

*“Do the arguments of the Holocaust deniers have any credibility?
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GENERAL SEMANTICS AND HOLOCAUST DENIAL

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Introduction

CERTAIN GROUPS claim the Holocaust never happened. Almost from the beginning of the discovery of this widespread destruction of European Jewry before and during World War II, Nazi apologists, anti-Semites, and self-styled “skeptics” have tried to discredit the accepted history of this period. Deborah Lipstadt of Emory University has termed this phenomenon “Holocaust denial.” While originally an obscure movement, since the rise of the internet in the mid-1990s, Holocaust denial has grown significantly, and new adherents continue to set up web sites dedicated to “debunking the myth.”

The upside to the growing awareness of Holocaust denial is that organizations and individuals have taken up the task of preserving the basic truths of the Holocaust, while exposing this period to continuing historiographical scrutiny, thus promoting a better and more complete understanding of the Holocaust.

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Do the arguments of the Holocaust deniers have any credibility? Here is an opportunity for us to use the principles of general semantics to put such claims to the test.

The challenges that the deniers apply to the generally accepted history vary widely in size and scope. For instance, they dispute the death toll at Auschwitz-Birkenau, resurrect early allegations about the Holocaust and Nazi atrocities that are now known to be untrue, e.g., soap production from human fat, and they claim that the Nuremberg trials were a sham and a perversion of justice. Furthermore, they pore over documents from the Nazi era, and, disregarding any document that would further incriminate the Nazis, they find what *might* be an exculpatory document and seize on it as if its existence destroys the entire house of cards. The so-called Luther memorandum is a prime example here.

Looking at such Holocaust-denial tactics through the lens of general semantics, we can find at least three main shortcomings:

1. *Over- and Under-Defining the Holocaust.* The use of “the Holocaust” as an over/under-defined term, allowing for the “disproof” of victim numbers and atrocity stories.
2. *Extending the Definition over Time.* The inability (or refusal) of the deniers to accept multiple time-based definitions of the Holocaust, as seen in their reading of the Luther memo.
3. *The Two-Valued Orientation.* The overwhelming use of the two-valued orientation in presenting the so-called revisionist version of the Holocaust, for example, in their allegations about Nuremberg.

A strong working definition of the Holocaust with consideration of its development over time, along with the exposure of two-valued orientations wherever they are used, can enable us to see the faulty logic on which Holocaust denial is built.

1. Over- and Under-Defining the Holocaust

In the 1941 Introduction of the second edition of *Science and Sanity*, Alfred Korzybski introduces the idea of over/under-definition as follows: “[M]ost terms are ‘over/under-defined.’ They are over-defined (over-limited) by intension, or verbal definition, because of our *belief* in the definition; and are hopelessly under-defined by extension or facts, when generalizations become merely hypothetical” (p.xxxvii, emphasis in original). We can see how over/under-definition applies to common understanding of the Holocaust using a simple approach.

Were we to approach a random person on the street who happened not to have any specific knowledge of Holocaust history, and were we to ask that person to define “the Holocaust,” that person might reply, “Hitler gassed six million Jews to death.” This is a massive oversimplification of the events that encompassed the Holocaust. Furthermore, it is factually incorrect.

First, in dealing with the normative history, according to Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg, roughly half of all Jewish deaths in the Holocaust took place entirely outside the concentration camps. Even all of the deaths that did take place in the camps were not the result of the use of poison gas. (Hilberg, p.338) Thus the statement that six million Jews were gassed is untrue. More important to the subject at hand, however, the “man-on-the-street” definition is a classic under-definition of the Holocaust because it fails to include various killing techniques used besides poison gas, it fixes the death toll at an exact figure (rather than a range), and it leaves out all of the other participants in the Holocaust and lays blame solely on Hitler. (Furthermore, the definition at hand neglects an equal number of non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust, such as Gypsies, Poles, Soviet POWs, homosexuals, and political prisoners.)

