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Danger in Denying Holocaust?

A revisionist is accusing a prominent critic of the movement of libel. Scholars and survivors say the evidence is irrefutable, but those who question extent of horrors say they pay a price.

By KIM MURPHY, Times Staff Writer

A young German chemist named Germar Rudolf took crumbling bits of plaster from the walls of Auschwitz in 1993 and sent them to a lab for analysis. There were plenty of traces of cyanide gas in the delousing chambers where Nazi camp commanders had had blankets and clothing fumigated. There was up to a thousand times less in the rooms described as human gas chambers.



Holocaust revisionist David Irving, who has filed a lawsuit, in 1983. (AP)

Rudolf, a doctoral candidate at Stuttgart University, concluded that large numbers of Jews may have died of typhoid, starvation and murder at Europe's most famous World War II death camp, but none of them died in a gas chamber.

When a report on his findings -- commissioned by a former Third Reich general -- got out, Rudolf lost his job at the respected Max Planck Institute and his doctoral degree was put on hold. He was sentenced to 14 months in prison under a 1985 German law making it a crime to incite racial hatred, his landlord kicked him out, he fled into exile and his wife filed for divorce.

There are many who say Rudolf got exactly what he deserved. But to the increasingly vocal movement of Holocaust deniers and revisionists, Rudolf stands as a crucial figure because of what he represents: a highly trained chemist who purports -- despite a wide

variety of scientific evidence to the contrary -- to have physical proof that the gas chambers at Auschwitz did not exist.

Over the last decade, supporters of such theories have scrutinized hundreds of thousands of pages of Third Reich documents and diaries made available after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They have analyzed gas chamber construction. They have pinpointed contradictions and hard-to-believe details in stories told by camp survivors and, amid nearly universal scorn from the academic establishment, won testimonials for some of their work from academics at respected institutions, such as Northwestern University and the University of Lyon.

The revisionists, whose theories will be at the center of a high-profile libel trial scheduled to begin Tuesday in London, are not operating in a vacuum. A 1993 poll by the Roper Organization found that 22% of Americans thought it possible that the Holocaust never happened.

The theorists contend that far fewer than 6 million Jews died in Europe during World War II -- and that most of those who died did so through starvation, disease and ad hoc executions carried out by lower-level Nazi officers.

That scenario has been almost universally dismissed as a flawed misreading of history, cooked up out of deep-seated anti-Semitism. Indeed, at least two dozen people have been prosecuted in Germany, France, Spain, Austria, Poland and Canada since 1990 under various laws prohibiting racial hatred and the defaming of the memory of those who died in Nazi death camps for even questioning what has become one of the defining horrors of the modern age.

Now one of the leading deniers of the Holocaust, British historian David Irving, is striking back, suing the most prominent critic of the movement, Emory University professor Deborah Lipstadt, for libel. The trial is likely to feature many of the world's premier WWII historians weighing in on the mechanics, logistics, chain of command and blueprints for the extermination of millions of European Jews.

In her book, "Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory," Lipstadt accuses Irving of skewing documents and misrepresenting data. The book quotes analysts who describe his work as "closer to theology or mythology than to history." As a British citizen, Irving can take advantage of British libel law, which places much of the burden on Lipstadt to prove her book did not libel the historian. Irving says his lawsuit will prove Lipstadt's book is part of an international Jewish campaign to discredit him.

Irving, author of biographies of Adolf Hitler and his propaganda chief, Joseph Goebbels, has argued that Hitler has never been found to have ordered a massive extermination of the Jews and, in fact, tried to stop some of the killings. He has described Auschwitz as "a very brutal slave labor camp, where probably 100,000 Jews died." And not unlike U.S. Reform Party presidential candidate Patrick J. Buchanan, he asserts the world would have

been better served if Winston Churchill had accepted Hitler's peace overtures in 1940 and allowed Hitler to fight it out with Josef Stalin in Russia.

