



Review

Deborah Lipstadt's Assault on Academic Standards

Bigotry in the Guise of Scholarship

- *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*, by Deborah Lipstadt. New York: Free Press, 1993. Hardcover. 278 pages. Notes. Index. \$22.95.

Reviewed by Anthony O. Oluwatoyin

In a forthcoming work I examine Holocaust revisionism at length, including telling details about a quasi-revisionist experiment of my own with some of my students. Just now I wish to deal with some aspects of the methodology employed by Professor Deborah Lipstadt in her book, *Denying the Holocaust*, promoted as "the first full-scale history of Holocaust denial." [See also [Theodore O'Keefe's review](#) in the Nov.-Dec. 1993 Journal.]

In her book, the Associate Professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies at Emory University in Atlanta sets out to expose what she views as the irrationality of revisionist historiography, particularly what she calls "Holocaust denial." She compares her role as a historian with that of "the canary in the coal mine whose death warned the miners that dangerous fumes were in the air ..." (p. 29). She promises to reveal the hidden political agendas, objectives and methodology of the "deniers," to expose their influence and "impact on contemporary culture," to warn of the "triumph of ideology over truth" (p. 213), and more. Only with such a thorough understanding as she aims to provide "will there be any hope that history will not be reshaped to fit a variety of pernicious motives" (p. 28).

A daunting mission. Does Lipstadt deliver?

'No Debate' Double Standard

From the start it is clear that serious problems lurk behind the noble motives she proclaims.

For one thing, although she pretends to search for the truth she refuses to debate deniers. Indeed she "once was an ardent advocate of ignoring deniers" (p. 221). Now she will confront their ideas, but not debate them. Repeatedly, she fairly boasts, she has turned down requests to do so (although she did meet with and interview revisionist Robert Faurisson).

One might think that Lipstadt's "no debate" stance is a personal matter. Perhaps she is a daughter of a Holocaust survivor, and appearing in public with a "denier" would simply be too traumatic for her.

But she insists that no one should debate deniers. "We cannot debate them," says Lipstadt. Revisionists do not represent "the other side" in a legitimate debate. Instead, they are contemptuous of truth and reason, "the very tools that shape any honest debate," and their arguments do not deserve any kind of thoughtful response.

Debating Holocaust revisionists, she contends, would be like trying to "nail a glob of jelly to the wall." Just what is this juvenile analogy supposed to mean? Does she contend that there is nothing to pin down in "Holocaust denial"? Or does she contend that deniers cannot be pinned down to any specific claims? In either case, if Lipstadt is so concerned with truth, with "irrefutable evidence" (p. 21), one might reasonably expect her to welcome the opportunity to illuminate the public in open debate.

What is she afraid a debate will reveal? She admits that there already have been revisions by Holocaust "confirmers" (?) of once supposedly proven allegations, such as the story that the Nazis manufactured bars of soap from the bodies of murdered Jews (pp. 188, 201), and of estimates of Auschwitz victims (p. 188). Is it the likelihood of further revisions of "irrefutable" evidence that worries Lipstadt?

Even a cursory look at a dictionary shows that her careful distinction between discussing ("exposing," "consider and argue the pros and cons of," "take up in discourse") what she calls "Holocaust denial," and debating the "deniers," is a

specious one. Any good discussion is a debate, that is, a grappling with contending views. The useful thing about a formal debate, of course, is that, by its very nature, participants can immediately respond, one to the other.

We are expected simply to trust Lipstadt to tell us the truth. She will "respond" to deniers, but won't permit them the same right. Lipstadt, the anti-denier, herself denies deniers the opportunity to answer her. In her intellectual kangaroo court, cross-examination is a one-sided privilege.

And yet, Lipstadt says that her opponents are "contemptuous" of honest and open debate. However accurate or mistaken Holocaust revisionists may be, dishonest they are not. It is precisely because revisionists have been so clear and forthcoming with their views that she is able so easily and so vehemently to take issue with them.

Betrayal of Academic Standards

All this raises basic issues about purpose and objectivity in academia, professional standards of scholarship, and the nature of the pursuit of truth.

