

HOLOCAUST DENIAL

Although the Holocaust is one of the most heavily documented and corroborated events in history, anti-Semites across the globe continue to deny or distort facts about the Holocaust as a way to foment ill will against the Jewish people.

The occurrence of the Holocaust is or should be undeniable. In 1945, the Nuremberg trials conducted by the International Military Tribunal established the horrific crimes committed by the Nazis during World War II, creating a public record of unassailable evidence.¹ Over the last seven decades, more evidence has come to light, and efforts to conceal the atrocities committed by the Nazis failed. Even so, Holocaust deniers and revisionists persevere, perpetuating Jew-hatred under the guise of academic debate.

This fact sheet defines Holocaust denial; provides a brief overview of its history; explains why it is anti-Semitic; explains who Holocaust deniers are and the common arguments they use; and discusses Holocaust education.

What is Holocaust denial?

According to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of Holocaust denial and distortion, Holocaust denial is “discourse and propaganda that deny the historical reality and

the extent of the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and their accomplices during World War II, known as the Holocaust or the Shoah.”² Deniers believe Jews to be malevolent schemers who possess the ability to garner global sympathy in pursuit of an alternative, evil agenda. Holocaust denial is also a form of erasive anti-Semitism - an attempt to erase Jews as victims of prejudice, stripping them of their minority status and denying past persecution.^{3 4}

Holocaust denial includes publicly denying or doubting whether the Holocaust took place, the use of principal mechanisms of mass destruction (such as gas chambers, mass shootings, starvation, and torture), or the intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people.

Examples of Holocaust denial and distortion include:

1. Efforts to excuse or minimize the impact of the Holocaust or its principal elements, including collaborators and allies of Nazi Germany.
2. Gross minimization of the number of the victims of the Holocaust in contradiction to reliable sources;
3. Blaming the Jews for their own genocide;

4. Statements that cast the Holocaust in a positive light. Those statements are not Holocaust denial, but are closely connected to it as a radical form of anti-Semitism. Promoters suggest that the Holocaust did not go far enough in accomplishing its goal of “the Final Solution of the Jewish Question”;
5. Attempts to blur the responsibility for the establishment of concentration and death camps devised and operated by Nazi Germany by blaming other nations or ethnic groups.⁵

Why is Holocaust denial anti-Semitic?

Kenneth L. Marcus, Founder and Chairman of Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law (“Brandeis Center”) has stated that Holocaust denial “requires that the denier believe and perpetuate the notion that Jews are capable of a hoax so massive that Jews are capable of misleading the entire world ... It is built on many of the age-old defamations of the Jewish people.”⁶

According to IHRA, Holocaust denial attempts to relieve supporters of National Socialism and anti-Semites from guilt or responsibility for the genocide of the Jewish people.⁷ Holocaust deniers frequently blame Jews for exaggerating or inventing stories about the Holocaust for financial or political gain or even to gain statehood. The corollary to this is that the State of Israel exists only because of

fraudulent sympathy garnered from political leaders in the West. This erases the 4,000-year-old Jewish connection to the Land of Israel and assumes that a revival of Jewish sovereignty would not have occurred without the Holocaust when Zionism predates the genocide.

The IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism provides contemporary examples of anti-Semitism, including “denying the fact, scope, mechanisms (e.g. gas chambers) or intentionality of the genocide of the Jewish people at the hands of National Socialist Germany and its supporters and accomplices during World War II (the Holocaust)” and “accusing the Jews as a people, or Israel as a state, of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust.”⁸

