



GPN GENOCIDE PREVENTION NOW

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Holocaust Denials - Review of "The Abuse of Holocaust Memory: Distortions and Responses"

Gerstenfeld, Manfred (2009). *The Abuse of Holocaust Memory: Distortions and Responses*. Foreword by Abraham Foxman. Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, and the Anti-Defamation League. 243pp.

Reviewed by Israel W. Charny

This work deserves a place of merit on the bookshelves of all people who care about preserving the memory and understanding of the Holocaust, as well as all people who oppose any and all celebrations of mass violence and killing of human beings other than in true proven self-defense. It is a fine and important book, and it is a genuinely readable and interesting work for all those who are concerned with maintaining the authentic history of the Holocaust, and for addressing the Holocaust's meanings and significance reverently and with genuine respect for the Jewish victims. This work is also fine and satisfying reading on a literary basis. Gerstenfeld writes directly and clearly without pretensions or subterfuges. You know where he stands and what he is trying to tell you, and you in turn have a clear basis for going on to decide whether you do or do not agree with him.

The author, Manfred Gerstenfeld, whose professional grounding is in business strategy, is chairman of the Board of Fellows of the excellent Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, an editor of the *Jewish Political Studies Review*, and an expert on contemporary anti-Semitism around the world.

In this book Gerstenfeld has done yeoman intellectual service in cataloguing and classifying different categories or types and strategies of Holocaust denial (see Charny, 2003 for a classification of denials of genocides in general). Denials of the Holocaust are an amazingly widespread phenomenon in every culture, including western cultures, and including Muslim cultures which have adopted Holocaust denial as an explicit tool of their anti-Israeli positions, and in recent years including Iran which sponsors denials of the Holocaust as a major government policy, much as the Turks continue governmental activities to deny the Armenian Genocide. In Iran's case, there is the added horror that Iranian denials of the Holocaust are coupled with their arrogant and defiant race towards nuclear capability, and these along with manifest calls for the

actual destruction of the State of Israel! If once it was an intellectual advance to identify the underlying implied destructive messages in denials of a known genocide (see my work on the psychology of denial - Charny, 1991, 1992), now with the Iranian denials of the Holocaust the metaphoric or subtext meanings take on manifest meanings as a warning of very terrible real dangers in the coupling of denials with calls for the obliteration of Israel by a country hell bent on nuclear capability.

Gerstenfeld convincingly links the agenda of Holocaust deniers to manifest antisemitic thinking, intentional efforts to stir up hatred of Jews and/or delegitimization of the State of Israel, up to and including building desensitization to the actual destruction of the people of Israel and to the destruction of the Zionist state.

What is amazing about denials of the Holocaust, and as I will suggest shortly denials of any of the proven genocides in history, is the endless twists and turns that the human mind takes to produce the garbage and madness of denials. Gerstenfeld writes correctly that Holocaust denials as such – e.g., denials of death camps and gas chambers-- have been around and have received attention for several decades, but “other distortions of the Holocaust, however, have become increasingly important. The number of their mutations is growing as well” (p.23).

This book classifies, explains and illustrates eight types of denial of the Holocaust as follow:

- Holocaust Justification and Promotion
The Jews were the cause of anti-Semitism and their own destruction.
- Holocaust Denial
Negation of main facts of the Holocaust
- Holocaust Deflection and Whitewashing
Along with admission the Holocaust took place, denying the responsibility of specific groups or individuals and shifting the blame to others
- Holocaust De-Judaization
Minimizing the Jewish identity of the victim, stressing non-Jewish aspects of the Holocaust
- Holocaust Equivalence
Whitewashing or minimizing the role of the Germans by equating other events to the Holocaust
- Holocaust Inversion: The Portraying of Israel and Jews as Nazis
The victim people is demonized such as accusing Israelis of being the Nazis of today
- Holocaust Trivialization
Comparing the Holocaust to other phenomena such as ecological abuse, abortion, human rights abuses
- Obliterating Holocaust Memory
Destruction of memorials and memorial events including turning Holocaust memorials into “more general remembrance events”

Each and all of the above are clearly deserving of our understanding and our ability to counter them when we encounter them. Thus, I recently had the dubious privilege of encountering one, Norman Finkelstein in a TV debate (CrossTalk on RTV - Russian TV English language program, now available on YouTube; the program can also be seen in [Issue 3 of GPN](#)). Finkelstein, a son of bona fide Holocaust survivors, does not dispute the events; he reduces and dismisses their significance by attacking relentlessly and insultingly memorials of the Holocaust as intended for purposes of profit and power, and the State of Israel as oppressive and destructive of Arab rights. Finkelstein quotes his hero Noam Chomsky regularly, and has been the darling of anti-Israel groups (including Nasrallah and the Hezbollah in Beirut whom he has visited respectfully). Interestingly, I had first agreed to appear on RTV in response to their invitation to participate in a program in honor of International Holocaust Day (or January 27 as mandated beginning in 2005 by the UN), and it was only when I asked who else was on the program did I learn it was Finkelstein. My own philosophy about debating deniers frontally is yes, sometimes, not only to counter the distorted facts the deniers present, but with a serious effort to embarrass and expose the denier as hatefully anti-humanist, let alone a bigot and a celebrant of violence.

