

The New Criterion

Books

May 2001

Great is this truth

by [David Pryce-Jones](#)

A review of *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust & the David Irving Trial*, by Richard J. Evans.

An underworld exists of people who believe that we are deceived about the nature of much recent history in general and the Second World War in particular. To them, Hitler was a great man and Churchill was evil. To bypass the objection that Hitler launched not only war but also mass murder on a continental scale, these people have to deny that there ever was a Holocaust, that nothing much happened to the Jews in the war, or if it did then they deserved it and more. They see themselves as “revisionists,” which is a fancy way of saying that they are defying the usual processes of fact-finding and reasoning whereby the rest of us know our history.

Plenty of academics and critics in other fields today argue that there is no such thing as truth, and every assertion of objective knowledge is therefore in need of deconstruction. It follows that there are no moral absolutes or intellectual standards. That is the tide which carries within it these “revisionists” and Holocaust deniers. Their cause of postwar Nazism and anti-Semitism can only be pursued through their specific variety of deconstruction, involving the denial of some facts and the invention of others. So they have spawned a variety of institutions and associations, such as the misleadingly named Institute for Historical Review in California. The common purpose is to degrade everybody else’s facts as prejudices and to glorify their own prejudices facts.

In this underworld, David Irving has long been an acknowledged star, earning himself a wide reputation as “controversial,” that euphemism for anything and everything which goes against common sense, reason, and humanity. He is familiar with German, has read in the archives, interviewed a good many Nazis, and written some thirty books. His admiration for Hitler and Nazism, his Jew-baiting, his detestation of Churchill have left behind him a persistent trail of outrage. Nobody has tried harder or with more success to deconstruct facts on these topics and to replace them with his personal animosities and prejudices. He has argued that the British bombing of Dresden in 1945 was a war crime comparable to any committed by the Germans. He libelled a British naval officer about his conduct during an Atlantic convoy (and had to pay damages). He accused Churchill of ordering the destruction of an aircraft flying the Polish General Sikorski home from Gibraltar in 1943 (with the death of all on board, including Victor Cazalet, a close friend of Churchill’s and a fellow Conservative Member of Parliament). The Hungarian uprising of 1956 was in his view a Jewish conspiracy, and as such the Soviets were right to suppress it.

Hitler, Irving has maintained, was neither aware of the Holocaust until about 1943, nor responsible for it. If anyone, Goebbels was to blame. Irving concedes that rogue S.S. men killed some Jews, but the majority had died of disease and starvation. To a woman who told him to his face that her grandparents had died in Auschwitz, he replied, “You can be comforted in the knowledge that they

most likely died of typhus, like Anne Frank.” In his opinion, Auschwitz had no gas chambers, there was no systematic mass murder, and the Jews themselves put about this tale in order to receive financial compensation to which they had no right. To an audience of sympathetic listeners in Canada in 1990, he hit upon the acronym ASSHOLS, standing for “The Auschwitz Survivors, Survivors of the Holocaust, and Other Liars.”

Confronted with his work, writers who ought to have known better have bent over backwards to find merit in it. In tones of dismay, Richard J. Evans, in his new book, *Lying About Hitler*, [1] quotes Michael Howard, formerly Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, declaring that Irving was “at his best as a professional historian demanding documentary proof for popularly-held beliefs”—the very opposite of Irving’s procedure. Or again Gordon A. Craig, who asserted that Irving “knows more about National Socialism than most professional scholars in the field,” following this up with the preposterous (and condescending) sentence, “It is always difficult for the non-historian to remember that there is nothing absolute about historical truth.” Another prolific writer on military affairs, John Keegan, believes that Irving has “many of the qualities of the most creative historians.” If these men were indeed familiar with Irving’s sources, plainly none of them had taken the trouble to verify Irving’s use or abuse of them. Slapdash opinions of this kind reflect the decline of standards in historiography and book reviewing.

