

## ***The Journal of Genocide Research* Featured Still Another Minimization of the Holocaust**

Israel W. Charny

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Response to a review of two books on the Holocaust and why the Jews were singled out for extermination by Amos Goldberg, Helmut Walser Smith, Simone Gigliotti, Marc Buggein, and Alan Confino, in "Book Forum," *Journal of Genocide Research* (2016).<sup>1</sup> The two books reviewed are by Alan Confino, *Foundational Pasts: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding*, 2012, and *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide*, 2014.<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

The *Journal of Genocide Research* came under scrutiny in two research studies of readers who are genocide professionals (N=67) and a smaller number of students of Holocaust and Genocide courses (N=39), together N=106. These studies evoked considerable controversy. The present review essay is in response to a subsequent multi-author review in the book forum of the *Journal of Genocide Research* of two books on the Holocaust, in which both the review essay and the books under discussion are shown to be strong minimizations of the significance of the Holocaust: The thesis advanced is that *the extermination of the Jews was not a product of ancient antisemitism-hatred of Jews, but a function of the Nazi vision of creating a new world.*

**Keywords** minimization of the Holocaust, antisemitism, denials of genocide, integrity of genocide studies, laws against incitement of violence, Wannsee Conference, Final Solution

### **THE JOURNAL OF GENOCIDE RESEARCH ALSO PUBLISHES SIGNIFICANT RESEARCH ON THE HOLOCAUST**

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God bless (biblical scholars attribute two meanings to this phrase, one a blessing and the other a curse or denunciation) the *Journal of Genocide Research (JGR)*, where we have seen an outpouring of articles that sought to minimize the significance of the Holocaust.<sup>3,4</sup> At the same time it should be clear that the journal as a whole does publish much significant research on many genocides and on genocide as a process. It is also to be noted that valuable studies of several aspects of the Holocaust have continued to appear on its pages. Thus, I am happy to note

that since the earlier publications in *JGR* which were the basis for our research of the journal's calculated (because there were so many articles) intention to minimize the significance of the Holocaust, the journal has published some constructive researches on the Holocaust such as, but not only, a *Special Issue: The Holocaust/Genocide Template in Eastern Europe*, edited by Ljiljana Radonić.<sup>5</sup>

I will take special note here that one article in the above issue offers a decisive correction of one of the articles we included in our research about the murders of the Hungarian Jews in the Holocaust.<sup>6,7</sup>

In our studies a cluster of articles and the journal as a whole were evaluated by a majority

of a group of genocide scholars and students as minimizing the Holocaust and as anti-Israel, and by a smaller but still noteworthy number of the evaluators as anti-Semitic. Sixty-seven professionals and thirty-nine students in Holocaust and genocide studies (N=106) were presented with excerpts including some direct quotations from seven articles in *JGR*. Of the 106 subjects, 59% respondents then evaluated *JGR* as a whole as a journal seeking to minimize the Holocaust, 59% described *JGR* as promoting an anti-Israel theme, and 33% defined the journal as advancing an anti-Semitic theme.

Needless to say, the above studies raised many criticisms and retorts, including a letter to the editor in the *Jerusalem Post* that was signed by a number of genocide scholars, among them prominent leaders in the field that charged me with “character assassination” rather than recognizing my effort to expose Holocaust denial in an important professional journal.<sup>8</sup> The definitive critique of my research will be found in an article rejoinder by Goldberg et al. (the same Goldberg who is the senior author of the review that is the subject of the present paper)<sup>9</sup> in *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, to which there followed a response by me in the *Journal of the Study of Antisemitism*.<sup>10</sup> Whatever the claims in this rejoinder of author bias and manipulatively recruited samples of subjects, for this writer the bottom line remains clearly that a significant number of subjects in my study offered their opinions that a professional journal of genocide studies was publishing one article after another that promotes minimization of the Holocaust, anti-Israel and anti-Semitic themes.

### **REGRETTABLY, JGR HAS PUBLISHED ONCE AGAIN A MINIMIZATION-DENIAL OF THE HOLOCAUST**

Regrettably, I now report that since the above, “they did it again,” and *JGR* has published further work minimizing the significance of the Holocaust, particularly in respect of the agonized fates of the Jewish victims. Actually, in

the original studies we also discussed what was then a new article by Gerhard Wolf, which was published in another issue of *JGR* but too late to be included in the study along with the seven earlier articles.<sup>11</sup> In this article, Wolf declared categorically that the Wannsee Conference was not so much about killing the Jews but about “Nazi Germanization policies” of minorities as a whole in Europe, and actually called more for annihilating Jews “through labour.” Thus, Wolf seemingly transformed the Wannsee protocol into a more routine government document rather than an outright call for murder—regardless whether by direct murder or killing labor (if you go along with Wolf’s dubious interpretation). In this connection see a recent book by an historian (that actually deals with the necessity of impeaching Donald Trump) in which the author writes,

The Nazis murdered many diverse people, but their Final Solution only targeted Jews for total annihilation. Submergence of the Final Solution within other Nazi atrocities is a tactic typical of Holocaust deniers.<sup>12</sup>

Now, in the extremely interesting, respectably multi-authored “Book Forum,” which reviews at length two books by a professor of history at Ben Gurion University in Israel and the University of Virginia about which we are writing now, once again the journal put across the message that the Holocaust was not really directed at Jews because they were Jews; rather, they were to a great extent victims of another larger policy.

