



Survivors: A group of children freed by the Russian Army when it liberated Auschwitz in 1945. More than 1.5 million people are believed to have died in the Nazi death camp.

The Holocaust revisited

A libel case has resumed in the High Court where controversial historian David Irving is disputing that he denied the Holocaust happened. Christopher Hitchens believes that re-examining the claims behind the genocide will be no bad thing.

A FEW years ago, US Vice President Dan Quayle referred to the Nazi Holocaust as one of the worst things that had happened in America in his own lifetime. Everything about the statement was wrong, of course - Mr Quayle was even born after 1945 - but it didn't feature in his list of notorious or infamous gaffes because everybody thought it was a nice try and appreciated the spirit in which it was offered. Likewise, when Ronald Reagan (who spent the entire war in Hollywood) claimed to have been present at the liberation of the Nazi death-camps, and made the claim to Israel's then foreign minister Yitzhak Shamir as well as to Simon Wiesenthal, the general view was that it was the thought that counted.

Now Patrick Buchanan (who was Reagan's Press spokesman at the time of the above excursion into fantasy) has been effectively marginalised in an American election for writing a book that says Hitler was no great enemy of the United States. In an earlier incarnation, Buchanan also took up the case of John Demjanjuk, a Ukrainian-American immigrant accused of being a sadistic mass murderer at Treblinka. When Demjanjuk was deported to Israel over the protests of Buchanan and others, he was able to prove conclusively that he was a victim of mistaken identity, despite being positively "identified" by camp survivors in the courtroom. A Jerusalem judge let him go.

The *Endlösung* (Final Solution), as the Nazis called it, or the Holocaust as we commonly allude to it, has become the cen-

tral moral narrative of the democratic West. William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, and the agonised prose of the late Primo Levi, help define its tragic scope for the intellectuals, while countless kitsch movies keep it alive as a popular drama. (When Steven Spielberg accepted the Oscar for *Schindler's List*, he did so in the name of "the six million who can't be here tonight" - an invocation of ratings and market share that I thought might get him ridiculed but which did not.) In Washington DC, commanding the mall which honours Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, there is a National Holocaust Museum which has established itself, with public money, as an essential stop for any tourist. The black slaves and exterminated Native Americans still await their memorial museums in the nation's capital; God knows what Dan Quayle will say when or if they eventually get them. Meanwhile, hardly a day passes without some report of compensation for slave labourers, or some account of Nazi loot in Swiss banks, to keep the memory green.

When the Holocaust Museum was first mooted in Washington, Henry Kissinger was among the Jews who were sceptical of the proposal. He thought that too much emphasis on the suffering of the Jewish people would lead to jealous or envious anti-Semitism. He was wrong about that in the short run - though some black Americans were upset, given that there had been a slave market only a few yards away on Capitol Hill - yet some recent scholarship has been musing aloud about whether he might be right in the longer term. Just in the past week or so, Sam Schulman in *The Spectator* and Norman Finkel-

stein in the *London Review of Books* have raised objections to the cheapening and myth-making that surround the limitless invocations of the subject. And in the United States, I come across more and more frequent expressions of distaste at the exploitation of the Holocaust theme. (Leon Wieseltier of *The New Republic* once famously and scornfully said that, in America, "There's no business like Shoah business".)

The topic has to be approached with the softest of kid gloves. You will have noticed that all the names cited above are Jewish; very few gentiles care to express dissent in public and of those who do, some belong to that curious and sinister community which denies that the Nazi genocide ever took place. A major High Court case in London is pitting the American Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt against the revisionist historian David Irving, whose work on the Goebbels diaries could not be published in New York a few years ago because of rumours and allegations that he was a "Holocaust denier", too. Some old and infamous assumptions are being tested again for a new generation, as the memory of the few survivors dims and fades. (To give you one intriguing example, Professor Lipstadt in her book on the subject concedes that the notorious tale of the Nazis making soap out of the bodies of dead Jews is a myth, probably fabricated by the "Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee" of the former Soviet Union.) An ancestor-by-marriage of mine, a Polish-Jewish Communist named David

Smulewski, was one of the witnesses who survived Auschwitz to help to write its official history. (Photographs he smuggled from the camp in wartime were taken to the Vatican and shown by the Resistance to an indifferent Pope.) Nobody can doubt that unthinkable extremes of violence were perpetrated at Auschwitz, but since the de-Communisation of Poland it has been conceded that the figure of many millions put to death there is an exaggeration; for the moment the museum authorities have no total on which they agree. The Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem, which is more scrupulous and careful than some professional Holocaust outfits, also admits that the round figure of six million dead is an arbitrary one. Further disturbances to the accepted story can be expected: many people are surprised, for example, when they are told that no extermination camps - as distinct from concentration camps - were located on German soil. They were operated in the occupied East, and kept a state secret. Yet all serious Holocaust scholars are agreed on this. And the implications of it for what many still consider to be the collective guilt of the German people, are considerable.