Now, if we were to take a definition of the Holocaust that includes all responsible people, includes the non-Jewish death toll, allows for some flexibility in the total death tally, and includes all methods of execution, we would still run the risk of under-definition when discussing the Holocaust. This is because of the tendency among deniers to refer to the Holocaust as a single event. What we must understand is that, in the words of Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman, “The Holocaust was a myriad of events in a myriad of places and relies on myriad pieces of data that converge on one conclusion.” (Shermer and Grobman, p.33)

The flip side of the perils of defining the Holocaust is over-definition, and it is because of traditional over-definition here that deniers have been able to claim victories in “debunking” the Holocaust. A classic element of the traditional over-definition of the Holocaust is that the Nazis produced soap from the body fat of Jews who had been murdered. There is no record of large-scale processing of Jewish remains into soap during World War II. Nevertheless, the idea of human soap production remains a fundamental belief of some people when they consider the Holocaust.

Another longstanding over-definition of the Holocaust is that the death toll at Auschwitz-Birkenau was four million people. This is also false. The death toll at Auschwitz-Birkenau can best be estimated at somewhere between 1 million and 1.5 million. However, from 1946 until 1989, an official commemorative plaque at Auschwitz-Birkenau listed the death toll at four million. Although the number was lowered after years of inquiry into the topic by historians and

finally after the liberation of documents from the Soviet archives, the mass media still routinely reports that four million people died at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Journalists are not historians, so the repeating of this mistake is somewhat understandable, but it contributes to a continued over-definition of the Holocaust.

With the Holocaust thus over/under-defined, ample opportunity exists for deniers to exploit the term. On the one hand, if we consider again the “man-on-the-street” definition of the Holocaust, a denier can confront such a person and respond by stating, “Six million Jews were not gassed, and no reputable historian claims that they were.” On its face, this is a true statement, but to the person relying on an under-definition, it can appear that the denier has “revised” the Holocaust. On the other hand, if a Holocaust denier encounters a person with an over-defined concept of the Holocaust, the denier can begin casting doubt by saying, “There was no human soap production. Israeli historian Yehuda Bauer has stated as much.” Again, this statement and its attribution are true, but the risk is that the denier now has a greater advantage in advancing claims that are not true.

2. Extending the Definition Over Time

One way to better understand how Holocaust deniers are able to exploit historically valid statements to advance their agenda is to track the definition of the Holocaust over the course of time. We will here use the German expression for this genocide, *Endlösung* (final solution). As will be seen, the use of this term is important because deniers have not just questioned the veracity of the killings of Jews during World War II, but they have questioned the very nature of what the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” (*Endlösung der Judenfrage*) entailed. The aforementioned Luther memo plays a major role here.

The official policy of the Nazis vis-à-vis the Jewish population of Nazi Germany and areas under their control — until the beginning of World War II — was emigration. Jews were encouraged and, later, forced to emigrate from these areas, often without their property. Even during the initial months of the war, the idea of setting up a massive Jewish ghetto on the island of Madagascar was given consideration by the Nazi leadership. It was not until the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union that mass killings of Jews began in earnest by the *Einsatzgruppen*, or mobile killing squads.

In a memoir written while he was hiding in Argentina, Adolf Eichmann, a lieutenant colonel in the SS frequently called the “architect of the Final Solution,” discusses at length the genesis of the term *Endlösung*:

Today I can't recall whether the term "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" was coined by me or if it came from [Gestapo chief Heinrich] Müller. When I read Böhm's book *The Jewish State* about [Zionist Theodor] Herzl, I encountered "Solution of the Jewish Question" [*Lösung der Judenfrage*] for the first time. (1) When in 1935 in the SDHA [Head Office of the *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Police)] I had been given the Zionist association as my field of work, I already at that time had started to use the keyword "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" in the files; because it was the endeavor of [Reichsführer-SS Heinrich] Himmler to bring about a definitive [*endgültig*] solution ... After the [annexation] of Austria the term "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" crystallized. "Final Solution" had nothing to do with physical ending or the end of a physical person. The term from the files "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" was just being used further. Nobody thought that this term would include the killing of Jews. When later at the end of 1941 the physical extermination was ordered, for reasons of camouflage this — harmless as such — term "Final Solution of the Jewish Question" was kept as well for this. What had meant a mutual satisfaction by emigration, by secretion out of the hosting people before, was now camouflaging the physical extermination. (Aschenauer, pp.229-230)

Clearly *Endlösung* is a term whose meaning changed drastically between 1935 and 1941, at least in Eichmann's usage, if not in the usage of the Nazi apparatus entirely.