It seems strange to have to point out to a scholar that objectivity in academic life is not merely a Constitutional First Amendment matter, for the same rules hold true universally in academic life. The unique business of academia is, simply, the pursuit of truth. No ifs, ands, or buts -- truth, the whole truth. While libel and slander normally are proper limits on free speech, even these should not apply to intellectual inquiry. No limits. For truth lurks in the strangest places. Historically, truth has often been the preserve of madmen and heretics, such as Galileo.

"Every opinion now accepted was once eccentric," Bertrand Russell cautioned. He also admonished us to "find more pleasure in intelligent dissents than in passive agreement, for if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter."

The issue here for society is this: if we cave in to Holocaust theorists who would prevent "revisionist lies" from being spread on college campuses, how can we be sure that anti-revisionists will not be the ones who turn out to be the historic dupes? We must have a refuge to which everyone can look and say: if ever truth is possible, it will come out there.

That place is academia, which historically is built away from the rest of society. This spirit is what, following the Thomists, we call the essence of academia, its bottom plank, without which it could not be what it is.

Lipstadt doesn't grasp any of this. She repeatedly berates students who have accepted revisionist ads or articles for their campus papers. She cringes at the possibility that students may be willing to consider "any idea or opinion." Such a view, she contends, "contravenes" everything for which academia stands. Students should rather be "geared toward the exploration of ideas with a certain lasting quality" (p. 197).

A more lamentable corruption of the mantle of Socrates one can hardly imagine. "The unexamined life is not worth living" had been his great cry.

If Holocaust revisionists did not exist, the legitimate mission of academia would require their invention. It is precisely such emotionally charged claims as those concerning the Holocaust that most need rigorous, dispassionate scrutiny.

Keeping in mind that the Holocaust belongs to what we may call the "I.Q." or "inflammatory quotient" group of issues, we can use it to test our basic intellectual attitudes.

Passion, particularly that aroused by an issue such as the Holocaust, is the ancient nemesis of reason. Passion subdues reason's power for clarification and resolution and brings discussion down to the emotive level of evasion, distortion, conflation.

Lipstadt's intellectual bankruptcy is perhaps best shown in her approval of gutter language. In a December 1991 editorial, the Harvard University student daily *Harvard Crimson* rejected a revisionist advertisement as "utter bullshit." Lipstadt finds that this language "properly characterized" the ad (p. 206).

Lipstadt's has no more respect for law than for truth. She clearly approves of legal muzzles of revisionists, lamenting only that such measures often don't go far enough (!) and may "transform the deniers into martyrs on the altar of freedom of speech" (pp. 219-220). Typical of her ideological breed, she pays mere lip service to the First Amendment rights of opponents (pp. 26, 191).

Lipstadt is a didactic construct precisely in *reverse*. She shows *exactly* what an academic should not be: a blindly

believing bigot.

Lapses of Logic

Lipstadt's specious distinctions, question-begging definitions, and a woeful failure to grasp essence, are not the worst of her lapses.

At one point she accuses Dr. Arthur Butz of contradicting himself in characterizing Jewish control of the media. "How," she asks, "could Jews have had such control over the media after the war but virtually none during it?" (p. 132).

Well, one obvious answer might be that Jews could have gained control after the war, much as the Japanese have made impressive postwar gains. Times change. She might just as well ask: How could I be rich today when I was so poor yesterday?

Lipstadt castigates Holocaust revisionism as "the apotheosis of irrationalism" and "a threat to all who believe in the ultimate power of reason" (p. 20). She vows to "remain ever vigilant so that the most precious tools of our trade and our society -- truth and reason -- can prevail" (p. 222).

At the same time, though, she despairs of this very "power of reason" to defeat "Holocaust denial." Repeatedly she speaks of the "fragility of reason," and thinks it "naive to believe that the 'light of day' can dispel lies." She approvingly quotes scholars who express skepticism about the power of reason to cope with "the mythic power of falsehood," while castigating those whose relativistic view of truth "created an atmosphere of permissiveness toward questioning the meaning of historical events" (p. 18; see also pp. 25, 193, 207, 216).

