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## Reflections on the Visit of David Irving to Huntsville

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## Ellis: Reflections on the Visit of David Irving to Huntsville

There is enough true evil in the world without allowing these deniers to continue their anti-semitic attacks. And don't be foolish enough to believe that this is not blatant anti-semitic garbage disguised as "history" written by skinheads in business suits.

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2. Reflections on the Visit of David Irving to Huntsville by Dr. Jack Ellis, Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, University of Alabama in Huntsville.

Those who try to erase the crimes of the past have no greater ally than the human capacity for denial. Nearly half a century after the close of World War II, the power of this impulse can be seen in the work of those who attack the reality of the holocaust and who seek to discredit the evidence for the Nazi campaign to exterminate Jews. The movement is only a symptom of what one historian has called a growing assault on truth and memory, and it feeds on the moral relativism that characterizes the age in which we live.

The controversy attending the 1993 visit of the British writer David Irving to Huntsville has brought the matter home to our own community. It has reminded us of the ease with which history can be obscured and distorted, and it has served as a warning for what can happen if we allow new generations of young people to forget the past.

In America the campaign with which Mr. Irving is associated has long been led by the Institute for Historical Review, a pseudo-scholarly enterprise that is held in contempt by every credible historian I know. Taking their cue from Paul Rassinier, anti-semitic and ex-member of the French Communist Party, and from Arthur Butz, an electrical engineer at Northwestern University and author of *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*, its leaders have created a veritable industry from their assaults on the holocaust.

The strategy of these so-called revisionists has been twofold. First, they have tried to portray the Nazi regime as a legitimate response to historical conditions and as one whose wartime actions fell well within the range of traditional big-power behavior. Such arguments are of value if they can persuade others that what the Nazis did was morally no worse than, say, the Allied fire bombings of Tokyo and Dresden. The destruction of millions of people for no other reason than that they were Jews is thereby safely relegated to the trash heap of all wartime atrocities, to be submerged and trivialized in memory.

Second, the revisionists have sought with growing stridency to attack the evidence itself. For example, they have argued that the gas chambers of Auschwitz were used for fumigating and delousing prisoners rather than homicidal killings; that those who perished in the camps died of starvation, typhus, and allied bombing; and that many Jewish prisoners were actually spies and communists who deserved their fate.

What is the motive for this assault on reason? One explanation lies in the global warming of nationalism and neo-fascist ideas and in the efforts of their partisans to gain respectability. For them, the holocaust has long been an inconvenient fact of history. Cut away the anvil of genocide from around its neck, and fascism could soar once again.

Another is a new strain of anti-semitism that is being vented today in attacks on Israel, "Zionism," and the alleged dominance of Jews in Hollywood, finance, and the media. It can be seen in the many crude tracts published by the Institute for Historical Review, including one circulating in the Huntsville area that belittles the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, as a "monstrosity" devoted to "non-American members of a minority, sectarian group." Its sole purpose, the author insists, is to promote "an agenda of unalloyed support for minority, Zionist ends."

Whatever the intent, the campaign cannot be motivated by lack of evidence. The physical disappearance of millions of men, women, and children in the camps and ghettos of eastern Europe has been documented in sad detail time and again, especially in Raul Hilberg's classic book *The Destruction of the European Jews*, published in 1961. The evidence is seen in the statements of Nazi leaders--for example, Himmler's speech to the SS at Poznan on October 4, 1943, where he spoke of "the moral right, the duty to our people," to exterminate the Jews. It is borne out by eyewitness accounts from people of every nationality, including Nazi camp guards, and by the narratives left by the victims. It cries out to us from the photographic and newsreel record made by the armies of liberation and in the admissions of the guilty during the war crimes trials that followed.

Worst of all, for the partisans of denial, is the great mass of evidence available from the records of the Nazi overlords themselves, who, good bureaucrats to the last, recorded their accomplishments in meticulous detail. One could cite the Wannsee Protocol of January 1942, which summarized the Reich's new Jewish policy in the east; the journals of Dr. Hans Frank, head of the General Government in Poland; or the records of the infamous SS killing squads in the east known as the Einsatzgruppen.

The deniers have found it possible to explain away this record. How this happened is described in a 1993 book by Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University entitled *Denying the Holocaust*. In it she describes David Irving as being among "the most dangerous" advocates for this group. Mr. Irving's career has indeed been remarkable, starting with publication of his book *The Destruction of Convoy PQ-17* which cost him the largest libel judgement ever granted in the history of the British courts. It was his multi-volume study of Hitler's wars, published in the 1970s that earned him the greatest notoriety, however. Among its many curious features was the claim that Hitler knew nothing of the

extermination camps and the implementation of the Final Solution.

Irving's distortions of the evidence were noted by many historians, both here and abroad. Martin Broszat, director of the Institute of Contemporary History in Munich, went so far as to characterize him as "a Hitler partisan wearing blinkers." Irving's drift into the camp of holocaust denial occurred later, however, during the 1980s court trials of Ernest Zundel, a neo-Nazi publisher of Toronto. Author of *The Hitler We Loved and Why*, Mr. Zundel was charged under an old paragraph of the criminal code that made it a felony to disseminate false information having the potential to cause public mischief. Mr. Irving served as a witness for the defense during the second Zundel trial, which ran from January to May 1988. The catalyst for his transformation appears to have been the "evidence" gathered by Fred A. Leuchter of Boston, a self-styled consultant on electric chairs and lethal injection devices. During the trial, Mr. Leuchter visited the Auschwitz site and reported that the design of the gas chambers, along with the minimal traces of Zyklon-B gas that remained, proved that they could not have been used for mass killings. That his findings could be taken seriously is just one indication of the contempt with which the partisans of denial regard the rules of evidence.

As the *New York Times* reported in October of 1993, the whole bogus controversy has been laid to rest by the work of Jean-Claude Pressac, who had access to previously unpublished SS documents seized by the Red Army in 1945 and recently made available from KGB archives. Using the correspondence of the Bauleitung SS unit with the engineering firm of J. A. Topf & Sohne of Erfurt, Pressac shows with the precision of "an accountant's audit" how Auschwitz was built and how it managed to carry out its mission of death.

As for Mr. Leuchter, it turned out that he had training in neither toxicology nor engineering; in fact, he was later slapped with a sentence of two years' probation in Massachusetts for passing himself off as an engineer. Nevertheless, the introduction to the London version of the Leuchter report, written by David Irving, cited the "scrupulous methods" that the author had used.

Several other facts emerge from Professor Lipstadt's book. In 1988, Mr. Irving described himself as "a one-man intifada" against the official history of the holocaust, and in July of 1992 he was quoted in *The Daily Telegraph* as saying that the gas chambers were "a propaganda exercise." Fined in a German court for propagating holocaust denials, he denounced "the blood lie of the holocaust" and characterized the memorial to the dead at Auschwitz as a "tourist attraction."

Why should these matters be of concern to citizens of Huntsville and other communities? Beyond our reverence for the truth, beyond our concern for the feelings of concentration camp survivors and their families--beyond our respect for the canons of evidence--there stands a greater danger. It is the damage that the school of holocaust

denial has already inflicted on a generation of students who know little of the past. A recent Roper poll, for example, shows that one of five Americans now doubt that the holocaust ever occurred. On such terrain, in an age of resurgent ethnicity and tribalism, of new acts of genocide in Cambodia and Bosnia, no effective teaching is possible that aims to encourage understanding and tolerance based on a common regard for historical truth.