

HOLOCAUST DENIAL #2

i.e. the anatomy of a lie.

Last time:

- The Montel Williams Show
- Who denies? When did it start? When did it change? Why do people deny genocide?
- Holocaust denial belongs to a broader genre of *genocide denial* – similar rules and conventions, similar “logic”, arguments and rhetoric devices etc.
- Psychology of extremism + cognitive dissonance as psychological/sociological causes for denial – however, these theses might tell us more about why people *continue to deny* than why they begin denying in the first place.

Daniel Bell: “The way you hold your beliefs is more important than what you hold”, i.e. it’s more important *how* you think than *what* you think.

Today, we’ll largely focus on the *how*.

+ I’ll show you how the arguments of Holocaust deniers look a lot like the arguments of those denying other genocides, in particular the Armenian (as that is my area of research...).

You’ve read two articles till today, one written by the French Holocaust denier Robert Faurisson and the other written by the American denier Mark Weber. (Note: it doesn’t really matter where they are from though, as denial seems like an international enterprise.)

We’ll discuss the contents of the articles in just a minute, first I want to talk briefly about their CONTEXTS – where they were published, when they were written, who their authors were.

ARTICLE : “The ‘Problem of the Gas Chambers’” (Faurisson)

From the early 1980s – i.e. a time when Holocaust denial was aiming for respectability and a scholarly veneer. It’s also a time when Holocaust scholarship was *relatively* new.

1978: *Holocaust* was sent across the world → interest in the Holocaust grew. So did the denialist effort to disprove what was argued to be the “Jewish Holocaust myth”.

Many of the authoritative denialist works were written around this time, or a couple of years earlier.

One of the most infamous and most cited (among deniers) of the Holocaust “revisionists”:

ROBERT FAURISSON [Photo]

- F. represented something new within the Holocaust movement. He was a French intellectual, Professor of French Medieval Literature (Uni. of Lyon) up until 1991 when he was dismissed as a result of his Holocaust denial (the uni. argued for instance that they could not protect F. who had received death threats).
- An outspoken Holocaust denier: gas chambers, Zyklon B, Anne Frank Diary. [Comic]
- Prosecuted and fined in France in 1990 for “falsification of history”, but mostly known for what has been called the “**Faurisson affair**”.

- 1983: he published a book where he had included a foreword by American left-wing intellectual and linguist **Noam Chomsky** (without asking Chomsky) in which he defended F. right to freedom of expression, and argued that all possible viewpoints must be allowed – no matter how disagreeing and hurtful.
- Fierce debate followed (fierce in a way that only intellectual debates in France can be I think), and both F. and Chomsky were severely criticized. Chomsky was offended and didn't return to France for 30 years.

Zyklon B and Jean-Claude Pressac:

Pressac (French chemist and pharmacist) was initially Faurisson's protégé. In 1979 he went to Auschwitz (on F.'s orders) to prove that no gassings had taken place.

What Pressac found was, however, loads of evidence proving that gassings had indeed been a primary method of killing, and he estimated that somewhere between 600,000 and 800,000 people had been killed with gas in Auschwitz alone.

P. has since become one of F.'s greatest critics.

In addition to being able to prove forensically that people were gassed, P. has disproved F.'s otherwise quite logical argument that Zyklon B would have been an unsuitable method of killing.

For example:

- The instructions cited by F. and others refers to fully furnished home-environments – not gas-tight and bare cement bunkers used in the camps.
- The gas chambers had powerful ventilation systems, it wasn't just a matter of "opening windows" in order to let the remaining gas "air out".
- The Sonderkommandos (who actually collected the bodies from the gas chambers) wore masks – even if the SS guards did not.

[DISCUSSION QUESTIONS]

POINTS OF DISCUSSION

1.

a)

- Authoritative tone, matter-of-factly.
- Goes out of their way to make it simple and a matter of common sense.
- Pseudo-scientific language
- Citation marks to indicate incredibility
- Sarcasm

b)

- **Rarely say anything definitive about their own position** and instead attack their opponents' weak points or mistakes (hammer away at the inconsistencies of witness and survivor accounts for example)

- Find **errors** made by scholars and historians and exploit these as if all historians' conclusions are wrong (when historians have revised the total death toll, for instance, deniers make a point of arguing that if historians were wrong once, what makes them think they'd be right a second time around?)
- They **quote, usually out of context, leading mainstream figures to support their own position** (Remember Mark Weber referring to Raul Hilberg to make his point in the Montel Williams Show?)
- They **consistently turn debates among scholars on specific issues into debates about the reliability and accuracy of the entire historical field** (when historians, for instance, ask if the Nazis intended to exterminate the Jews from the beginning or if it was a decision taken during the war as other options were being closed off, deniers claim that historians are arguing about whether or not the Holocaust happened at all)
- **Focus on what is not known and ignore what is known** – carefully selecting data that fit and ignoring data that does not fit their preconceived ideas (deniers, for example, stress what we do not know about the gas chambers and disregard eyewitness testimony, as well as photographs of the gas chambers in action)
- **EQUIVALENCE**: “The Holocaust is no different from what X did to X”. (Remember how Mark Weber compared the US internment of Japanese to the Holocaust?)
- If this is wrong, so is everything else! Focus on **details**, claiming that everything else about the Holocaust needs to be doubted and revised (meaning falsified).
- Deniers **only deal with one piece of evidence at a time**, never with collections of evidence because those would be harder to refute. Therefore, deniers demand that each piece of evidence, independently and without corroboration among them, needs to prove the entire Holocaust. (Yet, no *one* piece of evidence ever proves anything in history, it's the combination that does it.)
- **Shifting the burden of proof to the historians**. Calls for “just one proof”.

