrounding the genocide of the Jews in the war. Another American denier is Austin App who has spent thirty years trying to find proof that genocide is a false claim. He does not believe that gas chambers are ever used in the war and that “the Nazis never had a plan for exterminating the Jews; had the efficient Germans wanted to do so, he explained, no Jew would have survived the effort” (Reich 33). App claims that any Jew

that died in the concentration camp died a justified death because they were “subversives, partisans, or spies” (Reich 33).

One of the most influential of the American Holocaust deniers is Arthur Butz who authors a book called *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*. In this book, he claims that any historian that believes in existence of death camps distorted the evidence that supports it. He concludes that Auschwitz is an industrial and “highly productive” work camp. His most erroneous claims, though, state, “The chemical Zyklon B had been nothing but insecticide for disinfecting workers’ clothing; the gas chambers were in fact baths, saunas, and mortuaries; the stench from the camp was due to hydrogenation and other chemical processes, not to mention the burning of dead bodies” (Wistrich). The “extermination of Jews” that Hitler refers to must mean something else entirely (Reich 33).

The Holocaust deniers will go to any length to make this even a hoax, which is seen in the 1988 trial of Ernst Zundel. Zundel is a citizen of Germany but as an immigrant in Canada, Zundel is caught distributing pamphlets and other informational packets denying Holocaust details, including the use of gas chambers. The defense for this case used the testimony of Fred A. Leuchter, an engineer who personally investigated Auschwitz and Majdanek for evidence of gas chambers. Leuchter concludes that “based on his expert knowledge and investigations, there had never been homicidal gassings at those sites” and that “it was impossible for the Germans to have used gassings to kill Jews” (Reich 33). The wrench in this case and the win for the prosecution is that Leuchter is not even an engineer, and so he was subsequently charged with “illegally practicing engineering, in response to which he agreed to stop presenting himself as a member of that profession” (Reich 34). The presence of Holocaust deniers since WWII continues even today and extends not only from Europe into Canada and America, but also into the Middle

East. In 2004, the Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at a meeting with the members of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, openly denies the claim that Hitler used gas chambers to kill millions of Jews (Gerstenfeld 39-40).

The Evidence

A few years before WWII, the Nazis conduct experiments on the mentally and physically disabled German citizens. In the experiments, they first find that an exposure to large quantities of carbon monoxide while locked in a sealed room, kills efficiently. The Nazis then turn their attention to Zyklon Blausaure, Zyklon B, which is “a powerful cyanide-based chemical in crystallized form that was used to destroy insects” (Rees 224). The experiment is conducted in the basement interrogation room at Auschwitz, and it concludes that when administered in large doses, the noxious gas that is released from Zyklon B is strong enough to kill humans (Rees 224-225). Both methods are used at the death camps, especially Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka (Rees 312-313).

As the methods for the genocide of the Jewish people have been identified, there are several pieces of evidence that confirm that these chemicals are indeed used in the gas chambers within the concentration camps. First, there are written documents that contain “orders for Zyklon-B, architectural blueprints, and orders for building materials for gas chambers and crematoria” (Shermer and Grobman 127). Forensic evidence confirms that they are traces of Zyklon-B on the walls of the gas chambers. Photographic evidence exists both from the ground and from the air. Perhaps, though, the most damning evidence comes in the form of eyewitness testimonies of the atrocities that occurred in the gas chambers at the camps. These accounts come from Holocaust survivors, guards, and even Jewish Sonderkommandos, who are responsible for removing the corpses from the chambers (Shermer and Grobman 128).

One eyewitness account is from Henryk Mandelbaum, a Polish Jew serving as a Sonderkommando at Auschwitz in 1944. He first recounts that as Jews are ushered toward the gas chambers, they try to fight their way back out, but “the SS men would hit them on the head with sticks and blood was flowing...by force they would be pushed into the gas chambers” (Rees 324). Once the doors are closed, Mandelbaum says that an ambulance bearing a red cross would arrive that carries the Zyklon B gas crystals. The crystals are thrown into the sealed gas chamber with the Jews. His account continues,

“the gassing lasted about twenty minutes to half an hours. After the gassing, after the twenty or thirty minutes, we opened the doors. You could see how these people died—standing. Their heads were to the left or to the right, to the front, to the back. Some vomited or had hemorrhaged, and they would shit with loose bowels. Before burning we had to cut their hair and pull out the gold teeth. And also had to look whether people kept anything in their nostrils, or valuables in the mouth—women in their vaginas” (Rees 324-325).

Even with all the evidence proving that the Holocaust happened and that gas chambers existed, the Holocaust deniers exist and adamantly claim that they hold the truth. The question then becomes—how is the Jewish population affected by all of this?

The Trickling Effect of Holocaust Deniers on the Jewish Population

Douglas Lawrence, in his article “The Memory of Judgment: The Law, the Holocaust, and Denial,” he writes, “Efforts to proscribe Holocaust denial remind us that the legal grammar of harm, jurisdiction, culpability and proof may permit the law to order a social world effectively, but not to speak reliably on behalf of that world’s most difficult histories and most traumatic memories” (9). It would be easier to forget the Holocaust even happened, to pretend

that the Jewish people were not targeted, tortured, and killed at the hands of the Nazis. There is too much evidence, however, to deny it. One of the main effects of the denial is the effect it has on the Jews, which is that when “one revives the dead in order the better to strike the living—that is, in order to hurt the Jews who are still alive” (as quoted in Reich 34). The deniers use the platform of free speech in order to propagate their cause, but the “freedom to express views” should never be “confused with an obligation to facilitate their expression.” They exert this freedom without expressing one ounce of concern to the Jews who survived or lost people during the Holocaust (Reich 34).

The more the world hears about the denials of the Holocaust, the more there is a chance that the world could start believing them (Reich 34). Where would this leave the Jews? What are the deniers truly trying to accomplish? In his book, *The Holocaust Denial: The Politics of Perfidy*, Robert Wistrich answers these questions as follows,

Holocaust denial is a particularly malevolent form of racist incitement—the most up-to-date rationalization for hating Jews, thinly disguised under the mask of revising history. Not for nothing have the deniers been called assassins of memory, fanatics engaged in a new kind of symbolic genocide against the Jewish people. Where the mobs once cried ‘Death to the Jews,’ the deniers cynically proclaim that ‘the Jews never died’ and ‘this truth will make you free’ (25).

So, in essence, the deniers are putting the Jews right back in the fire of racism, though one can only hope it is, and stays a figurative fire.

Conclusion

Two of the main reasons for Holocaust denial are either anti-Semitism or to assuage German guilt, but in both cases, the Jews are at the disadvantage. Their history gets diminished,

ignored, or completely forgotten. For the Holocaust deniers, Walter Reich says it best in his article “Erasing the Holocaust”—

But the devastating truth about the Holocaust is that it was a fact, not a dream. And the devastating truth about the Holocaust deniers is that they will go on using whatever falsehoods they can muster, and taking advantage of whatever vulnerabilities in an audience they can find, to argue, with skill and evil intent, that the Holocaust never happened. By being vigilant to these arguments we can all fight this second murder of the Jews—fight it, and weep not only for the victims’ mortality but also for the fragility, and mortality, or memory” (34).

Each and every time an old claim resurfaces or a new claim is created, the Jews and their direct descendants have to relive the Holocaust all over again. Living through a tragedy once is enough for any one person but having to relive that tragedy over is devastating to the mind and to the soul. Can the Holocaust just not be remembered for what it was—the worst atrocity against any one group in the history of the world? It cannot be denied but never should it be forgotten lest history should repeat itself.

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