Holocaust Denial in the 21st Century

Applied Research Project

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

This applied research project, Holocaust Denial in the 21st Century explored the conflicting views between anti-Semitism and Holocaust researchers and survivors', and the societal significance of the conflicts. By interviewing and archiving historians and Holocaust survivors, this project additionally reflects the importance of oral history told by Holocaust survivors. The project is presented as an 8 minute documentary.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

The Holocaust, the genocide of millions of European Jews by Germany during WWII, is a well-documented event. Yet, throughout the world there are people who deny that the Holocaust happened. Today, there are a plethora of websites and blogs dedicated to repudiating the Holocaust. Additionally, many organizations have been formed by groups to promote denial of the Holocaust.

Holocaust denial is not a recent phenomenon. In fact, pamphlets and books refuting the Holocaust began to appear in the 1950’s and numerous denial materials have since been published (Lipstadt, 1993). In recent years, however, there has been an upsurge of Holocaust denial.

Questioning the validity of this genocide seems implausible. One only needs to review the massive collection of documents and photographs collected by the U.S. Army after the War for prosecutorial use in the Nuremberg trial to verify the facts. Robert Storey, Nuremberg trial lead prosecutor, hoped that a detailed public record of the German war crimes would thwart any questions as to the events that occurred. After the trial, Storey wrote, “The purpose of the Nuremberg trial was not merely, or even principally, to convict the leaders of Nazi Germany. Of
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far greater importance, it seemed to me from the outset, was the making of a record of the Hitler regime which would withstand the test of history” (Deak, 2001).

It may be shocking, therefore, to read the following question posted on Ask.com in 2009 from a girl identifying herself as a ninth grader: “I know Jews are kind of different than Christians, but somebody was talking about the Holocaust and then my friend said it was a lie. Can you tell me if it happened?” (Ask.com, 2010).

Now one may attribute this query to a naïve child or an anomaly, but it is alarming that there is any question as to the validity of the Holocaust. The vast proliferation of historical books and documentaries, blockbuster movies such as Spielberg’s “Schindler’s List” and public education would lead one to assume that the Holocaust is an undisputed fact. Yet, there is an element in society of Holocaust denial which may very well breed confusion.

In fact, if the ninth grader had Googled, “Is the Holocaust a lie,” she may have been persuaded by the information readily available disputing this genocide. Such arguments postulated by the Holocaust deniers include the implausibility of the gas chambers in the death camps, disputing the actual number of persons killed and even questioning the veracity of Anne Frank’s diary (Kessler, 2011).

Additionally, numerous recent events have brought renewed concern about these anti-Semitic views. On Sept. 8, 2010, The Harvard Crimson school paper ran a full-page ad to promote Holocaust denial. The ad was placed by Bradley R. Smith, founder of the Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust. Bradley stated, “I don’t want to spend time with adults anymore. I want to go to the students. They are superficial. They are empty vessels to be filled” (ADL,
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2010). On Feb. 29, 2012, Arthur Jones, a Republican nominee running for Congress in Illinois, said, during an on-air interview on a CBS affiliated radio station, “This idea that 6 million Jews were killed in the Holocaust is the biggest, blackest lie in history. There is no proof that the Holocaust took place in Europe against the Jews” (KMOX-CBS, 2012). On May 13, 2012, Nikos Michaloliakos, a party leader in Greece, made statements inferring that the Holocaust never happened. “What Auschwitz? Were you there?,” Michaloliakos said (MEGA-TV, 2012).

In fact, a report from the U.S. State Department in 2008, “details an upsurge across the world on anti-Semitism...including Holocaust denial” (USDOS, 2008). A nationwide survey by the Anti-Defamation League was released on Nov. 3, 2011 that concluded that, “anti-Semitic attitudes have risen slightly in America” (ADL, 2011).

Now, while many speak out against those who deny the Holocaust, these recent events and statistics are disconcerting to many. Representing this uneasy feeling, Dr. Paul Hollander, a renowned political sociologist and professor emeritus from the University of Massachusetts, spoke publicly for the first time about his experience as a Holocaust survivor on April 5, 2011. In explaining why he hasn’t spoken about it before, Hollander said he was only 12 years old at the time of the Holocaust. More importantly, he said, “I always felt there has been universal agreement in the Western world, at least, about this unique evil chapter in history. I felt people knew about it. The Nazis were defeated, the camps were liberated and things were morally settled. But now there is a revisionist school that, amazingly, is denying the Holocaust” (Prusi, 2011).