Moreover, the journal informed us, in astoundingly competent academic doubletalk that makes everything sound so intellectual and important while evading the reality of experience for human beings, that for all the evident antisemitism—because they obviously killed lots of Jews - the Holocaust is not less a function of German cultural metaphors. Translation: the Holocaust is not so much about hating Jews. The prime source of the Holocaust is “the logic of the modern nation-state seeking to get rid of its others” (Goldberg et al., 102)—obviously

true but very much deflecting both intellectual and emotional awareness of the Jews as prime victims at the center of the German enthusiasm and devotion to killing.

The lead author of this book forum, Amos Goldberg, who is also a lecturer at an Israeli university (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), goes on to identify Confino's historical account as "a major shift in Holocaust studies" in that it "differs significantly from traditional schools of Holocaust historiography, the intentionalist and the functionalist schools" and is more interested "in the cultural processes of creating meaning" (103). What meaning? What is this new central source meaning of the Holocaust that no one has understood before and which will revolutionize Holocaust studies? It is that "to understand the extermination of the Jews we must first and foremost understand how the Nazis made sense of the world, and not necessarily search for long or short-term chains of historical causality" (quotation is from Confino, *Foundational Pasts*, 23, as cited by Goldberg et al., 103). Indeed, "it is not that the past (of antisemitism) produced the [Nazi] present (of the execution), not that the ancient hatred led to the Holocaust but that the Nazis interpreted anew the past of Jewish German and Christian relations to fit their vision of creating a new world" (quotation is from Confino, *Foundational Pasts*, 11, as cited by Goldberg et al., 103).

For me, the above are so many words that for one thing I can no longer hear the cries of despair and torment of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust, nor of the other victims—for indeed there were also significant non-Jewish victims of the Holocaust who must be remembered and honored,<sup>13</sup> but the Jews are there not because of god knows what geopolitical and cultural goals of the German state, but *because they are Jewish*.<sup>14</sup>

The Nazis themselves tell us over and over again and fully explicitly that they hate Jews. It is because of the justification that the Jews are horrors, and in effect a disease, that they

are humiliated, tortured and then hauled off to death at every stage of the Holocaust.

In his own participation in this forum, the author of the books, Confino, notes entirely correctly that "there were a multitude of factors that made the Holocaust"—an important truth with which I and most scholars agree emphatically. Confino goes on to say that his interpretation "should be seen as giving *one* answer (italics mine) to an event caused by a combination of factors" (Goldberg et al., 123). But he then goes on to assert definitively that there are two concepts of the Holocaust that are "outright wrong": The first is that the Holocaust was a result rather than a goal of Nazism—to which I agree in part, but I think that it is obvious that the Holocaust was *both* a goal and the result of a process. However I disagree entirely and in fact am appalled at the second claim by Confino that another outright *incorrect* view is that the Holocaust was "a result of the accumulation of centuries of antisemitism (an interpretation especially associated with Yad Vashem)" (Goldberg et al., 123). I say angrily in response to such minimization of the Holocaust that it is historically false not to recognize historic antisemitism as an overwhelming major central dynamic of the Holocaust.<sup>15</sup>

I will also add that a statement that the killing of the Jews was a product or extension of other motivations for power and not basically and first of all, a most lethal expression of anti-Semitism is an over-intellectualization that kills off emotions, empathy and moral outrage about the Holocaust. So that I also protest what I see as the honor that is being rendered a *Moloch* of convoluted pseudo-creative intellectual neologisms.

The concept of minimization of the significance of a genocide as one of the many noteworthy formats of overall denial of a genocide that has been advanced and studied by a good many scholars including Gerstenfeld,<sup>16</sup> Hovannisian,<sup>17</sup> and Lipstadt,<sup>18</sup> Charny in collaboration with Vartan Gregorian and

earlier with Marjorie Housepian-Dobkin,<sup>19</sup> as well as Charny in a classification of denials of genocide<sup>20</sup> and an updating of the classification.<sup>21</sup>

## THE LANGUAGE AND CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MINIMIZATION-DENIAL OF THE HOLOCAUST

The minimization of the Holocaust in this *JGR* review and in the books reviewed includes:

- claims that deaths took place almost inadvertently under conditions other than an intention to commit genocide against a specifically targeted people;
- periodic acknowledgments of the truth and reality of the Holocaust in order to appear fair and accurate, but then overwhelming swings back into statements of denial, almost reaching a point of claiming that the executions were carried out as kind of legitimate, expected, or understandable acts of government and not for the horrid purpose of killing the victims;
- denial in the service of self-styled display of one's brilliant intellectualism;
- deconstruction, relativization, and contextualization of the Holocaust as if there is nothing new about it in the broad range of human history – where indeed there is a great deal of genocide of so many peoples, yet where each case has its own particular, even unique, configuration of events and dynamics.

