

Humiliation for Holocaust sceptic

JENNY BOOTH

The right-wing historian David Irving must have known it was a tremendous gamble when he opted to bring a libel case to defend his good name as an academic.

The libel courts have a habit of ventilating embarrassing facts that expose public figures to further notoriety rather than mend their reputations – as figures such as Neil Hamilton and Jonathan Aitken have found to their cost.

But not even Irving could have predicted the extent of the humiliation, the annihilation of his academic credentials, or the severity of Mr Justice Gray's verdict.

On the face of it, it is hard to see why Irving took such a risk, when he was still seen as a substantial scholar in England and the US. Previously he had contented himself with issuing libel writs to gag his critics.

However, his views have hardened over the years. He has progressed from debating the evidence in 1977 that Hitler ordered the Holocaust, to denying in 1988 that any Jews were ever gassed at Auschwitz. Since then his controversial career has been moving inexorably towards a showdown.

The turning point may have been in 1997 when a German court banned his further entry to Germany, cutting him off from the Nazi archives that are the primary source for his claims. Later, Canada and Australia, where he formerly carried out lucrative lecture tours, also barred him from entry.

Then his New York publisher ditched his book on Goebbels. Both decisions were calamitous for Irving. It was typical that he did not blame his own actions or his overt support for neo-Nazi causes, but a giant Jewish conspiracy.

The battleground which Irving chose on which to challenge this "global onslaught" on him, was a book by Deborah Lipstadt, an American expert on the Holocaust and on anti-Semitism, published by Penguin books.

Lipstadt, 51, is a very different character from Irving.

Born in New York of a German Jewish father and a Canadian mother, she has spent all her life in academia, studying in Jerusalem and Los Angeles.

She is now the Dorot professor of modern Jewish and Holocaust studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

Irving is an academic rough diamond, who dropped out of university in London without finishing his degree, and is attached to no educational campus.

Unfit for national service, he chose to work in a steel factory on the Ruhr. There, he made friends and developed the ideas for his first book on wartime history, about the 1945 Allied bombing of Dresden. Like his 19 further books, it was a controversial success, presenting a meticulously researched and persuasive account sympathetic to the Nazi cause.

Probably his main work is the 1977 history *Hitler's War*, a historiography in which he expounds his theory that Hitler did not order the extermination of the Jews.

At the same time as writing and researching his books, Irving was active on the right-wing lecture circuit, happy to share a platform with people of neo-Nazi credentials.

Irving has attracted enormous criticism for his views, including describing Anne Frank's diary as a fake, and backing the discredited "research" by Fred Leuchter which claimed to prove scientifically that the Auschwitz gas chambers were not used for mass murder.

But even his enemies had to admit that – unlike other right-wing propagandists – his books have academic merit. His enthusiasm for the Holocaust has led him to uncover and gauge the historical importance of many key documents moldering away in archives.

In *Denying the Holocaust* Lipstadt says this is what makes him one of the most dangerous Holocaust sceptics, because he was so well-read, and well-versed in presenting plausible propaganda.

Lipstadt was the first in the Jewish community to put her



Professor Deborah Lipstadt and Holocaust survivor Martin Hecht after the verdict branding Irving a 'holocaust denier'.

Picture: Jonathan Evans

head above the parapet and confront the arguments of Holocaust deniers head on. Instead of just ignoring them.

Given Irving's litigious reputation, it was a brave move to describe him as a "Hitler partisan who wears blinkers and skews documents and misrepresents data in order to reach historically untenable conclusions, specifically those that exonerate Hitler".

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into explanations that seemed tortured and evasive. Although the author of a biography of Goebbels, Irving also claimed he "had not read" his passages in Goebbels' diaries relating to the Holocaust – even though the book was in his library and he had discussed it in public.

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Israelis welcome the court decision

MATT REES

In Jerusalem

ISRAELIS welcomed the court decision yesterday, arguing that it finally shattered any veneer of respectability attached to the work of historians who deny the enormity of Hitler's death machine.

Others, however, noted that Holocaust denial is widespread in the Arab world and the verdict of a London court would probably have little effect there.

"It is a historic decision which shows that Irving's position is a lie," said Avraham Avi-Hai, a member of the World Zionist Organisation's executive board. "It is very sad to reflect that the suffering and pain of so many Holocaust survivors could be questioned by somebody with the temerity of Irving."