Honorable exceptions of course exist. The authoritative Martin Broszat showed how Irving had manipulated documents to build a case. Peter Hoffmann, no less authoritative an historian, called him “a great obfuscator.” Wolfgang Benz dismissed such new evidence as Irving uncovered as coming from “the perspective of the keyhole.” In the United States, John Lukacs pointed out the unreliability of Irving’s documentation, and in a long review Charles W. Sydnor, Jr., concluded that Irving’s research was “pretentious twaddle.”

There the matter might have rested, with Irving always “controversial,” if Deborah Lipstadt had not published in 1993 her book *Denying the Holocaust*. Exposing the pullulating underworld of Hitler admirers and anti-Semites, she singled out Irving as one of the leading falsifiers of the history of Nazis. His real political agenda Hitler and Nazism, and denial of the Holocaust was one of the came to court in 2000 in London.

British libel laws are admitted on all sides to be antiquated and unfair, weighted towards the plaintiff. The defendants, Deborah Lipstadt and her publishers Penguin Books, had to establish justification, namely that the charges were true and that Irving was indeed a Holocaust denier and Hitler admirer, as stated in the book. Irving may have thought that this was virtually unprovable, in which event he could expect considerable damages. There is also a quaint British precedent for a judgment of guilty but with damages placed at a farthing, have done wonders may have calculated that the publicity, national and international, would be great enough to cancel any damage done to

Pleading justification, the defense lawyers called on expert witnesses, and among these were Robert Jan Van Pelt, the historian of Auschwitz, and Christopher Browning, who has made a special study of Nazi killers. But Richard J. Evans, Professor of Modern History at Cambridge, had the most important task of all, which was to compare the original sources and documentation to the uses which Irving had put them. With the help of research assistants, he wrote a seven-hundred-page report, to be presented to the judge, Charles Gray, who would study it at leisure.

To Irving’s open delight, the trial received daily coverage in the press in several countries. In its opening stages, a number of journalists and commentators expressed a fear that the Holocaust itself might be on trial, and a courtroom was not the appropriate place to settle an issue of historical truth. By mutual consent, as the law allows, there was no jury, and everything therefore turned on what Mr. Justice Gray made of the expert witnesses and their evidence. For whatever reason, Irving chose to conduct his case himself, as “a litigant in person” in the lawyer’s phrase.

The court itself was unremarkable and crowded. My seat was almost directly behind Irving. He proved to be physically large, a little ungainly but a definite presence, with an energetic brutality about him. He wore a dark three-piece pinstripe suit, somewhat crumpled. The type was familiar: the man endlessly articulating the grievance that consumes him, the overbearing member of the clubhouse, the middle manager with no time for the lesser fry on the staff, the self-professed victim of aliens and ill-wishers. Yes, the Jews ganged up on him, there was indeed a Jewish conspiracy, and he referred repeatedly to its power and its gold. Christopher Browning, for example, had once published an essay in *Israel*, and no doubt had been paid for it.

John Keegan and the eminent Professor Donald Cameron Watt of the London School of Economics (once co-editor of a book with Irving) were two expert witnesses who had refused to appear for Irving, but were served with a subpoena by him obliging them to do so. Neither could be remotely considered sympathetic to Nazism, and both criticized Irving's presentation of Hitler and the Holocaust. At the same time, they praised his skills as an historian. "Depressing" is the mild word that Evans reserves for these examples of *trahison des clerics*, and there seems no good explanation of it. (Even more inexplicably, Keegan was later to write an article in which he defended Irving as "never dull," in contrast to Deborah Lipstadt, whose insistence on telling the truth about the Holocaust he characterized as "self-righteously politically correct.") Listening to the exchanges between Irving and the expert witnesses, Mr. Justice Gray's expression gave nothing away. Once he advised, "If I may say so, Mr. Irving, we must do better than that," but more gently and frequently it was, "Mr. Irving, please help me with this." Whether by accident or design, Irving was to repay him at a critical point by addressing him as "Mein Führer."

Evans by contrast is physically slight, modest, and quiet-spoken. In the witness box, he evidently shrank from Irving and reveals now that he deliberately avoided eye contact. The repeated thrust of his argument was that Irving could not be considered an historian in any sense of the word, but had shown himself a mere propagandist for Nazism and anti-Semitism. In reply, Irving read out the tributes which historians had so heedlessly proffered.

