

Holocaust Memorial Day

One day, there will be no living survivors of the Holocaust.

A historical event is most at risk of being denied when there are no more living witnesses to it, and this is the seed bed in which Holocaust denial can grow.

Polling carried out for the Holocaust Memorial Trust has shown that 1 in 20 British adults do not believe the Holocaust happened. Almost half of those questioned did not know the number of Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust and one in five said that fewer than two million people perished.

A lack of knowledge like this is susceptible to the many lies being propagated on social media where many get their sources of news.

Most people when they come across Holocaust denial for the first time are dumbfounded at its mendacity, but it refuses to be put to bed and is finding its feet at this critical moment as the last survivors die, and all kinds of lies are being shamelessly passed off as truth online.

Professor Yehuda Bauer, a preeminent Holocaust historian, has said it's pointless arguing with deniers, 'as hopeless as with those who say that the moon is made of white cheese.' he says. He might have said 'as meaningless as arguing with those who say the world is flat', except as you may have noticed, the numbers believing the world is flat has spiked in recent years. I have nothing of Professor Bauer's astonishing grasp of the Holocaust, but I think it is worth arguing with and opposing those who deny reality. When lies go unchallenged, they begin to have an effect.

There is no human predisposition to believe the truth. One of the goals of online propaganda is to confuse and demoralize people so they become passive and biddable. Historians of totalitarianism show how truth dies when lies are presented as facts and phrases are repeated endlessly until they become believable. We really are that malleable.

Abraham Lincoln said, 'You can fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all of the time.'

Modern European history shows you only need to fool some of the people for some of the time, to unleash epic cruelty. Stopping pernicious lies about last century may yet be a defining challenge of this one. Thank God, for the remarkable efforts that have been made in recent years by people like Steven Spielberg, to create a written history of survivors' experiences. But we should not leave the whole task to others.

It is up to us to deny the deniers.

Hannah Arendt, scholar of Nazi Germany said that, 'Most evil is done by people who never make up their minds to be good or evil. We must choose to do good, choose it each day and choose it in the presence of those who don't.'

I was privileged once to interview Eva Schloss, survivor of Auschwitz and childhood friend of Anne Frank. A woman who as a teenager looked Josef Mengele in the eyes. She would like to know where the deniers think she got her tattooed number from in an era without tattoo parlours.

I expect those who lie about the Holocaust would have an answer for that, which is why we must counter them again and again.

Bishop Simon Burton-Jones

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