Week 11
Remembering and Denying the Holocaust
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Week 11 Unit Learning Outcomes
ULO 1. evaluate in a reflective and critical manner the consequences of racism and prejudice

Introduction
How to adequately and appropriately remember and represent the Holocaust have remained vexed questions since the end of the Second World War. The world had never seen genocidal destruction on such a level, and no one even really knew how to articulate what had just happened to Europe’s Jews. What the Nazis wrought was by all means calamitous, disastrous, and destructive, and the event itself has posed a challenge to theologians and philosophers alike. How to most effectively convey the Judeocide in a single term has been, and to some degree remains, a matter of dispute. For those individuals who grew up as children of Holocaust survivors, or perpetrators, the event played a dominant role in their lives despite having no direct memory of it. For the many people around the world with a desire to continue remembering the victims of the Holocaust, former places of atrocity – such as Auschwitz – have become sites of commemoration, invariably imbued with an inherent contest of ideas and meaning. Some people, for whatever reason, prefer to forget or ignore the Holocaust. Moreover, for the twisted minority who even deny that the Holocaust ever happened, their “stupid and strange” arguments can be crushed under the weight of evidence gathered through decades of rigorous historical research. Even so, these self-proclaimed “revisionists” continue to peddle their hatred and deceit.

Section 1 introduces the overarching theme of remembering the Holocaust by tracing the peculiarities associated with naming this historical event. It focuses on the emergence and transnational acceptance of the term “Holocaust,” and also considers some alternative terms used to encapsulate the Nazi assault on European Jewry. Section 2 analyses the ways in which the Holocaust affected not only those who experienced it, but their children, from the perspective of first-generation Jews born to Holocaust survivors, and the children of German Holocaust perpetrators. Section 3 probes the question of representation and how the Holocaust can and should be

remembered, with special attention paid to Auschwitz. Finally, section 4 delves into the phenomenon of Holocaust denial. It considers the ways in which deniers distort history, versus the rigorous, evidence-based scholarship of professional historians.

After completing this eleventh and final learning module, you should continue to evaluate, in a reflective and critical manner, the longer-term and ongoing consequences of racism and prejudice.

Section 1. Naming the Event

As we discovered in the previous learning module, the Armenian case during the First World War notwithstanding, the Holocaust was such an unprecedented event that it inspired the official international acceptance of a new term: Raphael Lemkin’s “genocide.” While useful from a legal and political perspective, Lemkin’s intention was for genocide to be applied to future and (retrospectively) to past atrocities. Whereas “genocide” was coined as a wholly new word, it was not the only term to materialise in the wake of the Nazis’ destruction of Europe’s Jews. At the time when Germany and its collaborators was committing genocide, and as the world began to realise precisely what was happening to Europe’s Jews during the war, the term “Holocaust” was not used. Indeed, more than a decade passed before the word “Holocaust” was applied to the Nazis’ extermination program against Jews. So, the term “Holocaust” (or even more pointedly “the Holocaust”) eventually took precedence over all other options used in reference to what happened to Europe’s Jews during the war, but this was not always the case.

a) Discovering “the Holocaust”

Differentiating the experience of Jews under Nazism from the persecution of Europeans more generally was not an immediate development in the postwar period. Furthermore, applying the word “Holocaust” to these events did not occur immediately, either. When Israel’s official state memorial to the victims of the Holocaust — Yad Vashem — was established in 1953, the Hebrew word “shoah” (also spelled “sho‘ah” or “shoa” and in the original Hebrew as בְּשָׁוָה) was used to refer to the event that had taken place. Still widely used today, particularly in Israel, in a general and secularised sense the word translates most precisely to “calamity” or “disaster.” For some Jews, it seems more appropriate to use a Hebrew term to describe a Jewish experience. The term “Holocaust” — with a capital “H” — was first used at the Second World Congress of Jewish Studies in 1957. In 1959, Yad Vashem adopted the term “Holocaust” but only as a transliteration of the Hebrew word “shoah,” with the latter retaining its status as the preferred denotation.2

2 Angi Buettner, Holocaust Images and Picturing Catastrophe: The Cultural Politics of Seeing. (Ashgate, Farnham; Burlington, 2011)
Cole argues that Holocaust awareness was closely tied to events in Israel, including the kidnapping, arrest, and trial of Adolf Eichmann in the early 1960s followed by the Six-Day War of June 1967. International screenings of the 1978 American mini-series entitled *Holocaust* (starring Meryl Streep) further internationalised Holocaust consciousness — i.e. not only awareness of the event itself, but also a widespread acceptance of the term “Holocaust” when discussing the Nazis’ wartime extermination of European Jews. The Streep mini-series was remarkably popular in Germany, too, where it helped to cement the term “Holocaust” as part of the popular lexicon dealing with the nation’s “unmasterable past” concerning the Nazi era.³

**b) Evolution of the Term(s) “holocaust” / “the Holocaust”**

Cole explains how the term “Holocaust,” as applied to the extermination of Jews, was only widely popularised from the late 1960s and early 1970s. But he does not discuss why the word “Holocaust” was chosen.