This concern has also led to an increased anxiousness of organizations to find and record the oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors. The efforts to record survivor experiences began in
the 1970’s. Dr. Dori Laub and Laurel Fox Vlock, both children of the Holocaust, recognized the importance of creating a video archive of survivor testimonies. Their outreach and work resulted in the compilation of thousands of survivor testimonies which are now housed at Yale University titled the Fortunoff Video Achieves for Holocaust Testimonies. The effort to continue finding and recording these testimonies continues by Holocaust museums, universities and various organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the recent proliferation of Holocaust denial, what drives these people to promote their message and is it a cause for concern? Also, will compiling Holocaust survivors’ personal stories and making them readily available make a difference in persuading people that the Holocaust is true?

First, let’s examine genocide denial. Scholars find a direct correlation between genocide denial and prejudice toward particular groups of people. A recent study by Linda Woolf and Michael Hulsizer in 2005 entitled “Psychosocial Roots of Genocide: Risk, Prevention, and Intervention” identified seven basic stages that lead to genocide. The stages conclude, ominously, with stage seven which is “denial that the genocide even occurred.” They found that this denial is “a continuation of hatred and has its base destructive motivations (e.g. the denial exhibited by white supremacist and neo-Nazi groups.).” Their analysis attempted to explain the precipitating situations that may lead genocide. The stages start with the normative stereotypes that “in-groups” of people maintain. Then, if this “in-group” suffers an extreme economic downturn accompanied by a slight to their self-esteem, the propaganda against an “out-group” or
stigmatized group gains validity within the “in-group.” Their study warned that “with each step along the path to genocide, intervention becomes more difficult.”

Woolf and Hulsizer’s study postulated a caveat as to conditions within society that may lead to genocide. Their findings were iterated by Sheri Rosenberg in her 2012 study entitled, “Genocide is a Process, Not an Event.” Rosenberg identified eight stages leading to genocide with the last stage being denial and examined the importance of monitoring “escalating situations that are developing or could develop into genocide.” Another study in 2012 by Hannibal Travis, “On the Original Understanding of the Crime of Genocide,” concluded that “the destruction of the remembrance of the act increases the likelihood of recurrence.”

This issue is compounded when politicians embrace the self-interests of the “in-groups,” as Uur Ungor found in his research study entitled, “Studying Mass Violence: Pitfalls, Problems, and Promises.” He concluded that these self-interests fueled “polarization between the in-group and despised others,” and that political leaders can then “construct an imaginary of fear and anxiety.”

Scholars propose that education may be one way to prevent genocide. Israel Charny in his study “Requiem for the Prevention of Genocide in Our Time: Working Toward an Improbable Possibility but Not Giving Up,” argues that people “choose” to commit genocide and the human mind has the capacity “to decide to stop, including stopping violence.”

So as an addendum to considering the importance of genocide education, will recording Holocaust survivor testimonies make a difference? In order to help answer this question, it is important to examine the legitimacy of oral testimonies.
The reliance on a human witness to an event has long been held as a means to understanding what, when and to whom something happened. The judicial system incorporates witnesses into trials to help prove the guilt or innocence of one accused of a crime. Even a parent will decide whether their child misbehaved through listening to the child’s version of an event. The key, however, to the believability of witness testimony lies in the bias that witness may bear in retelling the event and the ability of the witness to recall the event as it actually occurred.

In a study done by Barbara Tversky and Elizabeth Marsh in 2000, they “corroborated the vulnerability of human memory to bias.” Their study utilized experiments to ascertain the believability of witnesses. One such experiment involved a group of participants who were asked to read the “Roommate Story,” a tale about two roommates. One roommate had an annoying personality while the other roommate had a neutral personality. When asked to write fictitious letters of recommendations for the roommates, the participants’ letters exhibited a negative bias toward the annoying roommate.

Accurate memory recall is another concern. Laura Engelhardt concluded in her study, “The Problem with Eyewitness Testimony,” that original memory may become distorted. “The process of interpretation occurs at the very formation of memory thus introducing distortion from the beginning.” Her study did not suggest that people intentionally lie, but rather that, “the mere fault of being human results in distorted memory and inaccurate testimony.”

Traumatic events, however, may be more accurately remembered. Robert N. Kraft, professor of Cognitive Psychology at Otterbein College in Ohio, found a strong correlation between memory recall and traumatic events. “The core memories of atrocity are extraordinarily
persistent. . .recent memories do not weaken or conceal them, and time does not diminish their potency.”

