

“Holocaust Denial: When in Doubt, Doubt”

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Newport Beach, California -- Amid the genteel tinkle of restaurant lunch sounds, Mark Weber is having difficulty doing justice to his salmon, such is his passion for justice, as he pretends to understand it. He is trying to persuade me that the Holocaust never happened. It is not going well.

I am a hard sell, having visited death camps (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Maidanek, Treblinka) with survivors. But the fact that some Jews survived is part of the Holocaust deniers' "proof" that the Nazis never intended extermination.

Mr. Weber edits the *Journal of Historical Review*, a recent issue of which advertises a book "that dares to ask: Who Benefited from the 'Crystal Night,' " the November 6, 1938, anti-Jewish rioting. If you guessed that the Jews benefited, you have got the drift of Holocaust "revisionism."

"Revisionism" is a term of scholarship hijacked by pseudo-scholarship in the service of anti-Semitism. Holocaust deniers present any conflict among, or amendment of, survivors' testimonies, or any historical refinement of previous understandings, as "proof" that the Holocaust is a myth.

Mr. Weber allows as how maybe a million Jews were victims -- of the rigors of confinement, and of excessive Nazi security concerns. But Holocaust deniers say victims exaggerate, and after the war Nazis made false confessions to appease their captors, who were serving the myth-makers -- Jews fabricating martyrdom for political and financial gains.

The deniers' "arguments" always return to what Mr. Weber, like the Nazis, calls "the Jewish question" (*Judenfrage*). The gas chambers were really showers. Zyclon-B gas was too weak to kill. Or too powerful to use for mass murder -- it would have killed those who emptied the "alleged" gas chambers. When Hitler promised "the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe" (January 30, 1939) he was, says one denier, merely using heroic hyperbole -- "the kind of defiance that was hurled by ancient heroes." And so on.

For some people, historical partisanship, such as defending Richard III against the charge that he ordered the murder of the princes in the Tower, is a hobby. But what kind of person makes a career of denying the reality of an almost contemporary event that was recorded graphically, documented bureaucratically and described in detail by victims, bystanders and perpetrators? Such a person tortures the past in the hope of making the future safe for torturers.

In her new book "Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory," Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University argues that the deniers' work "is intimately connected to a

neofascist political agenda." She says the deniers aim is to rehabilitate Nazism and re-evaluate its victims, thereby delegitimizing Israel and vilifying Jews.

Hitler, says Mr. Weber at lunch, was "the most philosophical" figure of the 20th century, and "his understanding of this century was more on the mark than that of any of his contemporaries." And "Hitler has the 'rep' he has because he opposed the whole development of the 20th century." Anti-Semitic and anti-democratic, Hitler understood the necessity for severely hierarchical and racially homogenous nations.

Applying these ideas, Mr. Weber says that America "has two ways to go." It can become a "Third World" chaos of tribes, or can be sundered into racially pure entities.

The Webers of the world are few and their "arguments" are farragoes of dizzying non sequiturs and the mock-scientific analyses peculiar to lunatics or sinister cynics. But the deniers' increasing echoes, and their ability to insert themselves into the conversation of society, are cultural symptoms.

Holocaust deniers play upon contemporary society's tendency toward historical amnesia, and its muzzy notion of "tolerance" that cannot distinguish between an open mind and an empty mind. Thus a young reporter for a respected magazine interviewing Ms. Lipstadt (without reading her book) asked this question: "What proof do you include in your book that the Holocaust happened?" That reporter passed through college unmarked by information about even the largest events of the century, but acquired the conventional skepticism of the empty-headed: When in doubt, doubt.

People as ignorant as that reporter know nothing, so they doubt everything except how sophisticated they are when they assume that nothing is certain. This assumption is irrigated in the badly educated by fashionable academic theories of epistemological indeterminacy. The vocabulary and mentality of literary "deconstruction" seeps everywhere, relativizing everything, teaching that history, like all of life, is a mere "narrative," a "text" with no meaning beyond what any individual reads into it. No event, no book, nothing has a fixed content; the individual's "perception" or "reaction" to it is everything.

That is the bad news. The good news is that this year 2 million people will pass through Washington's new Holocaust Memorial Museum, which will survive the survivors and be their testimony.