Holocaust organisations in Israel had never gone as far as some Western experts, who argued that the facts of the Holocaust were on trial in London. Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem memorial and Holocaust study centre, sent documents from its library to back Deborah Lipstadt's case.

Yad Vashem said in a statement that the verdict would help in Israel's continuing attempt to educate people around the world on the sheer scope of the Holocaust. "The issue is not Irving's right to say or not to say ridiculous things, but that people understand that the

IN GERMANY, the teaching of the Holocaust is compulsory, while Holocaust denial is also taught as a subject to warn youngsters of the dangers of accepting alternative history espoused by the likes of David Irving. But in Britain concerns remain that there is still a high level of ignorance among youngsters. Jim Murphy, the Labour MP for Eastwood and secretary of the Parliamentary Council Against Anti-Semitism, said last night that the teaching of the Holocaust remained inadequate, particularly in Scotland.

ideas of Irving and his ilk are based on a political, neo-Nazi ideology and do not represent any form of historical truth."

Israel's government did not take a public position on the case, but it did release the diary of Adolf Eichmann, the chief bureaucrat of Hitler's final solution who was tried and hanged in Israel in 1962. Israel had previously kept Eichmann's jail record secret, because it did not want to be seen to be letting the Nazi have his say. But the country's attorney-general decided in February to release the diary, so that Mr Lipstadt's defence could use it to show Hitler knew the details of the concentration camp operations.

The decision of the court favours the view that the historical facts surrounding the Holocaust should not be viewed from the specific point of view of a group which wants to promulgate its own racist politics," said an Israeli government official. "The court showed that the Holocaust should be approached from a moral point of view, so that the correct lessons can be learnt for future generations."

Holocaust denial is alive and well in the Arab world, and two weeks ago, the top Muslim cleric in Jerusalem said the number of Jews who died at the hands of the Nazis was much lower than six million and that Israel exaggerated it for political gain. Two months ago, a Syrian government newspaper made the same assertions and added that Israel had played a Nazi role in the Middle East.

'This man should have spent five minutes in Auschwitz'

ERNEST Levy remembers only too well the horror of the Holocaust. As with other survivors of concentration camps, it is extremely important to him that people know the truth. If it is never again, he believes.

He told his two children about his time in Auschwitz, where as a prisoner he was forced to work in the burial squads, and how he lost half his family in the Nazi atrocities.

In turn, his grandchildren will hear the terrible stories, so that they too, never forget. That an educated person, particularly a historian, could deny those events took place is beyond his comprehension.

"It was in Auschwitz when I was 19 and I just made it and no more after a full year in the



Ernest Levy: Lost half his family in Nazi atrocities

camp, and had to be nursed back to life from zero," said Mr Levy.

"Can you imagine how I feel when people come along and try to distort history? I was there, I know what happened, I saw it from so close."

Mr Levy, who retired as cantor at Giffnock Synagogue, in Glasgow, ten years ago, greeted with relief the news that David Irving, the Holocaust sceptic, failed to win his court action.

It was with troubled thoughts that he had been following the court case with his wife Kathy, a Belsen camp survivor. The couple, both 75, say the distortion of the truth is particularly hard to understand while there are still so many survivors alive.

"It is salt in our wounds when people deny what happened. Can you imagine how upsetting it is?" he asked.

"This man should have spent five minutes in Auschwitz, where you couldn't breathe for the stench of burning human flesh."

As a Hungarian Jew, Mr Levy

was among the last to suffer the consequences of Nazi death camps. Wreathed from his family in Budapest in April 1944, he was taken to Auschwitz, where he had a relative, and where, amazingly, he met his wife, who also had family in Scotland. "It was fantastic. She didn't remember me, but I knew her," said Mr Levy.

"After being so close to death, I just made it and no more, but I'm still here to tell the tale. But many more didn't make it, which is why it is hard when someone comes along and says it never happened."

"It is a great relief to all of us that the situation is now cleared up. We found it really upsetting. Thank God we are still here to put forward the facts."

By then he had already lost his "wonderful" father in Buchenwald, as well as his sister, brother-in-law and their entire family in Auschwitz. He also lost a brother, who was shot by Hungarian fascists af-

ter being forced to dig his own grave.

In 1962, Mr Levy escaped from behind the Iron Curtain and came to Glasgow, where he had a relative, and where, amazingly, he met his wife, who also had family in Scotland. "It was fantastic. She didn't remember me, but I knew her," said Mr Levy.