Using the general semantics device of dating, we can begin to distinguish between the differing meanings and connotations of *Endlösung* thus: *Endlösung*¹⁹³⁵, *Endlösung*¹⁹⁴¹, etc. *Endlösung*¹⁹³⁵ would denote forced emigration, whereas *Endlösung*¹⁹⁴¹ would indicate a genocidal final solution. From here we would need to consider the shift in methods of mass execution of Jews from firing squads to gas chambers. Thus *Endlösung*¹⁹⁴² would denote genocide including the use of gas chambers, while earlier versions of the term would not, since the decision to move from shooting to gassing was made in early 1942.

The problems with the time-based definitions of *Endlösung* begin with information leaking out from survivors or escapees of the six death camps, all located in Poland. Because of the extreme control over information exercised by the Nazis, witnesses to atrocities could not always be sure what they were seeing. Nor could these witnesses separate what had really happened from rumors. The result was a large amount of misinformation combined with the initial reports of the Holocaust as it was being carried out.

A testament to the amount of misinformation introduced into the initial historical accounts about the Holocaust is *The Black Book of Polish Jewry*, published in 1943. For instance, in the "Report of Dr. [Ignacy] Schwarzbart"

included in the *Black Book*, it is stated that “The methods applied in this mass extermination are, apart from executions, firing squads, *electrocution* and lethal gas-chambers.” (Apenszlak, p.131, emphasis mine) In the chapter on Treblinka, the killing process is described thus: “When the execution chambers are filled the doors are hermetically closed and the slow suffocation of living people begins, brought about by the *steam issuing from the numerous vents in the pipes.*” (Apenszlak, p.145, emphasis mine) The normative history of Belzec and Treblinka now no longer include electrocution or steam as killing methods. However, the belief that these methods were used continued for years, and three years after the *Black Book*’s publication, the allegations of steam being used to kill Jews were reiterated at Nuremberg.

Putting this in terms of understanding the evolving definition of *Endlösung*, we now have *Endlösung*¹⁹⁴⁶, which includes mass killings not only with poison gas, but also with steam at Treblinka, and electricity. Once again, when a denier is able to point to allegations of steam chambers at Treblinka and point out that normative Holocaust historians do not maintain now that they ever existed, then the denier is able to cast doubt on what historians have continued to maintain through strenuous historical examination.

What the deniers conveniently omit from their treatments of the *Black Book* are several easily verifiable incidents. Among them is that in the first major Holocaust study by a Western historian, Gerald Reitlinger’s *The Final Solution* (1953), the story of the use of electric current as a method of execution is discarded. Reitlinger writes:

Nevertheless the wildest legends surrounded the place [Belzec]. Dr. Guérin, in a prisoner-of-war camp only twenty miles along the line [train line between Lwow and Lublin], heard that Jews were killed by an incredible electric current passed through water, and this story reached London in November, 1942. It was only after the war that a real survivor appeared to describe the miserable diesel engine which had supplied the carbon monoxide. (Reitlinger, p.140)

(Similarly, neither Reitlinger or his next great successor in Holocaust historiography, Raul Hilberg, used the four million casualty figure for Auschwitz mentioned above.) So clearly, if we have now another time-based definition, *Endlösung*¹⁹⁵³, based on the revisions to the historiography based on Reitlinger’s trailblazing work, then it differs from *Endlösung*¹⁹⁴⁶ in its omission of electrocutions.