The term is derived from the Septuagint — the Greek version of the Old Testament translated by Jews living in Egypt from the 3rd century BCE. These Jews had become proficient in Greek. Later on, Greeks adapted the Jewish translation when compiling the Old Testament, where the term “holocaust” (note the use of a lowercase “h”) was used in reference to the act of making a sacrifice by a “burnt offering.” The word is derived from *holos* (meaning “whole”) and *kaustos* (“to burn”). Inherently, then, with its origins stemming from an association with being totally consumed by fire, the term “holocaust” encapsulates the burning of bodies in the extermination camps’ crematoria. This connection possibly explains why it caught the popular imagination once popularised by the writer and Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel in the 1960s. Yet it also explains why some Jews are at least ambivalent about, if not strongly opposed to, using the term because they argue that there was no “sacrifice” involved in this event and the “burning” connotation is objectionable given how victims’ bodies were treated.

For some, the purportedly biblical origin of the term “holocaust” has falsely sanctified its usage. Jon Petrie, in his on-line article “The Secular Word ‘Holocaust’: Scholarly Sacralization, Twentieth Century Meanings,” criticises what he regards as the myth-
making associated with its employment. Petrie suggests that, far from having connotations specific to Jews, for much of the twentieth century the term was most often associated with secular disasters, as in, for instance, the term “nuclear holocaust.”

In any case, there is an important distinction between the general term “a holocaust” and the proper noun “the Holocaust.” Before proceeding any further, you should pause momentarily to reflect on the difference in these two terms to ensure that you fully grasp the significance of why we use the definite article (the) and a capital “H” when referring to the extermination of European Jews during the Second World War. The deliberate capitalisation of the “H” ensures that, when it refers to the destruction of European Jewry, the word “Holocaust” cannot be confused with other uses of the term. Whereas “a holocaust” could be and was appropriately used to describe many catastrophic situations, “the Holocaust” is a very different usage of the same word.

Still, the term continues to raise some arguments against its usage to describe the Nazis’ genocidal assault on Europe’s Jews. Some genocide scholars, for example, might argue that the term lends this particular genocide a “privileged” or unique status over every other genocide committed. Moreover, there is some weight in the argument that the term “shoah” is less problematic than the more prevalent “Holocaust”—particularly since the former was being used to refer to the destruction of Jews as early as the 1940s and 1950s.

From a theological or philosophical perspective, employing the term “Holocaust” in reference to the extermination of Jews — especially in light of the mass cremations in Nazi extermination camps — can be seen as problematic and paradoxical. If the word “holocaust” originates from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, and translates to “burnt offering,” does it somehow imply that the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust were sacrificed as burnt offerings to God? Does it, moreover, highlight an “unwillingness” of God to intervene and prevent the “sacrifice” of Jews — apparently God’s own “Chosen People” no less? And if that is the case, does it not also logically suggest that mass murderers such as Hitler, Himmler, Heydrich, and Eichmann were actually God’s agents? How else can we explain their role in the Holocaust if we adopt such a stance that acknowledges the sacrificial connotation attached to the word’s origins?

Theologians and philosophers have grappled with these questions ever since the atrocities came to be known, and the ambiguities of a term such as “the Holocaust” have led some Jews to abandon it (if in fact they ever adopted it) usually in favour of the Hebrew word “shoah.” For others, however, even with its theological implications and contortions the word “Holocaust” has a universality about it that other terms do not. Consequently, it denotes an event that is not only part of Jewish history, but world history, and should be studied by Jewish and non-Jewish scholars and students alike. You can see that, when it comes to the Holocaust, even a matter as ostensibly simple as naming an historical event is multi-layered and contested.
Section 2. Coming to Terms with the Past

The Holocaust was such a cataclysmic event that it profoundly affected not only those who experienced it, but also their children. For first-generation children of Holocaust survivors, their parents’ experiences of the wartime genocide can be so vividly conveyed and become so familiar that they scarcely can be separated from their own (childhood) memories. By contrast, for Germans born after 1945, or who were too young to remember the war, the crimes and indifference of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations cast a long shadow for several decades.

a) Children of Survivors

As we discovered in the previous learning module, Jews who survived the Holocaust suddenly found themselves dealing with a postwar life of grief and suffering. Almost all of them had lost relatives and loved ones. Jews who were young when the Second World War began may have experienced most of their childhood during the Holocaust. The robbing of their childhood similarly crippled any chance to receive a proper education. After years of starvation and deprivation, furthermore, an individual’s physical health and wellbeing may have been irreversibly affected — to say nothing of the psychological effects of trauma (what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD) and perhaps also survivor guilt.