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KATRINA TWEEDIE



Young Jews huddle behind the barbed wire fencing at Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland in 1945



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The Authority welcomes views from the public on the services required from digital radio in Central Scotland, and in due course upon the proposals put forward by applicants for this licence. These should be sent to the address above.

The undeniable truth

30 January, 1933
Adolf Hitler appointed Chancellor of Germany.

15 September, 1934
Nuremberg Race Laws against Jews decreed.

9-10 November, 1938
Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, 55-led mob violence against Jews and their property.

1 September, 1939
Germany invades Poland. Curfew for Jews in Germany imposed. War declared by Britain and France two days later.

12 February, 1940
First Deportation of German Jews into occupied Poland, to sealed ghettos and concentration camps.

25 July, 1941
First extermination camp, Majdanek in Poland, becomes operational, followed by Chelmo, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka.

12 January, 1942
Holocaust conference details Nazi plans to annihilate 11 million European Jews.

5 October, 1942
Himmler orders extermination of all Jews in concentration camps.

Late 1942
Nazi Koehler Report puts number of Jewish losses at this point at 2,454,000.

Summer, 1944
Auschwitz-Birkenau records its highest daily number of persons gassed and buried at more than 9,000. The last ghetto in Poland, Lodz, is liquidated and its 5,000 Jews sent to Auschwitz.



Picture: Graham Barclay

A case of 'forensic' madness

ANALYSIS
JOHN ERICKSON

AS AN academic, David Irving presents the strangest kind of paradox. He is a documentary historian whose expertise with documentation cannot seriously be questioned. Yet this same expertise is put to a purpose which at the time defies commonsense, or is applied in so narrow a forensic context that the result is *reductio ad absurdum*.

His argument is that, because there is no filmic or photographic evidence of actual gassing, its existence and any statements describing its widespread use must be highly questionable, if not actually invalid. To me, such a case can only be described as "forensic" madness.

The resort to gas-chamber technology had its roots in the Wehrmacht's policy in Russia after 1941, when the killing could not proceed fast enough,

hence the first "gas-vans". The command: "Jews and Communists, one pace forward" summoned those human beings to their death. In fact, summoned to die of killing which swelled to monstrous proportions.

I am not sure that I go along with this phraseology about Irving "denying" the Holocaust. What Irving has done has been to divide into more and more "forensic" evidence, defending himself on a narrow front, if you like, "whittling down" the scope of the Holocaust.

Irving does not deny mass killing of the Jews, ascribing the greater part of it to the atrocities committed in the Soviet Union, but he distances himself from any admission of mass industrial murder.

The charge I would level against David Irving, from one historian to another, and as one long engaged in attempting to account for some of the worst battlefield horrors generated in the last century, is not that he has "denied" the Holocaust,

which seems as fatuous as it is juvenile, but that he has contributed to diminishing an experience which had profound significance and which, as yet, has not been fully explained.

Let me now be a little "forensic". Much new material is now becoming available from former Soviet archives, *Leto olist* archives, Odessa, oldest, Kharkiv, material from the Belarus Central State Archives, to cite but a few primary collections. It may well be that David Irving will finally be hoist on his own documentary petard.

I am not Jewish, but I am deeply concerned about the fate of the Holocaust at the hands of historians. While the Irving of the world ram-ran the plausibility of the available evidence relating to the scale and form of Jewish loss, other historians claim an exclusivity for the Holocaust, which contradicts what my long-time friend and colleague, Omer Bartov, has observed of it.

In his essay, *Defining Em-*

pires, *Making Victims: Germans, Jews and the Holocaust*, published in the *American Historical Review* (June 1998) he insists the Holocaust is "an event which defies conventional explanations" but not only that, it is an event which has been "appropriated by many groups, yet ultimately it belongs to us all".

Consequently, the Holocaust has been used "to justify the unjustifiable". It has served as a measuring rod for every other atrocity, relativising and trivialising what would otherwise be unacceptable; repeatedly mobilised to perpetuate victimhood.

The Irving approach is one of contrived trivialisation for its own sake, a virtual parody of the Holocaust experience, damaging the historical profession in the process.

In the final analysis, I submit that none of this business has done anyone's reputation much good.

John Erickson is Emeritus Professor of Defence Studies at the University of Edinburgh

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