These studies suggest that one should use caution when relying upon oral testimony but that does not mean that oral testimonies are without value. Dalia Ofer, in her study “Another Glance through the Historian’s Lens,” stated “Oral testimonies and memoirs not only fill in missing information but also contribute insights. . .” She asserted, however, that these testimonies should be verified, when possible, by examining other sources such as archival materials.

Supporting Ofer’s study, Notre Dame English Professor John Duffy, in his study “Testimony in Historical Studies in Literacy,” concluded that, “Oral testimonies disclose the full range of human experience, rational and emotional, and that this may lead to new understandings of literacy.”

**METHODOLOGY**

The process I employed for this applied research project included: reviewing Holocaust survivor videos; academic research into the subject matter; reviewing archival documents, footage and photos; interviewing experts in various fields of expertise relevant to the subject matter; consultations with Dr. Wong; writing a script based on the research and interviews; and editing together a 7-10 video incorporating expert interviews, survivor testimonies and archival footage.

The first stage of the project was meeting with Dr. Wong to discuss my ideas and receive feedback. After receiving approval from Dr. Wong on the direction I planned to take, I
engrossed myself in researching my subject more thoroughly. As part of this research I reviewed Holocaust survivor videos as well as archival photos and documents at the Florida Holocaust Museum. Once I had a level of comfort with my subject matter, I began contacting experts that could provide supplement to my research. After locating and conducting pre-interviews with experts, I set up in-person appointments in order to capture these interviews on video. I selected three experts: a Holocaust historian, a professor of genocide studies and a Holocaust museum curator. The interview questions were as follows:

1) Define the Holocaust.
2) Discuss the historical documentation of the Holocaust.
3) Why are people denying the Holocaust after over 70 years?
4) What is the agenda behind the public denial?
5) Bradley Smith, founder of the Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust, recently placed full page ads in college papers throughout the United States promoting Holocaust denial. Do you believe that outreach such as this may cause confusion or recruit followers toward this agenda? Why or why not?
6) Nikos Michaloliakos, a newly elected party leader in Greece, said in an interview in May of this year that the Holocaust is a lie. Given the economic situation in that country right now, is this a cause for concern?
7) How important are the recorded survivor testimonies?
8) How reliable are the survivors’ accounts?
9) Why is it important to remember the Holocaust?

After completing the interviews, I transposed the video interviews and wrote a script. I then edited the video together incorporating the expert interviews, archival footage and Holocaust
denier clips. Several versions were submitted to Dr. Wong and changes made per his suggestions.

CONCLUSION

When I began this project, I was intrigued and somewhat surprised that there were people who denied the Holocaust. But through the course of this project, it actually became a cause of concern to me. I considered the question asked by Ugur Ungor, from the University and Institute for War and Genocide Studies and Amsterdam: “What did Germany in the 1930s, Yugoslavia in the late 1980s and Rwanda in the early 1990s have in common that each came to such horrific violence?” The answer to this question is each of these genocides had an “us,” the in-group against the “them,” the out-group. Another disconcerting conclusion that came out of my research was the danger that historians attribute to people denying a genocide occurred and the possibility of future genocides in certain conditions.

The other aspect of my research was oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors. After reviewing over 100 hours of testimonies, I have no doubt as to the legitimacy of these testimonies. Yet, oral testimonies should be used in conjunction with archival materials that support the testimonies. While one may attribute bias on the part of the witness, the visual and auditory record of a person’s recollection of an event is a powerful addition to an historical record. It allows the viewer to act as judge and juror as to the witness’s credibility.

By presenting testimonies from Holocaust survivors along with expert interviews and archival footage juxtaposed with Holocaust deniers and the deniers’ arguments, I hope this video
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will provide an insight into the conflicting views between the two and the potential societal significance of the conflicts.

SOURCES


Dimensions: A Journal of Holocaust Studies Volume 17, No.1 / Spring 2003


Florida Holocaust Museum, St Petersburg, Florida


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APPENDIX: Video Script

Fade in l/s Chicago
Fade to push in protestor march in Chicago

Cut to l/s Arthur Jones

Cut to c/u photo of Jones
Fade in script “It’s the biggest, blackest lie in history.”
Cut to m/s recording

Cut to c/u denial articles

Cut to archival photos

Cut to c/u Kissi
Cut to archival photos

Cut to c/u denial on Facebook
Cut to c/u pull out Holocaust denial article

V/O: Here in Chicago, nicknamed “The city of big shoulders,” there is a group of people who deny one of the most documented atrocities in history.

