

Holocaust Bashing: The Profaning Of History

B A R N E Y S N E I D E R M A N * †

ON 25 SEPTEMBER 1939, A SPECIAL ISSUE of *Life Magazine* appeared on the news stands. Called "The War World," it contained an article by Bernard Lansing, who wrote about Adolf Hitler that: "His eyes sparkling with faith and decision, he has proved that he could summon the holocaust."¹ It is not known whether the author had a premonition about the fate of European Jewry, but that which Hitler summoned has indeed come to be called by the term Lansing invoked in the first month of World War II. This is an article about the perversion of language, about the profaning of a time seared into the memory of the Jewish people. It is about what I have chosen to call *Holocaust Bashing*, by which I mean a three-fold phenomenon: the Holocaust Denied, the Holocaust Relativised, and the Holocaust Trivialised.

I. THE HOLOCAUST DENIED

AS THE AMERICAN AND BRITISH ARMIES began to overrun the concentration camps in Germany in April 1945, the Allied Supreme Commander, General Dwight Eisenhower, went to view first hand the horrors reported to him. It was a sight to unnerve even the most battle-hardened soldier—the thousands and thousands of corpses, naked and emaciated, and the survivors, the living skeletons. According to the distinguished historian and Eisenhower biographer, Stephen E. Ambrose, the General's immediate reaction was to call upon the world press to come and witness what he had seen. As he told them, "You bring your cameras. I want you and I to be able to testify 30 or 40 years from now that, yes, by God, I saw that with my own eyes. Yes, that did happen."² They too had to witness

* Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Manitoba.

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¹ B. Lansing, "The World War" *Life Magazine* (25 September 1939) at 43.

² *The Last Days Of World War II* (1995). This is a documentary film produced by the History Channel and shown on the A & E Network.

the unbelievable because, as he explained, "I know that some day there is going to be somebody to come along and say that this is all myth, that this never happened."³ In order to create as many witnesses as possible, Eisenhower gave the order that all American troops in the vicinity—from privates to generals—were to go through the camps. German civilians living near the camps were paraded through them and ordered to help bury the dead.

In November 1945, a film compiled from American and British footage of the liberated concentration camps was shown at the Nuremberg trial of the major Nazi war criminals. Observers reported the reactions of the various defendants: "... looks pale and sits aghast ... has head bowed ... covers his eyes, looks as if he is in agony ... has head buried in his hands ... now hanging head ..."⁴ When the prison psychologist visited their cells that same evening, most expressed horror and shame. The Nazi ruler of wartime Poland, Hans Frank, burst into a sobbing rage against Hitler: "To think that we lived like kings and believed in that beast."⁵

But that was then, and this is now. Now we hear strident voices telling us that the stacks of bodies of concentration camp inmates found by Allied soldiers were really German civilians killed by the Russians. The deniers loudly and vehemently proclaim that the Holocaust is a myth, the hoax of the century. It is, they say, a gigantic fraud perpetrated by Zionists that serves their evil purposes in two ways: by extorting money from the German government and by creating sympathy for the state of Israel. (Since no country is more obsessed with the Holocaust than Germany—hardly a week goes by without a television documentary on the subject—one would have to believe that if the Holocaust is a myth, the Germans must be the most gullible people on the planet.)

There is a spellbinding book called *Quest*⁶—it is the story of a sixteen-year-old German, Frank Brandenburg, who hears conflicting stories about the Holocaust and resolves to find out for himself. It is 1982, and he is able to meet a number of unrepentant Nazis who find him likeable and who regale him with tales from the glory days of the Third Reich. Some deny the Holocaust; others minimise it; and still others say that whatever happened did not involve them. Although he sincerely responds to their fatherly affection, he never pretends to be a neo-Nazi but tells them frankly that he is simply seeking answers to questions about Hitler and his era.

As a conscientious albeit amateur historian, Brandenburg cannot accept their word alone. He consequently undertakes library research and even interviews a

³ *The Last Days Of World War II* (1995), *supra* note 2.

