

## **Responding to Holocaust Denial**

In order for students to respond effectively to Holocaust denial, it is critical that they have a background on antisemitism and the rise of the Nazi party; understand the documentation of events during the Holocaust by the Germans and their collaborators; and spend time listening to first-person accounts that verify and substantiate the historical record. Once such a background has been established, students should have opportunities to engage in a critical examination of Holocaust denial and other forms of hate and consider the cost to individuals and to society, as well as to examine ways that individuals and communities speak out against such action so that they can consider the importance of taking such action themselves.

### **What is Holocaust denial?**

Holocaust denial is an antisemitic conspiracy theory. Supporters of this theory claim that after World War II, Jews invented the story of their own genocide at the hands of the Nazis, and, by skillfully manipulating governments and the media, successfully inflicted this hoax on virtually the entire world. Holocaust deniers (who prefer to refer to themselves as 'Holocaust revisionists') argue that the Nazis did not kill approximately six million Jews—many with poison gas—during World War II.

### **Why do some people deny the Holocaust ever happened? What do they hope to accomplish?**

Individual Holocaust deniers may have different motivations. Some use Holocaust denial to make money, touring around the world lecturing to neo-Nazis and other hate groups. Others are motivated by a desire to tear down the State of Israel, which they believe was only founded as a reaction to the Holocaust. Still others seek to rehabilitate Hitler and Nazism to redeem the honor of the "Aryan race" or to make fascism and other radical political movements more palatable. But all Holocaust deniers share a conspiratorial mindset and a willingness to believe in and promote hateful stereotypes of Jews as greedy, deceitful, remorseless plotters, who framed Germany for the crime of genocide.

## **In what parts of the world does Holocaust denial occur?**

Holocaust denial takes place in every part of the world. It is currently growing fastest in the Middle East, where unscrupulous regimes have promoted it as a weapon in their war against Israel, and in the former Soviet Union, where antisemitism is widespread.

## **Is Holocaust denial against the law?**

After World War II, several European nations passed laws prohibiting efforts by surviving Nazis and neo-Nazis to deny the crimes of the Nazi regime, and Holocaust denial is included in this legislation. Other countries have more recently passed laws specifically targeting Holocaust denial, usually treating it as a form of racial incitement against Jews. Currently Holocaust denial is prohibited in the following countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, and Israel. Canada and the United Kingdom do not have laws against Holocaust denial but do have broader laws against inciting hate. In the United States, the First Amendment guarantees the right of free speech, regardless of political content.

## **Have there been any court cases involving Holocaust denial?**

In Canada and Western Europe, Holocaust deniers have been successfully prosecuted under racial defamation or hate crimes laws. Probably the most famous legal case involved Holocaust denier David Irving. After Emory University Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt made reference to Irving's historical misrepresentation about the Holocaust in her book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (Free Press, 1993), Irving sued her and her British publisher, Penguin Books, for libel. During a ten-week trial in London, Lipstadt was able to expose Irving as having deliberately manipulated historical evidence in order to refute that the Holocaust happened, and to advance his antisemitic and white supremacist ideology.

## **What argument can I make when someone denies that the Holocaust actually happened?**

Questioning whether the Holocaust happened is irrational; it is one of the most documented events in human history. One need only look at the fact that following World War II there were around six million fewer Jews, including 1.5 million children, in Eastern Europe. In addition, the Germans themselves left massive documentation, which has been supplemented by films and photographs, even aerial surveillance of the extermination camps by allied forces. As recently as 2006, Germany opened up a huge archive of Nazi records detailing information about more than seventeen million people who went through the concentration camp and slave labor system.

Survivors have written memoirs and documented their experiences. The USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, for example, conducted nearly fifty-two thousand interviews in thirty-two languages and fifty-seven countries of survivors and other witnesses of the Holocaust. Many survivors agreed to tell about their experiences during the Holocaust as a direct result of growing Holocaust denial.

Equally important is the fact that the Germans themselves never denied their crime and court cases on five continents—beginning with the Nuremberg Trial convened by the Allies shortly after the end of World War II—established a judicial record of the Holocaust.