All of the above have been recognized for some time as characteristic dimensions of the multifaceted phenomena of denials of genocide. Thus, in my original classification of denials of genocide – no less than in an earlier era of the same journal under its original founding editor, Henry Huttenbach (*JGR*), there is an entry about relativizers and deconstructionists that defines this type of denial as follows:

Mass deaths that took place, however unfortunate, and perhaps even genocide, are no

different than countless historical events of mass murder and do not justify undue emphasis.<sup>22</sup>

In the updating of the classification some years later where a few new categories were added to the classification of denials, I also relate to the psychology of bizarre evasions and denials of the reality of an absolutely known genocide in the following description of a type of denial:

*Anything goes*—just because I want to—for known political motives or often truly to be a show-off who draws a great deal of public attention by saying interestingly bizarre things; but often enough . . . as an expression of an omnipotent *can say anything I want to* narcissism about one's own mind products (item 14).<sup>23</sup>

## CONCLUSION

My conclusion, using an everyday plain-people phrase is that there “oughta be a law” against hyper-show off-intellectualism insofar as it cuts us off and creates serious distortions of what is happening to real human beings caught up in the events being discussed. Obviously, there will be no law as such, but it would be a relief to have this concept adopted more commonly in the intellectual world.

There also “oughta be a law”—which means there should be a guiding principle for all thinking people who are genuinely committed to protecting human life—against major minimizations of the significance, immorality and suffering of a genocide. Granted, this type of denial should also not be elevated to an actual legal principle, but I think it should guide.

Finally, there also “oughta be a law”—this time I refer to an actual law—against denials of genocides not only at the gross level of denials of the facts of history, but in particular as to identifiable incitement to violence, crimes against humanity, and genocide. There are actual laws against denials of the Holocaust and sometimes also about the Armenian Genocide in several European countries,<sup>24</sup> but not in the United

States where free speech is treated as much more sacrosanct. My own belief is that in the United States too there should at least be enforceable laws to cover explicit and implicit incitements to commit crimes of violence against targeted groups.<sup>25</sup>

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- 5 Ljiljana Radonić, "The Holocaust/Genocide Template in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, no. 4 (2018), whole issue.
- 6 Raz Segal, "Beyond Holocaust Studies: Rethinking the Holocaust in Hungary," *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no.1 (2014): 1–23.
- 7 In 2014 *JGR* published one of the articles included in my original study of bias in the journal. This article called for "new paths to rethink 'the Holocaust' [note author's single quotes around Holocaust] in Hungary" and emphasized the connections between anti-Jewish policies and the persecution of other groups in an overall "exclusionary campaign against the treatment of other minorities" (Segal, "Beyond Holocaust Studies," 1n5). Now in the Special Issue, István Rév writes decisively about the cooperation of Horthy's Hungarian government with the German policy directed specifically—as we well know—against the 400,000 and more Jews who were deported to Auschwitz. Rév quotes an official Hungarian government welcome of the German troops who, together with experts led by Eichmann, arrived to implement the Final Solution, obviously against the Jews as such, and also quotes an unpublished manuscript from Budapest that says explicitly, "the guarantee of success [referring to the deportation of the Jews—IWC] could not be but with the collaboration of the Hungarian authorities. With the help of the entire Hungarian civil service, around 51,000 people and the active participation of close to 200,000 civilians . . . accomplished the deportation." Eichmann is quoted as saying, "We would never have managed so well without them"—referring to the Hungarians of course (István Rév, "Liberty Square, Budapest: How Hungary Won the Second World War," *Journal of Genocide Research* 20, no. 4 (2018): 607–623, quotations from 615).
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- 14 "How many thousands of documents of the suffering of Jews as Jews are there? I will cite one that I have recently completed reading and which again tore my heart out. It is an account of Treblinka by one of its so few survivors." Ya'acov Viernik, *A Year in Treblinka* [Hebrew], ed. Ido Rotem (Tel Aviv: Dror Israel, 2011).
- 15 Daniel Goldhagen (1996) has been soundly criticized by many scholars including myself for his overemphasis on antisemitism as virtually the only causal source of the Holocaust, but clearly his basic emphasis on antisemitism as a major cause cannot be disputed rationally.
- 16 Manfred Gerstenfeld, *The War of a Million Cuts: The Struggle Against the Deligitimization of Israel and the Jews and the Growth of New Anti-Semitism* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, 2016).
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