c)

“The gas chamber controversy” [BILD]

The role of the gas chamber is one of the main areas of the Holocaust that deniers wish to debate. In fact, some of them don't talk about anything else.

During a Canadian denial-trial in 1984, deniers even employed one of their own to perform a forensic examination of the gas chamber at Auschwitz. The job fell upon a man named **Fred Leuchter**.

He went to Poland, accompanied by his crew of “specialists”, and toured Auschwitz/Birkenau and Majdanek. The group illegally collected “forensic samples” – bricks and cement fragments – from the crematoria and gas chambers at the camps, and when he returned to the US, Leuchter had the samples chemically analyzed, the only problem being the fact that he was by no means a chemist. He had a BA in history – that was it.

He summarized his findings in what he called the “**Leuchter Report: An Engineering Report on the Alleged Execution Gas Chambers at Auschwitz, Birkenau, and Majdanek, Poland**” [BILD], and his book was published by the deniers' own publishing houses in North America and Europe. In his report, Leuchter maintained, for instance, that there had never been any homicidal gassings at any of the camps. He claimed that his findings were based on his “expert knowledge” of the design criteria for gas chamber operation, and his visual inspections of both the remains of chambers and of original drawings and blueprints of some of the facilities.

According to Leutcher, the design and fabrication of the gas chambers made it impossible for them to have served as execution sites. And in any case, the Nazis could not have killed 6 million people in those chambers. (A refutation of an argument no one had made, historians have never claimed that the Nazis had killed 6 million people in the gas chambers of the camps!)

It is this report that Faurisson bases a lot of his claims on. And although Leutcher's report was rejected as garbage by the Canadian court, it has remained central within the Holocaust denial movement.

The issue of **Zyklon B** is closely tied to this gas chamber "controversy".

Why are the gas chambers targeted?

Because they have been made **a symbolic part of the Holocaust**. They are often imagined to be the most cruel and inhuman kernel of the Holocaust, and a piece of the Holocaust that sets it apart from other instances of genocide and mass murder in modern history.

Rudolf Höss' testimony

Perpetrator testimony has continually been a sore spot for deniers, and it's usually argued that perpetrators confessions were forced, falsified or manipulated in various ways.

→ this goes hand in hand with the fact that deniers of genocide usually dismiss all human testimony – regardless of where it came from (and despite the fact that when it comes to the Holocaust, the testimonies of all parties tend to corroborate each other).

Obsession with numbers, because statistics are seen as reliable, scholarly evidence where witness testimony is not.

2

How do they come across?

Somewhat **worse than Mark Weber and David Cole, I'd say**. Much happened to the image of the denier between the early 80s and the early 90s.

3

Deniers are **obsessed with truth and objectivity**. Hence, they enjoy discussing the "scientific" parts of history: tests, forensic evidence, materials, documents and archives.

To most, history is simply finding out what happened in the past. **History = a collection of facts**. These facts can, in turn, be true or false, and nothing more. To most historians, as I talked about last time, this is an outdated view. History is today largely seen in terms of scholarly interpretations of the past.

The past does not simply lie there, ready for us to explore. The past is gone, dead. What we have left are small bits and pieces of the past, and when we write scholarly history we do our best trying to puzzle them together. It's however unlikely that we'll every reach a complete and total account of the past.

HOWEVER, I think all historians would still agree that there is some kind of “factual bedrock” →

“Did the Holocaust happen” – is not a valid scholarly question. We know that it did, it has been proven repeatedly, and it is beyond doubt.

Questions such as “How did it happen”, “What was the scale of it”, “Was it premeditated?” are, however, valid.

→ All that we have talked about so far = A GENRE OF GENOCIDE DENIAL.

[3 x TABLES: Similarities Holocaust and Armenian genocide denial.]

HOW DO WE / SHOULD WE DEAL WITH HOLOCAUST DENIAL?

What should be done about Holocaust denial?

Should we **forbid it, ignore it, debate it**?

Historians chose, for a long time, to ignore it completely. Most historians dealing with the Holocaust didn't want to talk about or write about denial at all. It was better left uncommented, and the idea was that any kind of attention is good attention.