Holocaust survivors who established lives elsewhere invariably carried with them this emotional and physical baggage. Even with the best of intentions, moreover, often they passed some of it on to their children — many of whom were born years after the new family had resettled far away from the places of destruction in Europe. This process is what Marianne Hirsch conveys in the concept of “postmemory,” which she first articulated in 1992. Hirsch, the child of Romanian Jews who survived the Holocaust and resettled in the United States, was born in 1949. For Hirsch, postmemory consists of the intergenerational transference of her parents’ experiences and memories. Specifically, postmemory describes how children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma relate to the experiences of their parents’ experiences. In the case of the Holocaust, the children of survivors may “remember” these experiences as metanarratives and formative images of their childhood. Since the stories and pictures are so powerful and of such magnitude, however, they begin to distil their parents’ memories into their own, creating what is effectively an experience for the next generation of survivors (and other generations thereafter).4

Like Hirsch, Eva Hoffman is the child of Holocaust survivors and she considers herself to be a “direct inheritor” of “wounding trauma.” Hoffman describes the ongoing struggle to separate the past from the present, and to judge the present in its own right while finding a sense of what is “normal.” Fear that the pain and rage felt for the

crimes of the Holocaust will lessen in time is combined with a recognition that mourning must come to an end at some point.

**PRESCRIBED TEXT:** Please read Eva Hoffman's chapter entitled “After Such Knowledge,” pp. 866-68.

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**b) Descendants of (German) Holocaust Perpetrators**

What about the children and other descendants of Holocaust perpetrators? In the wake of the Third Reich, arguably all Germans shared in a collective responsibility for the advent of Nazism and the Holocaust. Subsequently, children born in postwar Germany, irrespective of their parents’ actions (or inactions) during the Second World War, were imbued with a sense of “inherited guilt” (*Erbschuld*). Even so, for various reasons we can say that Germans found themselves reflecting on their nation’s recent Nazi past in rather peculiar circumstances. The Allies divided Germany into four zones of occupation (each administered by British, French, American, and Soviet military forces respectively). Due to emerging Cold War realities, this partition soon led to the establishment of two separate German states: The Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany or the BRD); and the German Democratic Republic (or East Germany, or DDR). West Germany, viewed as a bulwark against the spread of communism across postwar Europe, was welcomed into the American-led democratic western bloc and soon functioned as a cornerstone of NATO politico-military strategy. Accordingly, remarkably little attention was devoted to remembering the Nazi past and instead the new menace of “Stalinist expansionist aggression” was a shared focal point. It was not until the mid- to late-1960s that the Holocaust received widespread attention in West Germany. Over in East Germany, Jewish victims and the Holocaust similarly did not receive much attention. Instead, and in accordance with Moscow-inspired rhetoric, war memories focused on communism’s singular ideological antagonist (Nazism) rather than singling out various victim groups. This meant that everyone who had been persecuted or suffered at the hands of Hitler’s Germany were collectively grouped together under the all-encompassing term of “victims of fascism” (*Opfer des Faschismus*). By extension, with all emphasis placed on “victims of fascism” it meant that Jews were not recognised in the DDR for having been singled out by the Nazis for wartime genocide.
This modest monument, erected on the site of the original Dresden synagogue that was destroyed on 9 November 1938 as part of Kristallnacht, is an example of the anti-Nazi memorialisation in communist East Germany during the Cold War era. Even though it was exclusively memorialising Jewish victimisation and takes the form of a menorah, the wording atop the monument simply states:

IN ETERNAL REMEMBRANCE OF THE VICTIMS OF FASCISM
(ZUR EWIGEN MAHNUNG AN DIE OPFER DES FASCHISMUS)


To a large extent, then, we can say that Germans who grew up in the postwar period initially came to know relatively little of the Judeocide. It is no fluke that the period in which these young (West) Germans reached adulthood coincided with a growing public sentiment for the Nazi past to be confronted. The notion of Vergangenheitsbewältigung (“coming to terms with the past”) became all-pervasive at political and education levels, first in West Germany from the late 1960s onwards and especially since the fall of the Berlin Wall and Germany’s reunification in 1989-90.

Unsurprisingly, direct descendants of Holocaust perpetrators faced an even greater challenge in confronting the past than their compatriots.