Norman Finkelstein, himself the son of camp survivors, makes the point that the Israeli state, especially after the 1967 war, "needed" the Holocaust emphasis for purposes of self-justification. Indeed, until a few years ago it was commonplace to hear Israeli spokesmen compare Arafat to Hitler. That's now been dropped for obvious reasons. So, in our brand-new century, with Germany democratically reunified and European, and Israel on the peace trail, and archives being opened in the former killing fields of the Eastern front, we may find ourselves re-examining one of the most apparently immutable of our historical examples. Some are afraid of the opening of this process, because they fear that the deniers and anti-Semites will be the profiteers from it. But I think this apprehension is groundless, and that the meticulous separation of fact and record, not just from propaganda but also from sentimentalism, will be a clarifying and reaffirming thing.

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Time of trial: David Irving is fighting a High Court libel case with American historian Deborah Lipstadt over claims that he "denied" the Holocaust.

Can Tony Blair afford to keep his NHS promises?

The inflation-busting pay deal for nurses yesterday sharpened the question: where is the money coming from for an improved NHS? Peter Kellner puts some figures on the promises.

TONY BLAIR made his biggest promise since he became Prime Minister. He told Sir David Frost that by 2006 we shall catch up with the rest of the EU in the share of national income we spend on health care. Afterwards, his officials clarified that target. This year's figure for the UK is 6.7 per cent. (The NHS accounts for 5.7 per cent; the private sector accounts for the rest.) The European average is 8 per cent. The Prime Minister is promising to raise our current figure by 1.3 percentage points. That is a larger increase than it sounds. This year, the NHS will receive around £20bn. By 2006, if the Prime Minister's target is to be reached, it will receive £20bn at today's prices - an injection of money that would utterly transform the Health Service.

The reason for such a huge increase - 40 per cent in real terms over six years - is that two forces are at work. Not only will the NHS receive a larger percentage share of national income: the national income itself should grow significantly. The Treasury projects an annual growth rate of 2.5 per cent. On that basis, Britain's economy should be 16 per cent bigger in 2006 than it is today. Blair is effectively promising to give the NHS a larger slice of a larger national cake. That is why his commitment to match the European average is so massive.

In the immediate future, we can forget the figures that Gordon Brown set out just 18 months ago in his three-year



Cash injection: Tony Blair is committed to a £3bn-a-year increase for the NHS.

comprehensive spending review. He offered the NHS 4.5 per cent more (after inflation) in 2000/01, followed by a further 2.9 per cent in 2001/02. To hit the Prime Minister's six-year target, Brown must give Alan Milburn, the Health Secretary, significantly more. NHS spending needs to rise by six per cent in real terms every year - a faster sustained increase than at any time in its history. Each year the health budget must rise by at least £3bn - on top of inflation. Downing Street insiders are well

aware that more money must be given to the NHS, but they may not realise how much more. Yesterday they were talking about increases of five per cent a year, which would not be enough. However, now Blair has made his commitment, he is certain to try to keep it. Somehow he will find the extra money. After yesterday, one of the big questions for the next six years is: where? One way to find more cash for the NHS is to spend less on tax cuts. According to *Observer*/ICM poll at the weekend, three-quarters of us want

Gordon Brown to scrap the 1p cut in income tax that he has planned for this April, and give the money to the NHS. But do we really mean it, or do we hide from pollsters our real desire to vote for lower taxes whenever we get the chance? Only a fool would deny that some people say one thing to pollsters and do another thing at the ballot box. The issue is not whether they exist, but whether they form a large enough battalion to make a nonsense of the polls. My judgment - respondents that a cut of 1p in the pound would be worth £140 a year to an average family. Despite this, a four-to-one majority said they would forgo it in favour of the NHS. The larger criticism of such polls is that they are contradicted by history. Labour lost the 1992 election when Neil Kinnock proposed tax increases for worthy social causes - and won in 1997 because Tony Blair promised to keep taxes down. In fact, the story of the past two elections is more complex. It is not true that Labour lost the 1992 election because of tax rises per se. The most

authoritative academic analysis found that Labour suffered because swing voters thought it would screw up the economy. They thought a Kinnock government would raise taxes without improving public services. Swing voters were willing to pay for better services - but not to throw good money after bad. Nor is it true that Blair's huge victory in 1997 flowed from a belief that he would keep taxes down. A BBC/NOP exit poll found that fully 60 per cent expected taxes to rise under Labour. This time, however, most people thought Labour was more competent than the Tories. They thought a Blair government would use the extra money wisely. The evidence, then, suggests that the public really would prefer Brown to switch money from tax cuts to the NHS this spring - provided that he persuaded us that the extra money really would filter through to our local hospitals and family doctors. That is the vital qualification. The results must be tangible. Maybe the Chancellor can have his cake and eat it: find enough money both for tax cuts and extra NHS spending. But if he has to make a choice, he should take care. If voters think the Government is breaking its promises to improve our public services in order to pay for tax cuts, then the Prime Minister and Chancellor should not be surprised if they attract more brickbats than bouquets.