History of Holocaust denial

Unsurprisingly, Holocaust denial began with the Nazis themselves. Hitler ensured that most of the killing orders were verbal and on a need-to-know basis while using euphemisms and code words in written orders.⁹ In response to the West receiving reports of mass murders in Europe, Germans and their collaborators implemented Aktion 1005 - an operation to conceal evidence of the annihilation of Europe’s Jewish population.¹⁰ Between 1942 and 1944, evidence of mass graves at the Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka killing centers,

and at thousands of sites of mass shooting operations throughout German-occupied Poland, German-occupied Soviet Union, and Serbia was destroyed.¹¹ In 1943, Reich Leader Heinrich Himmler told SS Generals that the mass murder of European Jews must be kept a secret from the outside world.¹² In addition to suppressing information, Nazi leadership coordinated disinformation campaigns to spawn confusion. In 1944, the Nazis permitted an International Red Cross commission to visit the Theresienstadt ghetto.¹³ By setting up fake cafes, painting houses, and instructing the Jewish prisoners on how to behave during the inspection, the Nazis were able to mask the true nature of Nazi policies toward Jews.

After the Holocaust, the world was confronted with the atrocities committed by the Nazis through written, verbal, and visual testimony and evidence. Some people chose to deny this evidence, even going so far as to use pseudo-academic methods of study. In 1955, American far-right antisemitic conspiracy theorist Willis Carto founded Liberty Lobby, an organization advocating for a "racially pure" United States and blaming Jews for problems facing the US and the world.¹⁴ In 1959, American clergyman Gerald L. K. Smith's anti-Semitic publication, *Cross and the Flag*, claimed that six million Jews were not killed during the Holocaust but instead immigrated to the U.S. during WWII. In 1964, French Communist Paul Rassinier

published *The Drama of European Jewry*, which claimed that gas chambers were an invention of a "Zionist establishment." He also claimed that the millions of Jews who disappeared from Europe had actually moved to North Africa and then immigrated to Israel.¹⁵ In 1973, professor Austin J. App published *The Six Million Swindle: Blackmailing the German People for Hard Marks with Fabricated Corpses*.¹⁶ In 1977, Ernst Zündel, a German citizen living in Canada, established Samisdat Publishers, which publishes neo-Nazi literature that includes Holocaust denial.¹⁷ The same year, David Irving published *Hitler's War*, arguing that Hitler never ordered or condoned the Nazi policy of genocide against Jews.¹⁸ In 1978, a revisionist group in California established the Institute for Historical Review which publishes holocaust denying literature and sponsored international conferences under false claims of academic inquiry.¹⁹ ²⁰ In 1989, white supremacist David Duke won a seat in the Louisiana State Legislature, where he sold [continues to sell?] Holocaust denial literature from his legislative office.²¹

By the 1980s, prevalence of post-war Holocaust denial spurred numerous countries and international organizations to implement laws and resolutions criminalizing Holocaust denial.²² In 1985, the West German criminal code was updated to include provisions

banning incitement of hatred, including Holocaust denial. The law was updated in 1992, 1994, 2002, 2005, and 2015.²³ In 1986, the Israeli parliament passed a law criminalizing Holocaust denial. In 1990, the French government enacted the Gayssot Law which declared questioning the scale or existence of crimes against humanity a criminal offense.²⁴

Many other European countries adopted similar laws in the 1990s and early 2000s.²⁵ In 1992, the government of Austria amended its 1947 Prohibition Act to criminalize the denial and trivialization of the Holocaust. In 1998, the government of Poland adopted "The Act on the Institute of National Remembrance - Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation," which included provisions to redress forms of denial and distortion.²⁶ In 2000, 46 governments affirmed the wording of the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, stating their commitment to conducting Holocaust research, education, and remembrance and to "uphold the terrible truth of the Holocaust against those who deny it."²⁷ In 2007, the United Nations adopted a resolution condemning any denial of the Holocaust.²⁸ The General Assembly declares that denial is "tantamount to approval of genocide in all its forms."²⁹

Who are Holocaust deniers and what arguments do they use?

Because Holocaust denial is used as a means of promoting anti-Semitism and denying Jewish victimhood, it is used by anti-Semites on the far-right and far-left, in European and Arab countries, and even here in the United States and Canada. Motivations, as well as methods, vary.