READING EXCERPT: Please read the piece by Katharina von Kellenbach "Vanishing Acts: Perpetrators in Postwar Germany," an account of her personal journey of discovery after she learnt that her uncle was unsuccessfully tried for crimes committed against Jews.
Her family’s response may have been built around silence and the transformation of the guilty into a victim, but for Katharina von Kellenbach accurate knowledge was the strategy she adopted. Rather than denying the past she confronted it directly and, armed with knowledge, she consciously distanced herself from her family (von Kellenbach has spent much of her adult life based in the United States, where she established a prominent career as a theological scholar). Von Kellenbach argues that other younger Germans adopted a similar approach and likewise deliberately distanced themselves from their ancestors. One should not generalise, of course, and silence and denial still persist among descendants of perpetrators.

Section 3. Representation
How should the Holocaust be memorialised and commemorated? As the Holocaust disappears from living memory, such a question is becoming increasingly important. The preservation of former sites of atrocity is ongoing and attracts a degree of controversy. The question of whose suffering is being remembered — Jewish, Christian Polish, Soviet, or other victim groups — through the conservation of sites such as Auschwitz and other Nazi camps is particularly contested.

Commemoration and Memorialisation: Auschwitz
Deborah Dwork and Robert van Pelt point out that, as you have discovered already, under the Nazis Auschwitz was constantly being rebuilt. The first question, then, is which version of Auschwitz is commemorated nowadays? At war’s end, much of the site was physically destroyed and parts of today’s Auschwitz are reconstructions.

READING EXCERPT: Deborah Dwork and Robert van Pelt, in the piece entitled “Reclaiming Auschwitz,” demonstrate the problems associated with the site’s continued maintenance.

So-called “dark tourism” has emerged as a remarkably popular phenomenon over the past two decades, and officially Auschwitz records over a million visitors per year. Many tourists, however, only visit the more accessible site of the former Auschwitz I camp. Consequently, they do not even take in the actual site responsible for Auschwitz being universally recognised as the epitome of hell on earth: Birkenau, where almost a million Jews were gassed and cremated between 1942 and 1944. As the Dwork and van Pelt reading points out, because Auschwitz II (Birkenau) remains harder to access it therefore appears to be marginalised in the public structure of commemoration. The Auschwitz Memorial and Museum, located on the truncated site of Auschwitz I,
largely focuses on Christian Polish victims who were imprisoned for political reasons and as forced labour. In more recent years, a concerted effort has been made to incorporate Birkenau as part of the overall experience of visiting Auschwitz (including a free shuttle bus that operates between Auschwitz I and Auschwitz II). Even so, there is no doubt that Auschwitz I continues to be promoted as the memorial site’s epicentre.

As van Pelt argues elsewhere, Birkenau is paradoxically a ruin that needs to be continually rebuilt in order to remain a ruin. Without extensive and expensive ongoing intervention and repair, the few remains at Birkenau would simply disintegrate and disappear over time. Most of the killing that took place at Birkenau, van Pelt notes, occurred in structures that are no longer there or are in a ruinous state — which equates to over 80 per cent of the original buildings. In van Pelt’s view, it is fitting that the Birkenau site be allowed to disintegrate, and be made inaccessible to visitors. His advice is: “Seal it [Birkenau] up. Don’t give people a sense that they can imitate the experience and walk in the steps of the people who were there.” But could such an approach, in which Birkenau effectively would be cordoned off from the world, result in the site’s dark past fading into history?

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In any case, it must be stressed that van Pelt’s advice does not stem from indifference or lack of knowledge about what happened at Auschwitz. On the contrary, van Pelt is arguably the world’s leading expert on the history of Auschwitz, particularly from an architectural perspective. Indeed, van Pelt has famously called the crematoria at Auschwitz “the most important building of the 20th century,” despite advocating the site be left to decay.

From the perspective of the International Auschwitz Council — body responsible for the memorial and museum at the Auschwitz site, and for ongoing questions around its preservation — the possibility of allowing a place as monumental as Auschwitz to disintegrate is unthinkable. Speaking in 2009, Chairman of the Council Władysław Bartoszewski equated such an outcome with “trampling” on the memory of the victims. “If we allow Auschwitz-Birkenau to disappear from the Earth,” Bartoszewski argued, “we might just be opening a way for a similar evil to return.” With this degree of polarisation, the discussion over what to do with sites of remembrance such as Auschwitz in the future — a future increasingly without survivors — will continue to remain contentious.

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Section 4. Holocaust Denial

The very antithesis of Holocaust remembrance and education are the attempts to deny the historical truth of the Judeocide. Although it sits on the fringes, Holocaust denial is a global phenomenon. Holocaust deniers typically claim that they are motivated by the supposed need for “revisionism” — in other words, they claim to be undertaking the role of checking and counter-checking the accepted version of events to ensure historical accuracy. Invariably they claim that, after having done rigorous research, they “discover” or “reach the conclusion” that the accepted version is bogus and the Holocaust never happened. In truth, however, they do not conduct rigorous research and instead they selectively focus on particular issues and deliberately decontextualise and distort the historical evidence in order to suit their pre-conceived agenda. Rather than “discover” anything or “reach any conclusions,” then, really all they do is confirm their own twisted version of events that they believed from the outset. Although deniers do not openly admit it, they are generally motivated by antisemitism and/or radically extreme political views. Why else would they so steadfastly refuse to believe the Holocaust happened?