Confronting Deniers' Arguments Head-On

Lipstadt was among the first in the American Jewish community to abandon the long-standing practice of ignoring the Holocaust deniers, choosing instead to confront their arguments head-on. Her book accuses Irving of misreading documents and distorting facts.

Historians she quotes have said Irving ignores the fact that the Nazis deliberately avoided a paper trail and that it is quite plausible that Hitler would never personally have affixed his signature to the Final Solution.

She cites accusations by prominent British historian Hugh Trevor-Roper that Irving "seizes on a small and dubious particle of 'evidence' " and allegedly uses it "to dismiss far more substantial evidence that may not support his thesis."

"There are more people in the United States who believe that Elvis Presley is alive than who believe the Holocaust didn't happen. As an American, that's a demi-consolation," Lipstadt said in an interview. "But I see it as a clear and future danger. The future danger is when there are no people left who can say in the first-person singular, 'This is what happened to me,' it's going to be much easier to deny it."

For Irving, who is regarded in some mainstream quarters as one of the premier documentarians of the Third Reich, it is an issue of professional vindication. It is no accident, he says, that he has been banned from even entering Canada, Italy, Germany and Austria because of Holocaust denial laws in those countries. "They regard me as dangerous, and the word 'dangerous' puzzles me," he said. "I don't go around punching people in the face. . . . 'Dangerous' can only mean dangerous to their interests, either in the long term or the short term.

"In the end, it isn't really a question of whether it's 6 million or only 1 million" Jews who died. "I think the figures have been inflated, and the significance of the inflation is that the Jewish community is trying to make out that their suffering is unique in its grandeur and the methods applied to achieve it. And it wasn't. It was just one of the many barbarisms committed under the cloak of war."

Some revisions in Holocaust history have been generally accepted. Stories that Jewish remains were manufactured into soap and lampshades have been dismissed as myth. There were, most historians now agree, no human gasings at Dachau. Deaths at Auschwitz, once estimated, based on the testimony of Nazi commanders, at up to 3 million have been scaled back to about 1.1 million. Even the widely accepted figure of 6 million Jewish dead all over Europe has been questioned in recent years by some of the world's most prominent Holocaust scholars.

Raul Hilberg and Robert Jan van Pelt, two of the leading authorities, now believe the figure is probably closer to 5.1 million.

Still, scholars say, the evidence of a massive extermination campaign that resulted in the deaths of millions of Jews is so exhaustive that it is irrefutable.

It includes detailed stories from camp survivors, confessions and memoirs from Nazi commandants (including Auschwitz commander Rudolf Hoess), testimony of Jewish prisoners who removed bodies from the gas chambers, blueprints uncovered from newly opened archives in Moscow that document construction of the gas chambers, records from the contractors who built the gas chambers and orders for large quantities of hydrogen cyanide gas, far more than would have been needed for fumigation, according to Van Pelt and others.

Revisionist Questions Limits on Inquiry

There is the sheer number of Jews who arrived at the camps and never left, far more than could have fallen victim to disease or starvation, most historians believe.

Since when, Lipstadt wants to know, does anyone in the name of academic inquiry have the right to claim there is "another side" to the Holocaust debate? And why is there even a debate?

To this, Rudolf, who could be called as a witness at the trial, says that no issue of history should be exempt from reexamination -- even if it pains the victims.

In convicting him, Rudolf says, the court took no notice of prominent German military historian Joachim Hoffman, who credited the quality of Rudolf's research and said that to suppress it would "work a powerful hindrance to legitimate striving for scientific understanding." The court apparently was moved, however, by a preface by the former Third Reich general who had commissioned Rudolf to do the research, Otto Ernst Remer, who in 1992 himself was sentenced to prison for incitement to racial hatred.

Could a report commissioned by a man like Remer -- who once joked while sniffing a cigarette lighter that he was mimicking "a Jew nostalgic for Auschwitz" -- ever be a justifiable contribution to scientific literature?