⁴ G.M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Co., 1947) at 46.

⁵ *Ibid.* at 47

⁶ I. Melchior & F. Brandenburg, *Quest* (California: Presidio Press, 1990).

Nuremberg war crimes prosecutor. He admits that he would like to believe his new friends; yet because he is engaged in an open-minded and painstaking quest for the truth, he is reluctantly led to the conviction that the killing of six million Jews did indeed happen. When an interviewer asks Brandenburg about the Holocaust deniers who had sounded so sincere and convincing he responds:

Had I not seen *The Holocaust* (a film shown on German television), had I not subsequently traced down as much research material as I could and read it all, had I known only their version of what happened, I might have [believed them]. And that is the honest truth. But I did see *The Holocaust*. I did have other information, other views...⁷

And therein lies the crux of the matter: regardless of any preconceptions, if one is of sound mind and takes the time to look into the historical record, then one must come to the same conclusion. When Holocaust deniers swear that they have come to their opinion without preconceptions and from a fair-minded study of history, the inescapable verdict is that they cannot possibly believe what they say. Unless, of course, their animosity for the Jews has led them into a delusional-paranoid disorder, because I see no other way that they could believe such utter nonsense.

So, whether liars or lunatics, why do Holocaust deniers assert their cause with such doggedness? According to Professor Deborah Lipstadt, author of *Denying the Holocaust*,⁸ the reason is simple. Holocaust deniers are seeking to revitalise the Nazi Party, and recruitment would suffer were they to acknowledge that amongst its achievements was the systematic killing of six million Jews. As she says, "If you want to make fascism—National Socialism—a viable contemporary political alternative, you have to do away with the Holocaust."⁹

I do not dispute her analysis, although I suggest an additional reason: malice, pure and simple. After all, if one hates Jews, what could be designed to aggravate them more than the outrageous claim that the Holocaust is a myth? In 1987, the renowned Italian-Jewish writer and Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi, committed suicide. His friends said that he never overcame the depression that affected him as a result of the Holocaust—what is now called post-traumatic stress disorder—and that the phenomenon of Holocaust denial fuelled the mental state that led to his suicide. One assumes that the deniers would take great pride in learning that they had played a role in Levi's death. They would no doubt say that he killed himself because he could no longer abide living the lie of the Holocaust.

How then does one respond to these self-anointed crusaders for historical truth? According to Toronto Rabbi Gunther Plaut, what one does not do is debate

⁷ Melchior & Brandenburg, *supra* note 6 at 316.

⁸ D. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust* (New York: The Free Press, 1993).

⁹ Interview by Mike Wallace, "Who Says It Never Happened?" *60 Minutes* (New York: CBS News, 1997).

the reality of the Holocaust. As he says, when someone calls your mother a whore, you do not argue the matter because that would give the impression that there are two points of view.

Yet, that is what happened on a nationally syndicated American television talk show hosted by Montel Williams. He opened the program by saying, "We're talking about the Holocaust and whether or not it happened or didn't happen."¹⁰ He then introduced two Holocaust deniers who argued their case. Then, as he paused for a commercial break, he left the audience in suspense with the breathtaking comment: "Is it a myth or is it true? We'll find out when we come back."¹¹

Mr. Williams is an african-american, and one can imagine how he would respond to someone telling him that slavery is a myth—that millions of Africans willingly sailed to the Americas on luxury liners to reap better economic opportunity and the benefits of Christianity, and that life on the plantation was a picnic. He would no doubt look incredulous and declare the speaker a lunatic or a liar.