But how relativistic she sounds ("fragility of reason")! How she fairly romanticizes falsehood ("mythic power")!

At the very least Lipstadt might have acknowledged, if not expressed concern about, the apparent logical tension between these views. If reason is potent enough to uncover "irrefutable evidence" (p. 21) and defend it against specious attacks, it cannot be all that "fragile." Wherein lies the threat of relativism?

There is not a single fallacy that Lipstadt "detects" in revisionism that she herself doesn't outdo. She accuses revisionists of appealing to each other's authority (instead of acknowledging facts). But the very language she employs in making the charge is lifted from a fellow anti-revisionist (p. 106). Moreover, Lipstadt herself frequently cites anti-revisionist authors as sources of "facts." (See pp. 20, 25, 46, 73, 105, 106, 187.)

Lipstadt trades ad hominem (personal attack) for alleged ad hominem. She goes after ex-Klansman David Duke for "shedding his sheet" (p. 5) in order to gain access to the mainstream. She calls this a clearly "insidious" (p. 215) "re-creation" (p. 187). As we have noted, Lipstadt herself has changed or matured her own approach. She once ignored deniers, now she will discuss their ideas (p. 221). Is it fair to point out her flip-flop on such a basic intellectual point? Perhaps she will once again change her view, and agree to debate Holocaust revisionists one on one.

The very term "deniers" is employed by Lipstadt as a name-calling weapon to discredit revisionism, as she all but admits (p. 20). Talk about "insidious"! Is doubt denial? Is questioning denial?

She commits the fallacy of "accident," which involves applying sweeping generalizations without qualification, thus failing to take cognizance of the special ("accidental") nature of particular cases. For example, Lipstadt lumps philo-Germans with "extremists" and "racists" (p. 137). She has, in fact, something of an abiding suspicion for the "German American heritage" (p. 39) "Germanophilia" (p. 80) and, in general, all things German (see pp. 85-86). But what about her "Judeophilia"? Or should one lump philosemites with Germanophobes?

George Will's Polemic

Lipstadt's work is influencing others. In August 1993, there appeared in numerous daily papers across the country an essay by "legitimate right" syndicated columnist George Will that is partly a promotion of Lipstadt's book and partly an attack against Mark Weber and Holocaust revisionism. [See Weber's "[My Lunch With George: How an Influential Journalist Twists the Truth](#)" in the Nov.-Dec. 1993 *Journal*.]

Shamelessly relying on Lipstadt, Will accuses "deniers" of having "hijacked" the term "revisionism" in the service of anti-Semitism. He wonders how anyone can deny an event, the Jewish Holocaust, that has been detailed by "victims, bystanders and perpetrators." Word for word, this phrase comes from Lipstadt (p. 23). Will also echoes Lipstadt's contention that revisionists everywhere see a great Jewish conspiracy (p. 38, for example). But she (like Will) herself portrays Holocaust revisionism as a kind of international conspiracy motivated by hatred of Jews and hostility toward

Israel (p. 14).

Will attempts to dismiss Weber's arguments -- without systematically examining any of them -- as "farragoes of dizzying non-sequiturs ..." The irony, of course, is that this is exactly the language to describe Lipstadt's logical lapses. A swarm of non-sequiturs, that is, claims that simply do not follow; claims dangling, utterly without support.

'Six Million' Fetish

What is this fetish for the Jewish "Six Million"? Lipstadt acknowledges that "Stalin killed more people than did the Nazis," and denies any wish to engage in a competition of tears based on a "head count" (p. 213). The distinction, she contends (p. 212) is that "whereas Stalin's terror was arbitrary, Hitler's was targeted at a particular group." Not true. Entire groups were "targeted" by Stalin. (Consider, for example, the systematic Soviet killing of captured Polish officers, most notably at Katyn.)

Outnumbering even Stalin's victims are those of China's Mao Zedong. And Mao certainly "targeted" certain groups, such as China's pre-Communist elite. But Mao receives not even a mention in Lipstadt's book.

Whatever her motives, Lipstadt is not animated by concern for humanity or a passionate search for truth.

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About the Author

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