Deniers have existed for decades, and originally self-published pamphleteering was a common method for disseminating their “revisionist” messages on a limited scale. The advent of the internet and even more recently the dawn of the social-media age have brought with them new platforms for Holocaust deniers to espouse their views worldwide. A casual search on the internet for Holocaust-related themes will bring with it exposure to Holocaust denial websites, videos on YouTube, and dodgy material dressed up as legitimate historical scholarship. Deniers not only hijack Holocaust discussions boards, but also create their own websites to host talk among likeminded “revisionists” who revel in denying the Holocaust, interpreting the Nazi era in debauched ways, and levelling warped charges against Jews in general or the modern state of Israel in particular. Again, instead of admitting their true motivations for such behaviour, deniers attempt to present themselves — and their ideas — as legitimate and valuable voices to be heard. And, it must be said, many of them are so polished at what they do and package their beliefs in such a professional manner that it means unsuspecting members of the general public can be persuaded by such efforts.

In December 2016, searching Google for “Did the Holocaust happen?” returned as its top result a thread from the neo-Nazi and white supremacist website Stormfront. Revisionist websites manipulate the search engine’s algorithms so that they can rank among the most recommended sites according to metadata.

Given the ubiquity and ingenuity of deniers, then, it is important that students of the Holocaust understand the fragility of their “revisionist” arguments, and appreciate the complex nature of dealing with historical evidence and knowledge in an appropriate manner.

As you no doubt have learnt by studying this unit, historians find various ways to disagree — often vehemently — with their colleagues’ views on most aspects of the Holocaust. Think about the disagreements you have come across in just the past two weekly topics: some historians argue that the Holocaust was mostly a product of the intent Hitler always harboured for eradicating Jews from Germany and Europe, whereas others view it as the eventual result of Nazi power structures; and some scholars argue that Jewish resistance should be limited to physical obstruction, while others advocate a looser definition also enveloping evasion tactics and survival. Furthermore, historians cannot reach agreement on precisely when the “Final Solution” was authorised. But, irrespective of what date particular historians may argue is the turning point — be it November 1918, November 1923, January 1933, January 1939, September 1939, March 1941, June or July or August or September or October or November or December 1941, January 1942, March 1942, or sometime else in between — none deny that by mid-1942 at the latest the mass murder of European Jews in purposely-built Nazi extermination centres was underway, it was systematic and industrialised in its scope, and the intention was to kill as many Jews as possible. There are countless other cases, of course, and the two key messages here are: first, that so long as it is healthy and respectable, debate is to be encouraged and appreciated; and, second, that no reputable, professional historians deny the Holocaust happened and instead they concern themselves with interpreting how and why it unfolded in the way that it did.

So, even with such fundamental levels of disagreement among reputable scholars, there is universal agreement that the Holocaust happened, it was purposeful and systematic, and around 6 million European Jews were killed through mass shootings, gas chambers, arbitrary acts of violence, starvation, deprivation, disease, forced labour, medical experiments, death marches, and other assorted horrific means. The sheer weight of evidence that proves these base-level historical facts is so overwhelming that anyone seeking to deny the Holocaust necessarily must distort, disfigure, dismiss, manipulate, mistranslate, prevaricate, and lie. In doing so, Holocaust deniers simultaneously attempt to present themselves as the “other side” of a non-existent historiographical debate: “revisionists” as the “truth-seekers” hunting for what they claim is the factual version of events, as opposed to what they ridicule as the supposedly fanciful metanarrative propagated by Jewish lobby groups and/or political enemies of Germany and subsequently promoted by academia and mainstream media.