Holocaust deniers operate on an individual, national, or international level. For example, neo-Nazis like Ernst Zundel, David Irving, and David Duke were instrumental in publishing and promoting Holocaust denial literature and sentiment.³⁰ Louis Farrakhan, the extremist leader of the Nation of Islam, has encouraged Holocaust denial in his campaign against the Jewish community.³¹ The Iranian regime has used state-sponsored Holocaust denial as a tool to push its anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist agenda since the 1990's. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has repeatedly called the Holocaust "a myth" and "a fabricated story."³²

Holocaust deniers employ a wide range of arguments, all of which lack historical evidence or work to distort the truth. Common claims include:

- The Holocaust was merely Allied propaganda;

- There is no proof that the Holocaust occurred;
- The estimates of Jewish losses during the Holocaust are greatly exaggerated since there were never six million Jews living in Germany;
- Nazi policy towards the Jews was emigration, not extermination;
- There is no documentation of Hitler's ordering the extermination of Jews;
- Zyklon B was not a practical agent for mass murder; and
- There is no proof that Nazis ever murdered anyone in gas chambers.³³

Holocaust historian and current Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism Deborah Lipstadt has stated that "Holocaust denial would be impossible but for centuries of anti-Semitism. Deniers build their pseudo-arguments on traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes and imagery. They contend that Jews created the myth of the Holocaust in order to bilk the Germans out of billions of dollars and ensure the establishment of Israel. Once again the devious Jews have harmed innocent multitudes - Germans and Palestinians in particular - for the sake of their own financial and political ends. To someone nurtured by the soil of anti-Semitism, this makes perfect sense."³⁴

Holocaust Education and Holocaust Denial

Holocaust education plays a vital role in combating anti-Semitism. A recent UNESCO report found that 16.4% of all Holocaust information across popular platforms is Holocaust denial, and on some platforms, such as Telegram, 50% of Holocaust information is denial and distortion.³⁵

The Conference of Jewish Material Claims Against Germany has conducted a number of country-wide surveys examining Holocaust knowledge and awareness. In the United States, an alarming 63% of Millennials and Gen Z do not know that six million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust. When broken down further, 36% of Millennials and Gen Z thought that two million or fewer Jews were murdered. 11% of the U.S. Millennial and Gen Z respondents believe Jews caused the Holocaust. 49% of Millennials and Gen Z have witnessed Holocaust denial or distortion on social media, 30% of respondents across all 50 states indicated that they had seen Nazi symbols on their social media platforms or in their community. Despite these statistics, 64% of Millennials and Gen Z believe that Holocaust education should be compulsory in school, and 80% of all respondents believe that it is important to continue teaching about the Holocaust so that it does not happen again.³⁶

A study conducted by Pew Research Center found equally alarming statistics and evaluated whether those who underestimated the death toll were simply uninformed, or if they are Holocaust deniers.³⁷ While they found the majority of Americans did not know that six million Jews were killed, most who underestimated the number had neutral or warm feelings towards Jews. Pew also found that more Holocaust knowledge was tied to warmer feelings towards Jews. This suggests that having false or incomplete knowledge of the Holocaust does not automatically make one an anti-Semitic Holocaust denier. Instead, it suggests that Holocaust education may be the key to combating this form of anti-Semitism.

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About the Brandeis Center

The Louis D. Brandeis Center for Human Rights Under Law is an independent, unaffiliated, nonprofit corporation established to advance the civil and human rights of the Jewish people and promote justice for all. LDB engages in research, education, and legal advocacy to combat the resurgence of anti-Semitism on college and university campuses, in the workplace, and elsewhere. It empowers students by training them to understand their legal rights and educates administrators and employers on best practices to combat racism and anti-Semitism. It is not affiliated with the Massachusetts University, the Kentucky law school, or any of the other institutions that share the name and honor the memory of the late U.S. Supreme Court justice.

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