

## Confronting Holocaust Denial and Distortion

I was too horrified to believe that the stories were true. How could they be true, when half of my mother's Jewish relatives died at the hands of Nazis, that with surprising prevalence, people around the world deny the Holocaust ever happened? For a tragedy of this scale, denial is not an option. Denial is not only an assault on the past but also on the victims of past catastrophes. It is unfortunate that in the wake of the Holocaust-- that most terrible manifestation of anti-semitism (humanity's "oldest hatred")-- we must expend energy combating denial, instead of ending anti-semitism itself.

Humankind must heal itself, and we cannot heal if we do not do so together. The Holocaust exemplifies the capacity of human hatred, and after all that was destroyed, humanity was given a clear a duty: To never allow a genocide to occur again. But denial prohibits progress.

It is a challenge to confront stubborn deniers, since their goal is not simply to be historically uninformed. Their objective is more often broader racism or political extremism. Some seek to delegitimize the Jewish state of Israel, which they believe only exists because of the Holocaust. Others seek to rekindle Nazi ideologies or political fascism.

Denial and distortion are manifested in varying degrees of expression but always result in harm. Some skinheads may draw swastikas in the bathroom stall, while others attempt to discredit the experience of the Jewish people and others who fell victim. They even turn the tables onto the victims themselves, seeing victimhood and the accompanying sympathy as part of a Jewish scheme for world domination.

What is important, though, is to recognize the racist motives behind these actions. What does Holocaust denial and distortion reveal about the person who perpetuates it? The most effective way to combat denial is education of our youth, since there are no criminal consequences for deniers. Unlike in Germany and other parts of Europe, Holocaust denial and distortion is not illegal in the United States, because freedom of speech, no matter how inaccurate or bigoted, is protected under the First Amendment. Through education, denial and distortion can be prevented.

The mark that the Holocaust branded on human memory must prevail, if we are to learn from the past. It is difficult for a rational person to deny the Holocaust, since it is the most documented event in human history. The documents, memoirs, photos, and other vestiges from the Holocaust are essential in furthering Holocaust education, and preserving victims' experiences. It is imperative that school systems teach a more in-depth history of the Holocaust, for I believe that educating younger generations is the most effective way to protect this historical record. Taking an elective Holocaust studies class broadened my understanding significantly, and inspired me to read my own family's memoirs written during the Holocaust.

Denial and distortion of the Holocaust is dangerous because it impedes our ability to understand genocides and consequently to prevent them. The Holocaust grew and festered in one of the most advanced countries of the time. If bystanders were unable to recognize and prevent it then and there, it could be even more difficult to recognize an impending catastrophe in new times and places, such as countries like Cambodia and Bosnia. We cannot learn to recognize the warning signs, or notice the preconditions, when some do not even acknowledge that the Holocaust occurred. The European Parliament called the civil war in Syria a genocide, which could be essential in how we view the murder of the country's citizens and respond to refugees.

Holocaust denial and distortion are damaging, and can be expressed in many ways, but with education and empathy, humankind can fight ignorance, and prevent events such as Holocaust from occurring ever again.