While it hardly needs to be pointed out that there is no “official narrative” of the Holocaust, or that “historical revisionism” does not equate to the deliberate perpetuation of untruths, it is noteworthy that Holocaust deniers do not actually offer a counter-narrative to what
happened. Instead, their strategy relies on the outright dismissal of evidence and misrepresentation of how historians construct history. Thus, Holocaust survivors are liars who concocted their stories after the war, and continue to extract huge sums of money from the German government as they have done since the 1950s. Moreover, their testimony — and that of all eyewitnesses, generally — is unreliable, with the slightest inaccuracies leading to the wholesale dismissal of its value in the eyes of deniers. Postwar confessions made by middle- and high-ranking perpetrators, they claim (without evidence), were allegedly and universally extracted only by torture, and thus cannot be considered reliable. The euphemistic terms the Nazis employed — “special treatment,” “showers,” “labour camps in the East,” “Einsatzgruppen,” “Final Solution” and so on — are taken at face value by deniers. Moreover, Nazi efforts to cover up their crimes through the attempted erasure of extermination camps such as Treblinka, and the blowing up of gas chambers and crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, as well as the inevitable deterioration of these sites after decades of exposure to the elements, all are seized by deniers as “proof” that no such crimes were committed. Finally, having “dismissed” every piece of historical evidence, deniers demand to be shown “a single document” that proves the Holocaust happened. Without a signed order from Hitler authorising the “Final Solution,” open mention of the secret extermination program in correspondence, or blueprints with clearly labelled “gas chambers,” deniers refuse to accept that the Holocaust took place. In other words, deniers make extraordinarily strict demands on the historical evidence, and when those demands cannot be met, the “official narrative” of the Holocaust is summarily concluded to be what they commonly label as “the greatest swindle of all time” or, as the title of an early “revisionist” book infamously claimed back in the 1970s, the “hoax of the twentieth century.”

To be sure, one reason why Holocaust scholarship is so replete with disagreements between professional historians at an interpretative level can be attributed to the nature of the historical evidence used to prove its factuality. No historical event can be said to leave a perfect trail of evidence for historians to subsequently consult. When it comes to the Holocaust, the evidence arguably is even more problematic for many of the reasons already identified. Robert van Pelt has suggested that the Nazis were the first ever Holocaust deniers, since through their use of euphemistic language and attempts both to keep the genocide a secret and to erase any trace of their crimes, they were effectively denying the mass murder of Jews at the time they were actually committing it. The destruction of both official documents and the physical remains of sites of genocide — not to mention the fact that most eyewitnesses to the Holocaust were amongst its millions of voiceless victims — has left historians with a particularly fragmented body of evidence. Matters of precise timing, perpetrator motivation, and how the “Final

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9 Arthur Butz, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: The Case Against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry.* (Historical Review Press, Southam, 1976). Butz has been an associate professor of electrical engineering and computer sciences at Northwestern University in Chicago since 1974 (i.e. two years before he published his controversial work of Holocaust denialism). After carrying this book for two decades, in March 2017 Amazon struck this listing from its website.

10 *Mr. Death: The Rise and Fall of Fred A. Leuchter, Jr.* Directed by Errol Morris, Fourth Floor Productions, 1999. (91 mins.)
“Solution” evolved all rely on evidence that is problematic, incomplete, and imperfect — this is precisely why historians fail to agree on such fundamental questions. But the same can be said of most historical events, and a lack of consensus among historians is not grounds for anyone to argue that something never happened.

In establishing the Holocaust as an historical fact, as opposed to how we interpret its various parts, the evidence is utterly overwhelming. The example of Auschwitz alone is compelling. When Soviet forces reached Auschwitz in January 1945, over 7,000 survivors still inside the camp were liberated and tens of thousands of other Jews who had passed through the camp at some stage also survived the war. Many of these Auschwitz survivors subsequently provided detailed accounts of what they had experienced or witnessed. Despite linguistic variances, temporal separation from each other, and the trauma caused by recounting these experiences, there is remarkable consistency among survivor testimony. Postwar confessions written by Rudolf Höß, the last commandant of Auschwitz, provide a comprehensive and frank record of the mass murder that was committed at this camp — not only the numbers killed, but also the methods and procedures that were used.\textsuperscript{11} Blueprints and the intended design of Auschwitz II (Birkenau), with the proximity of the gas chambers and crematoria to the arrival platform from which Jews were selected to live or die, strongly suggest the use of these facilities for mass death and no other purpose.

\textsuperscript{11} Rudolf Höß, \textit{Kommandant in Auschwitz: Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen. Eingeleitet und kommentiert von Martin Broszat}. (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, Stuttgart, 1958). His autobiography was translated into Polish and first published in 1951. It first appeared in German in 1958, and a year later an English translation was published.
The physical remains, though partially destroyed and left to crumble, are tangible. Moreover, despite the Nazis’ best efforts to cover up their crimes, the traces of the 1.1 million victims of Auschwitz were not erased. Following Auschwitz’s liberation, over 5,000 pairs of women’s shoes, 38,000 pairs of men’s shoes, almost 350,000 men’s suits, more than 800,000 women’s garments, nearly 14,000 carpets, 70,000 dishes, and seven tons of human hair were discovered inside the camp.\textsuperscript{12}

![Victims' shoes on display in the museum at Auschwitz.](source)

Viewed in isolation, none of this evidence proves the Holocaust as a historical fact, especially given that the vast majority of victims did not die in Auschwitz. In constructing historical knowledge, however, historians cast their evidentiary net widely, analyse each individual part, assess the strengths and weaknesses, and provide broader contextualisation in order to assign it proper meaning while also using each small piece to construct an intricate mosaic of the past. Imperfect records, euphemistic and ambiguous documents, unreliable eyewitness testimony — none automatically lead historians entirely to dismiss the value of this evidence. Through this process of careful and meticulous scrutiny, it is possible for Holocaust historians to reach universal agreement that the (physical and metaphorical) piles of evidence ultimately converge and point towards an indisputable historical fact: the Nazis and their collaborators conducted the systematic, state-sanctioned, industrialised mass murder of European Jews during the Second World War. By contrast, Holocaust deniers engage in acts of mass distortion and dismissal of the evidence, and make absurd demands for single pieces of evidence to prove a complex historical event. Basically, this is not how history works.