Arthur Jones: All we ever hear about is the alleged loss of six million Jews.

V/O: Arthur Jones, a 2012 Republican candidate running for Congress in Illinois called the Holocaust “the biggest, blackest lie in history.” Even though the Republican party tried to keep his name off the ballot, he gathered enough signatures to qualify.

V/O: Yet, Jones is only one of many throughout the world denying the Holocaust.

V/O: This denial is devastating to the descendants of the millions of Europe’s Jews and other people who were persecuted and murdered during 1933 and 1945 by the German Nazi party led by Adolf Hitler. Historians agree that nearly 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust and that this was a calculated and highly organized plan to exterminate the Jewish people - herding them into death camps where they were gassed upon arrival.

Edward Kissi: We tend to think is what the Nazi’s intended to do was to completely wipe out Germany’s Jewish population. And also proceed from there to destroy Jewish populations in places in Europe occupied Germany. But in recent years we have found that the Nazi’s actually intended to wipe out every Jewish person they could find anywhere on the surface of the earth.

V/O: Yet, why are there are people still denying that the Holocaust happened? Some say there was absolutely no genocide - that the gas chambers never existed as it would have been a scientific impossibility.
Nikos Michaloliakos interview:
R: The ovens didn’t exist
M: There were no ovens. This is a lie. I believe it’s a lie.
R: Neither gas chambers?
M: Neither gas chambers.

V/O: These deniers of the Holocaust say that the Jews created this myth to win sympathy from the world and get money from Germany because Jews are just interested in money.

Edward Kissi: Accepting an historical reality confirms legitimacy – that the victims have a legitimate claim to compensation, a legitimate claim to legal redress, has a legitimate claim to empathy from the rest of humanity.

V/O: Iran’s president denies the Holocaust to draw attention the Israeli Palestinian conflict.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: (interview)

V/O: Other deniers call themselves revisionists and say that the number of Jews killed by the Nazis was far less than 6 million.

Denier: I wouldn’t call myself a Holocaust denier. I’m definitely a Holocaust questioner. I think there are a lot of things that need to be reexamined.

In his book, “Did 6 Million Really Die?” British author Richard Verral claims that there were only around 3 million Jews that were actually in Europe during WWII. But Historians have established that this fact is not true.

Edward Kissi: The Holocaust happened. It’s a reality in history.

V/O: Fred Wysocki, a liberator of the concentration camps, is still tortured by what he saw there.
Fred Wysocki: In that camp there were a lot of Jewish people and there were a lot more that were completely dead too and buried or burned or whatever.

V/O: Yet there are still those who deny. Scholars tell us that sometimes they do it out of hate just to traumatize the descendants of the Holocaust. But there is also the discomfort of knowing that these horrors were committed by your countrymen.

Edward Kissi: Nobody wants to accept the fact that their ancestors were perpetrators of genocide.

V/O: Historians warn that people may start to pay attention to Holocaust deniers in certain conditions such as what led to the rise of Hitler with the German people suffering from massive unemployment and humiliation of WWI’s Versailles treaty.

V/O: Some see this happening in Greece today.

Anthony Vincent: When we combine that we look at the humiliation which the Greeks feel to this day from the very strict conditions that are being imposed on them by Europe and in particular Germany in return for the loans, we see danger.

Man in Greece: She should see how the people are suffering here. What we’re going through. That there is no future.

V/O: Educating people about the Holocaust may be one way to help prevent it from happening again.

Edward Kissi: Knowing something about the Holocaust, understanding the Holocaust, learning about it offers a warning sign post to every nation state about what not to do.

V/O: Today there are museums and organizations throughout the world dedicated to preserving the history of the Holocaust. In addition, they are scrambling to record testimonies of the last remaining Holocaust survivors to provide the oral history of those that were there.
Erin Blankenship: Being able to tell not only what they saw, or what happened to them, but the way it affected them and the loss that they felt.

Essie Levine (Holocaust survivor): My sister was 10 years old and she said, “Ma, I want to live a little longer. Let’s go to the back of the line.”

V/O: Thousands of testimonies like Essie’s have been recorded and are stored at museums throughout the world in hopes that future generations will listen to their stories and understand the horrors they endured – that the Holocaust was real.

Fred Wysocki: And then to have some people in some parts of this world come out and say, there was no Holocaust. I’d like to get ahold of them.

VIDEO LINK: http://youtu.be/8_lswwQPhjM