Lying about Hitler is a selection of the more significant chapters from Evans's seven-hundred-page document. Simple, elegant, and unemotional in style, it is devastating, a task of demolition so complete that it is hard to think of anything comparable. Irving's apology for Hitler and Nazism is shown to be based on selective quotation, misrepresentation, reversal of meaning, false translation, and sometimes outright fabrication. He has resorted habitually to double standards, crediting or refashioning evidence that suited his case, while denigrating and dismissing evidence that did not.

For example, at the time of the "beer hall putsch" of 1923, some of Hitler's Brownshirts had removed their party badges before looting Jewish shops. A policeman by the name of Hofmann testified to this. Hitler disciplined them for it, on the grounds that looting with party badges on was a political act, but without party badges it became a criminal act. Irving inverted Hofmann's words to pretend that Hitler was actually protecting Jews. At the time of *Kristallnacht*, the Nazi pogrom in 1938, a Nazi propagandist and senior policeman, Kurt Daluege, claimed that in one year in Berlin there had been 31,000 cases of fraud, reduced to 18,000 the next year, with "a considerable part" of the perpetrators being Jewish. By implication, Jewish fraud was coming under control. In Irving's account, however, this became "no fewer than 31,000 cases of fraud, mainly insurance swindles, would be committed by Jews."

In fact Daluege nowhere claimed that all 31,000 were Jews, nor did he mention insurance swindles. Had Irving checked the official statistics, as Evans did, he would further have learned that the actual number convicted of insurance fraud in the relevant year was just seventy-four, comprising Jews and non-Jews. According to Irving, Hitler on various occasions intervened to mitigate the fate of the Jews, but Evans establishes that all such claims involve blatant manipulation and deliberate

misreading of the record. The bombing of Dresden left about 25,000 dead, according to those German officials in charge of the city at the time, and Irving simply inflated the figure with an extra nought. And so on and on and on, in this studious unpicking of lies and subterfuges.

Towards the end of the Eighties, it appears from Evans, Irving reached some sort of a turning point, afterwards directing all his efforts to anti-Semitism and the obsessive defense of Hitler. He gravitated full-time to the underworld of like-minded people, speechifying often to the Institute for Historical Review and to drawing attention to himself through wilder and wilder pronouncements as though daring the authorities in one country after another to take action against him. No doubt he came to believe what he was spouting, for he is indisputably the author of his own fate. He had laid a simple trap for himself. Confronted by an expert witness of the calibre of Evans, he had to choose between admitting to professional incompetence or to Nazi sympathies and Holocaust denial. Either way, he ran slap into the folly of bringing the case against Deborah Lipstadt. Cornered by the facts, his body shook and his hard face flushed red with arrogance and anger. His only remaining escape route was to present himself as a patriot at bay in the toils of a giant conspiracy against him. But how could it be patriotic to admire and exculpate Hitler and revile Churchill because he “fought the war five years longer than was necessary”? That remains a mystery central to this man.

In his lengthy verdict, Mr. Justice Gray was forthright and unsparing. The evidence provided by Evans undoubtedly had its due influence on him. He concluded without any qualifications that Irving has a political agenda that “disposes him, where he deems it necessary, to manipulate the historical record”; that thereby he “has portrayed Hitler in an unwarrantedly favorable light”; and finally that “his words are directed against Jews, either individually or collectively, in the sense that they are by turns hostile, critical, offensive and derisory.” Irving has nowhere to turn to, nowhere to hide. In the eyes of the Nazified underworld, his conduct was so wrong and cowardly that he can no longer be considered a true “revisionist.” That is a comic bonus. Everywhere else, his discrediting is now permanent, and it brings with it a gain altogether unexpected and extraordinary. At a time of cultural disarray and widespread moral doubts, this case marks a triumph for the concept of historical truth as something knowable through the careful study of facts and the application of reason. And great is this truth, and it shall prevail.

Notes

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1. *Lying About Hitler: History, Holocaust and the David Irving Trial*, by Richard J. Evans; Basic Books, 336 pages, \$27. [Go back to the text.](#)

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 19 May 2001, on page 67

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