If one can doubt the Holocaust when the evidence of its existence and magnitude is so overwhelming, then one would have to question every historical event on record. In effect, one would have to deny history. In that sense, Holocaust denial is tantamount to historical nihilism. Napoleon—who says he existed? You got a photograph? Oh! you say there were no cameras then but you do have portraits and books; well, they can all be doctored. You say that Martin Luther launched the Protestant Reformation. You got witness accounts; you got documents? Oh! you do—proves nothing. Witnesses can be wrong; documents can be forged; you cannot prove to me that he ever existed. You say the pyramids were built by Egyptians? Nonsense, you cannot prove it. True, the pharaohs had the manpower; but since the ancients obviously lacked the technology to erect those monumental structures, a better theory is that it was aliens from outer space. Anyway, you were not there, so what do you know?

Proponents of Holocaust denial proclaim that the subject is open for discussion because, after all, "there are no sacred cows in history."¹² It is a nice phrase, and it is true that in the spirit of historical inquiry no subject should be considered off limits. But what that refers to is the assessment of individuals—was so-and-so a good, mediocre, or bad statesman, general, or whatever—and the

¹⁰ *Ibid.* Excerpt from *Montel Williams*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² This stock phrase is repeated *ad nauseam* by Holocaust deniers such as Ernst Zundel. For example, in *Hearts of Hate*, a 1994 documentary film about Canadian neo-Nazis, it is spoken by one of Zundel's teen-aged recruits. The film was produced and directed by Peter Raymont.

interpretation of events—who or what caused such-and-such to happen and what is its meaning in history?

There was, for example, a disturbing incident in 1995, involving a planned exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., which was to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. It provoked controversy by alleging that the bombing was not a matter of military necessity, which caused a storm of protest by veterans' organisations that led to the cancelling of the exhibit.

That question, and others about World War II, are still being contested, which is fair enough. But aside from Holocaust denial, where in the length and breadth of historical controversy can one point to a debate over whether an event of any significance actually happened? Two examples come to mind. First, there are those headline stories in supermarket tabloids about the abduction of humans by UFOs. Our fellow terrestrials encounter little green creatures with pointed heads and bulging eyeballs, who silently and painlessly probe their bodies with medical-type instruments and then release them unharmed. Many such encounters have been related by people who come across as sincere and sane, and there are investigators who say that they are the victims of mass hysteria while others are convinced that they are reporting the truth.

Then there is the so-called Roswell incident: the crash of some kind of flying object in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1947. Sceptics say that it was a high-tech government weather or surveillance balloon; others insist that it was a UFO and that four alien corpses were recovered by the military. A grainy black-and-white film has recently surfaced that purports to be half-century-old footage of an autopsy of one of the crew. There are those who swear by the film and others who insist that it is an obvious fake. The debate goes on. It even appeared as the *Time Magazine* cover story on 23 June 1997, which reported that, according to a Time/Yankelovich poll, 22 percent of Americans believe that a UFO did indeed crash in the Roswell area.

"Is it a myth or is it true?" asked Montel Williams. This is what he should have been talking about—Roswell and little green creatures with pointed heads and bulging eyeballs—which would have been more in keeping with the standards of afternoon television talk shows. The reality of alien spacecraft we can debate; but the undeniable truth is that the reality of the Holocaust is beyond argument. Those who say otherwise are kin to the self-styled social critic who made the following observation about historical truth:

You cannot prove anything that happened yesterday. Now is the only thing that's real. You can try to prove that Columbus sailed on an ocean, but it's not the same ocean. It's a different ocean. It's a different world. Every day, every reality is a new reality. Every new reality is a new horizon ... You cannot prove anything; there's nothing to prove.¹³

¹³ *Manson*, documentary produced and directed by R. Hendrickson and L. Merrick (1972).

This drivel was spoken in a Los Angeles courtroom by Charles Manson as he stood trial for the Tate/LaBianca killings. In their perspective on history, the Holocaust deniers have found in this mass murderer a soul brother whose credibility matches their own.

Unfortunately, as the years pass and the cohort of Holocaust survivors dwindles, the rhetoric of the deniers will become, if anything, even more strident. And when the last survivor has died, they can say: where are the witnesses? Not that they gave them any credence during their lifetimes. But when the survivors are all gone, the deniers will find it that much easier to promote their pernicious ideology. As they will no doubt proclaim: We all know that those books—like that piece of trash *The Diary of Anne Frank*, those so-called documentary films, and the testimonies of so-called survivors—it is all garbage, Jewish lies, the greatest fraud ever perpetrated on a gullible public by the most wicked race of people who ever lived.