More to the point, says Irving, should there be political limits on academic inquiry?

"I think, by the end of this case, the word 'scholarship' will come to stink," Irving predicts. "Scholars tend to award that accolade to each other. And their scholarship usually consists of sitting in libraries reading each others' books."

Irving prides himself on relying on primary sources for his biographies: interviews or diaries of the principals, radio transmission intercepts, memorandums. In the case of his

book "Hitler's War," Irving interviewed in detail most of the surviving members of Hitler's staff and only used documents that would have crossed Hitler's desk.

In the process, Irving said he did not come across a single document or interview that indicated Hitler had ordered a campaign to exterminate the Jews.

"Others who have come across with something have looser criteria than I do, like the Nuremberg trials. . . . I won't accept that. Not standing by itself," he said.

Irving's numerous critics say he fails to address the fact that the extermination campaign was carried out in deliberate secrecy, without written orders. SS chief Heinrich Himmler "explicitly forbade all discussion of it, and if it had to be mentioned, it was always disguised as 'resettlement' or 'transport to the east,'" Trevor-Roper pointed out in a review of Irving's book.

St. Martin's Press abruptly dropped plans to publish Irving's controversial biography of Goebbels in 1996 in the wake of a storm of criticism from reviewers, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and even, according to some employees, telephone death threats against the book's editor. Thomas McCormack, chairman of the publishing house, said he read the book and found it "repellent [and] effectively anti-Semitic." When the Doubleday Military Book Club backed out as well, Irving self-published the book, calling the whole affair "the most extraordinary treatment of a historian since what the Iranians did to Salman Rushdie."

Yet Irving has his admirers as well. Christopher Hitchens, writing of Irving's work in *Vanity Fair*, called him "not just a Fascist historian, [but] . . . also a great historian of Fascism." Gordon A. Craig, considered the dean of German historians, acknowledged that Irving has been an "annoyance" but said: "The fact is that he knows more about national socialism than most professional scholars in his field." His book on Hitler, Craig said, "remains the best study we have of the German side of the Second World War."

On the advice of her lawyers, Lipstadt won't discuss Irving or the upcoming trial. But she did say there is a danger in allowing what she calls Holocaust deniers to wear the mantle of legitimate revisionists -- those who look at accepted history and raise new and often enlightening questions.

"There's a definite political agenda," she said. "This is not just Looney Tunes history. These are people who want to make national socialism respectable again. And how do you make a thoroughly discredited movement respectable?"

"First of all, you deal with moral equivalencies. You say, 'Oh yes, the Germans bombed London, but the Allies bombed Dresden. There were Bergen-Belsen and Auschwitz, but the Americans had camps for the Americans of Japanese descent.' But there's no moral equivalency for them to bring up about the Holocaust. So instead, they are left denying the Holocaust. And denying it in such a way that you almost hear them saying, 'It didn't happen, but it should have.' "

Van Pelt, who is considered one of the world's leading authorities on Auschwitz, prepared an 800-page report on the death camp for the trial. "The whole idea of trying to prove the Holocaust is, for me, a kind of ridiculous exercise. But in some ways, it forces historians to show what they can do. I think the case has forced me . . . to look at things I preferred not to look at in the past," he said.

Van Pelt now can tell you how the gas chambers operated, how the capsules of Zyklon B were dropped in the ceiling vents, how the bodies were hauled out, and how long it took human beings to die at what concentrations of gas (about 35 minutes, in most cases).

Van Pelt's new report has not yet been made public, and Rudolf has not responded to it. "I can deal with Himmler. I can deal with Hoess. There's a certain kind of naive honesty in what they do, however evil it is," Van Pelt said. "But the contortions and complete fabrications of these deniers is obscene.

"What they do is take all kinds of very straightforward evidence and basically turn it upside down. And it's an incredible effort to simply sit there and take every sentence they write and compare it to the record. . . . It doesn't help you to understand anything except the contortions of their minds. And their minds are not very interesting."