As for the “steam chambers,” despite their being entered into the record (directly from the *Black Book*) at Nuremberg, a survivor of Treblinka, Jankiel Wiernik, in a Yiddish memoir published in 1944, *A Yor in Treblinka*, defini-

tively identified the chambers as gas chambers. Therefore, we may even consider a definition, *Endlösung*¹⁹⁴⁴, which did not include steam chambers as a killing method. Certainly by the time of the publication of Yitzhak Arad's authoritative study, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka* (1987), the idea of steam chambers had long since been disproved, as had the electrocution chambers of Belzec. Therefore, to make as stark a contrast as possible, *Endlösung*¹⁹⁴⁶ might include steam chambers at Treblinka, electrocutions at Belzec, and a death toll at Auschwitz of four million, while *Endlösung*¹⁹⁸⁹ would include none of these elements.

Looking at the problem from a different angle, the different time-based definitions of *Endlösung* have given the opportunity to deniers to distort the meaning of seized Nazi government documents involving the extermination of the Jews and try to cover up the Nazis' crimes. A prime example is the Luther memorandum of August 21, 1942, which was entered into evidence at Nuremberg as Document NG-2586-J. Martin Luther was a functionary in the Nazi Foreign Ministry. In the memorandum that he authored seven months after extermination had been ordered, Luther deals with the issue of the deportation of Jews from Nazi-controlled areas, notably Bulgaria and Romania. The memorandum is important to the present discussion because it twice uses the term *Endlösung*. In the fourth section of the memorandum, Luther writes:

In his letter of June 24, 1940 — Pol XII 136 — SS Lieutenant General Heydrich informed the Reich Foreign Minister that the whole problem of the approximately three and a quarter million Jews in the areas under German control can no longer be solved by emigration — a territorial final solution [*territoriale Endlösung*] would be necessary.

The most important thing to note from this excerpt from the memorandum is the seeming contradiction: If the Jewish question “can no longer be solved by emigration,” then a “territorial final solution” would have to be something other than emigration. Keeping in mind that Luther was an attendee at the Wannsee Conference, the minutes of which contain euphemisms like “relocation” and “evacuation” as terms for genocide, and having already ruled out emigration as a means to achieve a final solution, the “territorial final solution” mentioned in this memorandum is clearly the mass murder decided on months earlier. We can even now, keeping in mind that emigration was Reich policy vis-à-vis Jews until the war started, begin to distinguish between (*territoriale Endlösung*)¹⁹³⁹ and (*territoriale Endlösung*)¹⁹⁴² as denoting two separate policies — the latter a genocidal policy and the former not.

It is not necessary, as some deniers maintain, to rely on a creative reading of the Nazi documents to come to this conclusion. Eichmann himself admitted both at his interrogation in Israel before standing trial and on the stand in Jerusalem that the Wannsee Conference dealt with the mass murder of Jews. Under questioning Eichmann stated, “Heydrich did not at the time of the Wannsee Conference speak of killing. He spoke of putting Jews to work in the East. That was his way of camouflaging it.” (von Lang and Sibyll, p.93) Under oath in Jerusalem, Eichmann said of Wannsee, “There was talk about killing and eliminating and exterminating.” (“The Trial of Adolf Eichmann,” on-line document)

3. The Two-Valued Orientation

The two-valued orientation has served Holocaust deniers well as a rhetorical device. Consider the oft-repeated phrase among deniers, “No holes, no Holocaust.” Holocaust deniers say that if there are no induction ports for Zyklon-B crystals in the ruins of the building known as Krema II and believed by normative historians to have been used to gas half a million Jews, then no one was killed in this building and, by extension, the Holocaust has been either gravely exaggerated or it never happened at all.