\textsuperscript{12} Van Pelt, \textit{The Case for Auschwitz}, pp. 158-59.
Evans reflects on his experiences confronting Holocaust denier David Irving in the English High Court in 2000. Irving, in fact, initiated this libel case in which he accused the American scholar Deborah Lipstadt and her publisher Penguin Books of defamation due to labelling him a Holocaust denier. Lipstadt had made this observation (or “allegation”) based on Irving’s longstanding history of making claims such as: thousands, not millions, of Jews died; their deaths were the result of disease in camps during a time of war, rather than through systematic mass gassings and shootings; the numbers of Jews killed is dwarfed by the numbers of German civilians killed through Allied bombing raids; Hitler, in particular, had no intention of killing Jews and instead was fixated on waging war; any and all evidence of extermination centres was fabricated after the war; and the Holocaust was an instrument of western (read: Jewish) propaganda designed to gain postwar support for Jews and the state of Israel. Irving was found by the court to have manipulated historical evidence over the course of decades, with the judge in the case describing him as “an active Holocaust denier” who was both “antisemitic and racist.”

Newspaper report on the Irving vs. Penguin/Lipstadt trial, upon which the 2017 film Denial is based.

Source: “David Irving and Why the Holocaust went on Trial,” The Telegraph.
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/films/denial/why-the-holocaust-went-on-trial/
[Accessed 18 May 2017]

13 Deborah Lipstadt, Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory. (Free Press, New York, 1993)

[Accessed 18 May 2017]
A few years later, Irving was arrested when trying to enter Austria in November 2005, where Holocaust denial is a crime punishable with up to 20 years’ imprisonment. He pleaded guilty to denying the Holocaust (relating to two speeches he had made during a previous visit to Austria in 1989) and was sentenced to three years in jail, but was released on probation after 13 months. Not to be deterred, upon his release Irving resumed his position as arguably the world’s most infamous Nazi apologist and Holocaust denier. Many of Irving’s most popular claims — such as those listed above — are echoed by other Holocaust deniers and right-wing extremists around the world, leading to some rather innovative and provocative developments.

Take, for instance, the intriguing case of Dresden. Irving first made his name back in the 1960s with an account of the bombing of Dresden that was considered an impressive piece of scholarship when it first appeared. As Irving’s views on the Nazi period radicalised over time, however, in revised versions of his Dresden book he

![David Irving enters the courtroom for his trial in Austria, carrying a copy of one of his books.](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2224830/Holocaust-denier-David-Irving-allowed-Germany--thanks-EU-rules-allow-free-movement.html)


deliberately distorted and ignored evidence in order to support his increasingly extreme views. Indeed, even though the wartime bombing of Dresden was not directly linked to the Holocaust, in his role as an expert witness for the Irving vs. Penguin/Lipstadt case Evans devoted much attention to scrutinising Irving’s treatment of historical evidence relating to Dresden’s destruction as his Nazi apologia intensified over time. Irving enjoys a reputation as a cynosure among neo-Nazis in Germany who converge on Dresden every February 13th — the anniversary of the city’s firebombing in 1945 — to misappropriate the memory of the Saxon capital’s controversial destruction by the Western Allies so late in the war. Since the early 2000s, these neo-Nazi demonstrators have carried banners through the streets of Dresden each February 13th claiming that the Western Allies’ wanton destruction of the city amounts to a “bombing Holocaust.”

Neo-Nazis in Dresden on 13 February 2005 — the 60th anniversary of the city’s controversial wartime destruction at the hands of Western Allied bombers — marching behind a banner that sensationaly claims that it was a “bombing holocaust.”


In a future world without Holocaust survivors, and one in which antisemitism continues to flourish, there will continue to be individuals and groups who seek to deny the historical truth of the event. Their efforts, however, pose no serious threat to professional historical scholarship. On the contrary, eminent historians including Christopher Browning have acknowledged that knowledge of Holocaust denial has partially forced historians to be even more meticulous in their research, and even more cautious in reaching their findings. For a discipline such as history, cautiousness and meticulousness are par for the course. At the very least, if Holocaust denial reminds — nay, demands — historians to continue producing sound, innovative, and careful scholarship about the Holocaust, then this can only lead to further advances in historical knowledge and understanding. Ironically, then, Holocaust denial may unwittingly increase the strength of historical scholarship about the Holocaust — which, in turn, can be used to rebut deniers’ specious arguments.