When the extermination camp at Sobibor opened in 1942, one of the first gassings went awry. The camp commandant, Criminal Police Inspector (Kriminaloberkommissar) Christian Wirth, ordered that the gas chamber be packed with as many Jews as could be squeezed in and that they be killed by diesel exhaust gases. But it did not go as scheduled. As a German eyewitness reported:

The engine refused to fire. 50 minutes and still the diesel won't start. One can hear ... sobbing and weeping. After 2 hours and 49 minutes—the diesel starts ... a few are still alive after 28 minutes. Finally after 32 minutes they are all dead ... Jammed in the chambers, the dead are still standing there like marble pillars. There's no room for them to fall or even bend over.¹⁴

But according to the deniers, it is a lie. It never happened.

In his memoir, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account*,¹⁵ M. Nyzsli, a Hungarian-Jewish pathologist who worked for Dr. Mengele, describes an incident in which a girl of sixteen miraculously—and I say that with the most bitter irony—survived a gassing. She was carried to the room adjoining the gas chamber where the author revived her with stimulants, tea, and warm broth. She told him her age and that she had come with her parents in a convoy from Transylvania. How did she survive? As he explained, “By chance, she had fallen with her face against the wet concrete floor. That bit of humidity had kept her from being asphyxiated, for zyclon gas does not react under humid conditions.”¹⁶ There was, however, no place to hide her from the SS guards. When they saw her he begged for her life, but to no avail. She was carried into the furnace room hallway and shot in the back of the neck.

¹⁴ H. Hohne, *The Order of the Death's Head* (London: Pan Books, 1969) at 347.

¹⁵ M. Nyzsli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1993).

¹⁶ Nyzsli, *supra* note 15 at 114–20.

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In the Jewish Museum in Amsterdam there is a permanent exhibit of the work of the German-Jewish artist, Charlotte Salomon. She painted her autobiography in an extensive series of gouaches, which she titled, "Life? or Theatre?" A sample of her 1,300 pictures is on display and they are truly wonderful. At the entrance to the exhibit is a card that introduces the visitor to the painter. It simply says, Charlotte Salomon: born Berlin 1917, died Auschwitz 1943. She had fled to the south of France, married an Austrian-Jewish refugee, and was pregnant with their first child when they were rounded up, transported, and gassed as soon as they arrived at Auschwitz.

But if it is all a lie, then she did not die at Auschwitz. If so, then it also must be a lie that she fled for her life from Germany because the Germans were not hunting down and killing Jews. And if all that is a lie, then what about her is true? Maybe her whole life is a lie, more Jewish propaganda.

On the other hand, however damning the indictment against Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, one cannot brand him a Holocaust denier. When Eichmann—the man in the glass booth—was sentenced to death by an Israeli court in 1962, he continued as he had throughout his trial to make excuses for his actions. As he responded to the court: "I have listened to the severe judgement ... [and] I cannot recognise the verdict of guilt. I am convinced in the depths of my heart that I am being sentenced here for the deeds of others."¹⁷ But he never, never said that it did not happen.

II. THE HOLOCAUST RELATIVISED

PROponents of this viewpoint do not deny the Holocaust; instead, they blunt its impact by placing it within an historical perspective. They say, in effect, that since crimes of genocide have occurred all too frequently in recorded history, Hitler's killing of the Jews does not call for special notice. Such, for example, is the substance of commentaries voiced by a number of German historians, whose work is scathingly critiqued by historian Richard Evans in his 1989 book, *In Hitler's Shadow: West German Historians and the Attempt to Escape from the Nazi Past*. As noted on its back cover:

In Hitler's Shadow, by noted historian Richard Evans, is a study of recent attempts by some West German historians to free the German conscience from guilt about its Nazi past. These new revisionists argue that Germans have no more to be ashamed of than other peoples. Auschwitz, they say, does not stand alone in history; it was merely one of a number of similar crimes, from Stalin's purges to the mass murders committed in Cambodia by Pol Pot. The German army was not trying to impose a genocidal dictator-

¹⁷ Quoted in the documentary film, *The Trial of Adolf Eichmann* (1960). It was shown on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in 1997.

ship; it was fighting to prevent a Communist takeover of Europe. These theses are advanced not by fanatics or extremists, but by senior West German politicians and internationally respected historians.¹⁸

The most prominent of the German revisionist historians is Ernst Nolte, who presented his thesis in *The European Civil War* (1987). In his view, the Holocaust was somehow inspired by events in Stalinist Russia: the massive deportations to the Gulag Archipelago (the slave labour camps strewn across the northern reaches of Stalin's domain), and the shootings and starvation of millions more. He presents his thesis by asking the following rhetorical questions:

Did the Nazis, did Hitler only commit an 'Asiatic' deed, perhaps, because they thought that they and those like him were potential or real victims of an 'Asiatic' deed themselves? Was not the Gulag Archipelago prior in history to Auschwitz? Wasn't 'class murder' by the Bolsheviks the logical and real precondition of 'race murder' by the Nazis?¹⁹

In answering "Yes" to the three questions, he contends that the Nazis needed an ideology to defend Germany against the Communist threat and that they found it in anti-semitism. In that sense, Hitler's onslaught against the Jews was simply another Gulag. The Holocaust was

the attempt at the complete destruction of a universal race ... the exact counterpart of the attempt at the complete destruction of a universal class, and thus the biologically transposed copy of the social original.²⁰

Nolte no more excuses Auschwitz than he excuses the Gulag. Rather, his goal is to put the Holocaust in historical perspective; clearly, it was a crime against humanity, but then Stalin did essentially the same thing and, moreover, he did it first.

In all fairness, one should acknowledge that although Nolte does not stand alone, there are many German historians who vigorously contest his viewpoint. It has been a bitter battle, which the Germans have taken to refer to as the *Historikerstreit*—the historians' debate.

Another effort at placing Nazi war guilt in perspective is that of the Canadian-German Congress, an umbrella organisation of 2.5 million Germans and Canadians of German descent. The occasion was the backlash over a controversial CBC television documentary, *The Valour and the Horror*, which dealt with the Allied air war against German cities that resulted in the deaths of a half million civilians. In depicting what happened as terror bombing that besmirched the Allied cause, the documentary provoked a wave of impassioned criticism by

¹⁸ R. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* at 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.* at 29.

Canadian war veterans. The Canadian-German Congress deplored the backlash and publicly defended the program by stating:

World War II was not a comic book war with only monsters on one side and only knights in shining armour on the other. The war was fought on both sides with ferocious and inexcusable cruelty against civilians as well as soldiers.²¹

The Congress' declaration about the relative war guilt of the Allies and the Axis mirrors the position of Dr. Nolte and company. Whether by intent or not, the implication of this shared "historical perspective" is that, as tragic as the Holocaust undeniably was, it stands as but one of countless examples of man's inhumanity to man. Or, as American Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman once said, "War is Hell"—so why single out the Holocaust for special consideration?

It is true that the Allies were not all "knights in shining armour;" atrocities occurred on both sides, as they do in every war. But if World War II was not a war of white against black, it was undeniably a war of grey against black. There are after all historical truths, one of which was captured so eloquently by Winston Churchill when he said in his Battle of Britain speech that if Hitler won the war, "the whole world will sink into the abyss of a new dark age, made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science." That certainly was no understatement. As we all know, the stakes were indeed that high.

Aside from the context of Hitler's evil measured against that of his enemies, there is another us-versus-them angle to the historical perspective on the Holocaust. Its focus is more upon victims than perpetrators and its refrain is: the genocide or Holocaust committed against our people is no less a crime than the Jewish Holocaust; the only difference is that the Jews keep harping on what happened to them—to the exclusion of other people's holocausts.

