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# Holocaust Deniers Can't Be Ignored: History: As Victims and Witnesses of World War II Die Off, Revisionist Views of the Nazi Horrors Could Gain Broader Acceptance

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# Holocaust deniers can't be ignored

**History: As victims and witnesses of World War II die off, revisionist views of the Nazi horrors could gain broader acceptance.**

April 02, 2000 | By Kenneth Lasson

ON TRIAL in an English courtroom, where British historian David Irving has sued American professor Deborah Lipstadt for defamation, is not only the scholars' reputations but history itself.

Irving claims that he was libeled by Lipstadt's 1993 book, "Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory," in which she called him "one of the most dangerous of the 'revisionists'" because, "familiar with historical evidence, he bends it until it conforms with his ideological leanings and political agenda."

Irving maintains that he is a legitimate historian who challenges orthodox views. Here are a couple of his statements:

"I don't see any reason to be tasteful about [the gas chambers at] Auschwitz. It's baloney. It's a legend. -- I say quite tastelessly, in fact, that more women died on the back seat of Edward Kennedy's car at Chappaquiddick than ever died in a gas chamber in Auschwitz. -- The holocaust of the Germans of Dresden was real. The holocaust of the Jews in the Auschwitz gas chambers is a fabrication."

"I would say that [Jews are] a clever race. I would say that as a race they are better at making money than I am. That's a racist remark, of course. If I was going to be crude, I would say not only are they better at making money, but they are greedy."

In the United States, such views are protected by the First Amendment. So, too, are Lipstadt's remarks about Irving, because it would be virtually impossible for him to prove they were false.

But under British law, the burden of proof in defamation is squarely on the defendant, thus making it necessary for Lipstadt and her English publisher to demonstrate that Irving deliberately lied. As bizarre as it may seem, they must prove that the Holocaust actually happened.

One is tempted to dismiss this libel suit as little more than sideshow entertainment that's wholly irrelevant to the reality of Nazi genocide. "It's more about the silliness of English libel law," says Walter Reich, a professor at George Washington University and former director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

But, for others, the trial has serious ramifications. "I used to wonder why one must even dignify such an absurd position," says British historian Eric A. Johnson. Given the deniers' increasing numbers and influence, he now feels they can no longer be ignored.

Indeed, Irving has been recognized by some as a meticulous researcher. By his own account, he's "scrupulously fair." But if Irving is able to dismiss the testimony of tens of thousands of witnesses, where does that leave history?

Lipstadt's lawyers tell us what to make of David Irving. As far back as 1959, Irving announced his admiration of the Nazis and claimed the British press "is owned by Jews."

In the ensuing years, he made numerous appearances before revisionist groups, shared platforms with neo-Nazis and consorted with Ku Klux Klansmen. The vast majority of Jews who perished at Auschwitz died of typhus or "other natural causes," he says.

There is no evidence that Hitler either ordered their slaughter or had a systematic plan to destroy European Jewry.

The lawyers produce documents such as Adolph Eichmann's diaries, which offer a meticulous accounting of the death camps over which he presided. They call other historians, who characterize Irving's scholarship as a gross disfigurement of history -- "perverse" and "so extraordinary it would defy reason" -- and are forced to ask the tragically obvious burning questions:

How would he explain the countless testimonies of survivors, not to mention the voluminous documentation produced by the Nazis themselves?

The Jews have made it all up, suggests Irving.

How would he explain the Nazis' diabolically meticulous record-keeping that numbered victims with permanent tattoos on their arms, itemized their personal effects and provided in gruesome detail the methodology by which they were tortured and killed? All lies?

It soon becomes clear that, despite his comprehensive knowledge of Nazi history and his use of the scholarly voice, he deliberately ignores data that don't fit his anti-Semitic thesis.

But Irving is hardly a lone wolf in the academic wilderness. Many university libraries classify Holocaust-denial books under "Holocaust." Ignorance about what happened is widespread and growing; recent polls found that 38 percent of American high school students and 28 percent of American adults could not identify the Holocaust.

There can be little doubt that Holocaust denial will gain strength once there are no more victims alive to supply eyewitness

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testimony about Nazi atrocities.

The need to remember is made all the more critical by the existence of well-known political figures who at various times express sympathy for accused Nazi war criminals or deny the extent of the Holocaust, such as Patrick Buchanan and Louis Farrakhan.

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If we are unwilling to brand scientific nonsense as just that, and if when empirically verifiable falsehoods become subjects for debate, then the whole notion of truth becomes hazy. The need to present both sides of an issue is necessary only when there are two sides.

It is ironic that only in America would Irving's views be legally protected -- and that his lawsuit was brought in England, which since 1936 has sought statutorily to prohibit racist expressions (including racial incitement by spoken or written words). Similar laws exist in most Western democracies.

France found right-wing leader Jean-Marie Le Pen guilty of trivializing the Holocaust by referring to the Nazi gas chambers as "a detail of history." (He was fined \$180,000.) Canada convicted neo-Nazi Ernst Zundel of Holocaust denial in a trial in which Irving, testifying for the defense, dismissed the crematoriums at Auschwitz as tourist attractions built by the Polish communist regime after World War II. Germany's constitutional court banned Irving from speaking -- ruling that propagators of the so-called "Auschwitz lie" cannot invoke freedom of speech as a defense.

In 1947, Thomas Dodd, the former U.S. senator who was one of the American prosecutors at the Nuremberg Trials, said of the evidence he was about to present that "the proof will be so overwhelming that I venture to predict not one word I have spoken will be denied." Of course, Dodd hadn't countenanced Irving, who himself is living proof that one may be both a scholar and a bigot. As the generation of survivors dwindles, whose words will win?

Kenneth Lasson is a law professor at the University of Baltimore, and author of a recent article in the George Mason Law Review titled "Holocaust Denial and the First Amendment: The Quest for Truth in a Free Society."

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