The first historians to deal with Holocaust denial often meet this opinion telling other historians what they wrote about. "Don't bother with them. Leave them alone and they will wither and die", they say. The problem is that historians and other scholars did leave deniers alone for a very long time. And they didn't die. They only grew stronger, more tenacious, and more sleek.

Enter: the Internet.

Suddenly, denial became harder and harder to ignore. If school children today google "the Holocaust", they are bound to run into some pages of Holocaust denial. That's a problem, because how do you teach 10-year-olds about Holocaust denial?

Solution?

Should we **debate and discuss it continuously**?

Chances are that if we did, we'd never stop. Holocaust research would never move forward, because we would forever be caught in proving every single, tiny detail.

Furthermore, the real problem of discussing and arguing with deniers is the fact that whether you want it or not, **denial tends to pull and reduce the center of a debate towards the extremes. And in the case of history, the balanced center of a debate is usually a sound and good thing, going "on the one side X, but on the other Y" – engaging denial in debate reduces the possibility to engage in such fine-tuned argumentation.** What usually is scholarly sound, saying "the historical sources point towards this, however, some also argue that", becomes dangerous, because it opens up for denial. Historians will instead have to go: "that was that, period". Less room left to maneuver in.

And it is really as dangerous as if physicists were supposed to argue against people believing that the world is flat every time they are to perform an experiment or write an article.

There are, furthermore, **GREAT DIFFICULTIES in debating deniers.**

1. The deniers long to be considered "**the other side**". Engaging them in debate, even if it's only to tell them they're wrong, does just that.
2. Deniers cannot be debated because they are **contemptuous of the very tools that shape any honest debate: namely, honesty, reason, and logic.** Historians that have tried have noted that trying to debate with Holocaust deniers is "like trying to nail a glob of jelly to the wall". It simply can't be done in a proper way.

Still, while not ignoring them or engaging them in direct debate, I think there are still things we can do.

This final burden still has to fall on people that know and study the Holocaust; on historians, sociologists, educators, teachers, political scientists and so on.

It is up to them to make sure museums and education etc. reflect both proper Holocaust history, and explain what is faulty in denialist reasoning. But it's also up to them to make sure the media and producers of popular culture (such as the Montel Williams Show) understand what they are doing by providing Holocaust denial with an outlet and a forum that they can present their theories in. Because as individuals those working with media has to understand that Holocaust denial, and denial of any genocide really, **is not a matter of ignorance**. It's not that Holocaust deniers don't know any better. It's about hate.

LEGAL RESTRAINTS

There are those who believe **that the courtroom is the place to fight the deniers** (as we discussed last time). Different countries have adopted differently formed laws.

Some legislation criminalize incitement to hatred; discrimination; or violence on racial, ethnic, and religious grounds (so does, e.g., Swedish law).

Others ban the dissemination of views based on racial superiority for one group and racial inferiority for another.

There are several problems with this, as you noted.

One is very practical. It's **difficult to sustain and carry through such legislation**. Several court cases have been made very difficult as they've come to be about whether or not the Holocaust actually happened, and not about the nature of Holocaust denial and its racist motivations.

However, **the main shortcoming of legal restraints is that they transform the deniers into martyrs of the altar of freedom of speech**. When some deniers have been asked to appear in court, some academics have felt the need to speak up for them (Chomsky), saying it's wrong to legally judge someone for talking, even if that talk means lying and hurting people in the process. Deniers have used that support for freedom of speech to mean support for their cause in general.

WHEN AND WHY DID HOLOCAUST DENIAL GO TO COURT?

1984: Ernst Zundel, Canada.

In Canada it is, therefore, forbidden to deny the Holocaust. This is also true for countries like Austria, Germany or France. In Germany the law is known as the "Auschwitz Lie"-law, and makes it a crime to "defame the memory of the dead".

There are similar laws in place in Switzerland, Belgium, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, Australia – and Sweden.

In Sweden we have laws forbidding hate speech, and in 1982 Holocaust denier Dietlieb Felderer was, for instance, prosecuted for "obscene propaganda against the Jews".

Several countries around the world have further banned certain Holocaust deniers from speaking within the country.

Laws against Holocaust denial, not so much as a result of what deniers said as what context they said it in. The connection between Holocaust deniers and neo-Nazi organization was becoming clearer and clearer.

In court, Holocaust deniers were discussed as falling somewhere between the lines of “free speech” and “hate speech”, of instigating violence and promoting anti-Semitism.

Is Holocaust denial a matter of free speech?
Should it be a criminal offense?

My opinion: **Free speech is complicated, but important, and it works both ways!** While **I disagree that governments should be allowed to limit free speech in any degree, individual organizations, schools, newspapers etc. should be allowed to do so at their convenience.** Because this is also a matter of free speech! Being able to choose what to publish and what not to publish in your own newspaper is a matter of free speech.

Similarly, Holocaust deniers should be allowed to publish whatever they want on their own, using their magazines, news papers and journals.

They should also be allowed to lobby for their advertisements and so on to be accepted into news papers etc., but it should also be alright to turn them down.