In his 1939 treatise on general semantics, *Language in Thought and Action*, S.I. Hayakawa described the two-valued orientation, and by coincidence, he used Nazi Germany as an example of a society that had taken the two-valued orientation to new levels of absurdity. In fact, in later editions of the book, Hayakawa anticipated the phenomenon of Holocaust denial, writing:

The cruelties of the Nazi treatment of Jews and other “enemies” ... have often taxed the credulity of the outside world. Stories of Nazi prison camps and death chambers are still regarded in some quarters as wartime anti-Nazi fabrications ... To the student of two-valued orientations, however, these stories are credible. If good is “absolutely good” and evil is “absolutely evil,” the logic of a primitive, two-valued orientation demands that “evil” be exterminated by every means available. (Hayakawa, pp.117-118)

With the large number of Nazi sympathizers to be found among deniers, we should perhaps not be surprised that Holocaust denial relies largely on two-valued orientations as well.

To review briefly, the two-valued orientation may be termed “black or white thinking,” i.e., the belief that there is no middle area between what we hold to be “right” and “wrong.” By extension, all opinions that do not fall under the aegis of right become wrong in the mind of the person with this mindset. The

result is the elimination of information or points of view that may hold some value, despite not being 100 percent compatible with one's own view. Hayakawa's most striking examples detail how the Nazis extended the rigid concepts of "Aryan" and "Jewish" to aspects of German daily life, including the mating of cattle, which received Jewish or Aryan designations based on their owners.

In the "No Holes, No Holocaust" argument, the presence of a two-valued orientation is revealed through a sardonic joke that emerged before the holes had been definitively located. (2) It was sarcastically said that if one or two holes were found, the deniers would then have to change their slogan to "Some Holes, Some Holocaust." Although perhaps in poor taste, this joke does demonstrate the intellectual bankruptcy of the two-valued orientation being offered by the deniers.

Holocaust deniers also use the two-valued orientation in claims about the Nuremberg Trials when they cite the fact that prosecutors from the Soviet Union presented evidence about the gas chambers. At the trials, Soviet prosecutors accused Nazi defendants of atrocities that they themselves had committed — most notably the massacre of the Polish Officer Corps in the Katyn Forest in 1940. Deniers seize on such lies by Nuremberg prosecutors to conclude that *all* testimony offered against Nazi defendants was perjury, whether it was offered by the Soviet Union or not.

Few would deny that all sides during World War II committed atrocities of some kind. That the Soviet prosecutors tried to blame some or their own atrocities on the Nazis does not mean that the Nazis did not commit atrocities themselves. It is not even necessary to take the issue of Katyn as far as the deniers do. Although the principal Soviet prosecutor at Nuremberg, Iona Nikitchenko, tried to enter the Katyn Massacre as a Nazi war crime in the indictment, the American and British prosecutors, already aware that the Soviets had carried out the massacre, refused to take judicial notice of the massacre as a Nazi crime. The massacre is mentioned only twice in the Nuremberg proceedings, and nowhere in any judgment against any defendant. Therefore, despite the claims of the deniers that the Nuremberg proceedings were entirely tainted because of the guilt for Katyn being assessed to the Nazis, no such guilt was ever assessed. Even if the Soviets had successfully hung the guilt for Katyn on the Nazis, this does not impeach all of the evidence brought by the Soviet Union at Nuremberg.

Conclusion

The Holocaust denial movement relies on the relative ignorance of the average person regarding the minutiae that makes up much of Holocaust histori-

ography. However, much more dangerously, the deniers rely on several of the semantic traps that Korzybski and Hayakawa exposed decades ago. While ongoing historical inquiry on the history of the Third Reich will continue to shed light on this tragic period in human history, the application of the principles of general semantics to the propaganda of Holocaust deniers and other Nazi apologists can do much to discredit their claims.

NOTES

1. Eichmann is confusing book titles here. Herzl's book was *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*). Böhm's title was *Die zionistische Bewegung* (*The Zionist Movement*).
2. The interested reader may want to consult "The Ruins of the Gas Chambers," by Daniel Keren, Jamie McCarthy, and Harry W. Mazal of THHP, in Volume 18, Issue 1 (2004), of *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*.

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