As students of history and public citizens, we are among the best informed to wrestle with the possibility of outlawing denial of the Holocaust in Australia and elsewhere, while recognising that a balance needs to be struck between protecting the memory of the Holocaust and the practice of freedom of speech and scholarship. Denying the Holocaust is illegal in Germany and Austria. It is a law that has led to the arrest of known (or suspected) Holocaust deniers simply for crossing a European border into a country that outlaws denial, rather than for a particular act of Holocaust denial. Issues around the Holocaust, then, continue to test legal systems and civil expectations in many parts of the world.

**Conclusion**

The Holocaust was an event of such moral, religious, philosophical, political, historical, and destructive magnitude that it effectively remains beyond comprehension. It was so monumental and unfathomable that no single person or group could agree even on what to call it — to choose a name that would convey its complexities, and capture the challenge it posed to those seeking to understand it. The word “Holocaust,” though somewhat contentious, has prevailed as the most widely accepted term for the Nazis’ attempted extermination of European Jews. For some, however, the religious connotations and the implicit or inferred meaning of the word invariably leads to questions over its suitability. Were Jewish victims of Nazi death camps sacrificed as “burnt offerings” to God, murdered by Nazi henchmen who were doing God’s work? The question is vexed and, in many ways, unanswerable, but it leads to important discussion about the suitability of “the Holocaust” as a term.

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Liberation did not axiomatically signal the end of the Holocaust for those who survived, nor did physical distance or the passage of time diminish its impact on the next generation. Children of survivors and descendants of perpetrators, as well as whole nations — particularly Germany and Israel — lived and continue to live with the memory of the Holocaust. For children whose parents survived Nazi ghettos and camps, the Holocaust may have been a dominant feature of their childhood, with stories and photographs of their parents’ experiences becoming as vivid and impactful as their own memories. For children in postwar Germany, by contrast, the opposite was true. Silence was increasingly met by acrimony, however, and young Germans came to not only resent the shadowy past their parents had bequeathed them, but also lead the charge for it to be openly confronted.

The future of the Holocaust will be characterised by two antithetical goals: remembrance and denial. International Holocaust Remembrance Day — observed on January 27th each year, notably the day Auschwitz was liberated in 1945 — is marked by commemorations worldwide. For Israelis, their day of remembrance — Yom HaShoah — effectively brings the state of Israel to a complete standstill, at least for a two-minute period from 10am. And in many parts of the world, especially in Europe where the event occurred, there are memorials — from large and bold through to small and subtle — dedicated to remembering the Holocaust and in particular its victims.

*Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Berlin.*

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On the bank of the Danube adjacent to the Hungarian parliamentary building in central Budapest, this Holocaust memorial was unveiled in April 2005. It simply depicts empty shoes, in remembrance of victims who were executed by members of the Arrow Cross (military forces of Hungary’s fascist movement). They were ordered to take off their shoes (so they could be distributed to other Hungarians) before being shot on the bank so that their bodies drifted away down the river.

Photographs: Tony Joel, November 2011.
Remembrance and commemoration, however, remain controversial practices. While there is little argument against the need to remember, to honour, and to commit ourselves to a world in which horrors such as the Holocaust are never repeated, precisely how we pursue such an endeavour is another matter. Sites of former atrocities such as Auschwitz — which attracts more than a million visitors annually — are in an ongoing cycle of repair and disrepair. The danger that Auschwitz will eventually begin to resemble something other than an authentic representation of the site at which 1.1 million people were murdered is contrasted with the strong desire for the site to remain an accessible cornerstone of Holocaust remembrance. This balancing act is all the more precarious and pressing given that the living memory of the Holocaust will be extinguished through the passing of its last remaining survivors.

In turn, such a development may give further impetus to the obscenity of Holocaust denial. As there always will be individuals and groups who wish to remember the Holocaust, there will be others — antisemites, racists, Nazi apologists, conspiracy theorists etc. — who deny that it ever happened. Understanding the strategies that Holocaust deniers use, developing a sense of evidence-based history, and appreciating the strength of this evidence as it relates to the Nazi era will enable students of history — YOU! — to combat the scourge of Holocaust denial. Having completed this unit, you have now become important custodians of Holocaust memory and education. You are now equipped, moreover, with the knowledge and means to challenge anyone who stupidly or maliciously disregards the possibility that something like the Holocaust could happen again.

Thank you for studying what we believe is one of the most profoundly important events in modern history. We hope you have found this unit to be a rewarding learning experience.

Regards,

The AIH264 Teaching Team