I think Gerstenfeld is in favor of such confrontations though I do not find that he has discussed explicitly the controversy among Holocaust scholars, such as Deborah Lipstadt who has always been and as far as I know is still *against* debating deniers, but of course as we all know that when the climactic and perilous situation arose of one vicious anti-Semite, David Irving, suing her, she rose to be a great and successful warrior on behalf of the integrity of Holocaust history. Gerstenfeld writes touchingly and courageously that we must fight back:

In an increasingly uncertain world, the Holocaust is likely to continue to play an important role as the metaphor of absolute evil....Fighting the main manipulations of the Holocaust requires first understanding the nature of the abuses. This has to be followed by exposing the perpetrators, who must be turned into the accused (p. 170).

The concluding chapter of the book is devoted to "What Can and Should Be Done?" Again the author is clear, succinct, and calls for real action on many different fronts, including museums, monuments and memorials, ceremonies/remembrance days, art, literature, theatre, commemorative projects, prosecution of war criminals, and legislation. He also calls for our attention to the growing abuses prevalent on Internet along with the new opportunities to present constructive information to a wider audience that the new medium offers.

I have one major disagreement with the good author. To his credit, when I conveyed this criticism to him directly, he responded in his characteristic pleasant manner of welcoming open clarification of the difference between us. My strong disagreement is with what I perceive as Gerstenfeld's characterization of any treatment of the Holocaust as a major event of genocide among many other events of genocide (regrettably and

certainly past and future) as a denial of the Holocaust's overriding meaning in its own right.

Gerstenfeld is opposed first to efforts "to void or minimize to a large extent the Jewish character of the victims" (p. 79), and of course he is correct in respect of such things as monuments to victims that ignore the predominance of Jewish victims, and that we Jews were the main object of the driving power of the bestial Nazi murdering machine -- which also took in other victims with them. But he allows himself to seek a particularity and prominence and uniqueness of the Jewish victims that, to my mind, the other victims of the Holocaust do not receive respectful attention. It is as if mentioning them is an attack on the Jewish victims (see the excellent work by Michael Berenbaum, who was second in command in construction of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum on other non-Jewish victims in the Holocaust [Berenbaum, 1992].)

Second, Gerstenfeld is against "broadening the term Holocaust to various extents to include people other than the Jews..." (p.79), and for all that he writes carefully and not abusively, he pretty much slides into opposing "attempt[s] to promote an overall message for the human race." (p.79). I am glad to refer the reader to an essay in the *Encyclopedia of Genocide* (Charny et al., 1999) on the use of the word Holocaust in which we conclude that along with respecting the particularity of usage that has developed in re our Jewish people in the Holocaust—which we continue to write with a capital H, the word genuinely and historically belongs to all peoples. I recall that already in my early years in Israel in the 1970's I found fairly prominent references to the shoah of the Armenian people among straightforward Jewish historians, such as an essay in the *Bar Ilan University Magazine* about the "Armenian Shoah as a dress-rehearsal for the Holocaust" (Lapid, 1972).

I think a telling argument for the relationship between the Holocaust and other cases of genocide is that there are also a great many parallels between Holocaust denial and denials of other genocides, especially the Armenian Genocide but not only. Thus, distinguished Armenian-American scholar, Richard Hovanissian (1998) of UCLA has written and lectured extensively on the parallels between the denials. Many genocide scholars, including myself, have concluded that denial should be viewed as "the last stage of the generic genocidal process," where the perpetrator seeks to cover his tracks, and where the perpetrator and those who wish to honor and continue the original perpetrator's prejudices and threats, like neo-Nazis to Jews and the Turkish government to Armenians, utilize denials to drive home messages of humiliation, power, and celebration of the violence that was done to the victim people.

My larger judgment is that genuine and extensive awareness of the genocides of other peoples is in our interests as Jews, first as a moral and caring people, and then as a basis for recruiting support into future centuries of other victim peoples to create a strong coalition who will remember and learn from our Holocaust and all other cases of genocide—and maybe, maybe we can contribute to some degree of prevention of future genocides of whichever peoples, before hundreds of millions more are murdered. The number given by RJ Rummel, University of Hawaii, for those murdered in genocide and

related mass killing in the 20th century is around 260 million, or somewhat more than our 6 million Jews, I say wryly; but God only knows with no intention to reduce the grief and rage and significance that I feel for our Holocaust, which always remains at the center of my experience as a human being.



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Gerstenfeld has been an international business strategist for forty years. His background is in chemistry, economics, environmental studies and Jewish studies. Gerstenfeld has authored thirteen books and edited five.

Books of his have been published in six languages. His latest book (together with Steven Bayme) deals with the present and future of American Jewry.

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