At least, this viewpoint acknowledges the Holocaust as a benchmark. As observed by Kren and Rappaport, authors of *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior*,

[I]nsofar as the Holocaust is seen in general moral terms, it stands as the ultimate expression of the human capacity for organized evil and has come to serve as the standard to which all lesser or proximate evils are compared. Accordingly, over the past decades any substantial threat to the existence or basic rights of an oppressed population or minority group has triggered appeals to the Holocaust. Analogies and claims to the status of Hitler's Jews, therefore, has become a virtually automatic means of arousing attention to the plight of threatened groups everywhere. Soviet Armenians and Lithuanians, South African blacks, Palestinians, Cambodians, Native Americans, the homeless, and people with AIDS are salient examples ... [There is thus] a tendency

²¹ *Winnipeg Free Press* (25 November 1995) B1.

to use the Holocaust as a popular standard for absolute evil—antiabortionists, for example, regularly compare aborted fetuses, to gassed Jews ...²²

Consider a recent work by historian David Stannard, *American Holocaust*,²³ in which the author argues that every case of genocide is equally unique. His focus is upon the fate of the indigenous peoples of the Americas; and I for one have no quarrel with his righteous indignation regarding how the Christian nations of Europe (especially Spain) treated native Americans in the centuries following 1492. Along the way, Stannard attacks Elie Wiesel—acclaimed Jewish writer, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, and Auschwitz survivor—for contending that the Holocaust was a unique historical event. In branding this kind of “moral bookkeeping” as offensive, he proclaims that

[T]he pre-emptive conclusion that one's own group has suffered more than another is something of a horrible award of distinction that will be diminished if the true extent of the other group's suffering is acknowledged.²⁴

To the same effect is another work with the word Holocaust in the title: *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation*.²⁵ (Six million people were killed in Poland by the Nazis, about half of whom were Jews.) Written by Polish-American historian Richard Lukas, its major theme is captured in the following paragraph:

From a psychological point of view, it is understandable why Jews today prefer that the term (Holocaust) refer exclusively to the Jewish experience, thus emphasizing the wartime fate of the Jews. Yet by excluding others from inclusion in the Holocaust, the horrors that Poles, other Slavs, and Gypsies endured at the hands of the Nazis are often ignored, if not forgotten.²⁶

Are Jews then guilty of “moral bookkeeping”—do we dismiss the sufferings of all victims of genocide over the ages by determining to keep alive the memory of the Holocaust? I think not. Furthermore, I would say this in response to the Stannard and Lukas critiques: Holocaust is the term used to describe the greatest tragedy to befall the Jewish people. In the process, we do not deny the suffering of others; and we certainly need no reminding of the millions of gentile victims of the Nazis. It is incontestable that the Holocaust is a reflection of the evil of its

²² G.M. Kren & L. Rappaport, *The Holocaust and the Crisis of Human Behavior* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1994) at 4.

²³ D.E. Stannard, *American Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²⁴ *Ibid.* at 152.

²⁵ R. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1986).

²⁶ *Ibid.* at 220.

perpetrators and in that respect one must acknowledge all the victims, Jew and non-Jew alike.

Throughout history, the victims of mass murder have died miserable deaths, whether in the distant past, during World War II, or in more recent times—such as in the killing fields of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia. Surely one cannot rank or weigh the horror of their deaths on a scale of suffering. When, for example, I read about the closed cattle cars speeding Jews to Auschwitz, I am reminded of the unspeakable conditions on the slave ships that carried Africans across the Atlantic to the New World. When I read about the deaths by starvation in the Warsaw Ghetto, I am reminded of the millions of Ukrainians who perished in the 1930s in the famine orchestrated by Stalin. When I read about the gassings in the death camps, I am reminded of Saddam Hussein and his killing of thousands of Kurdish villagers by poison gas. And, when I read about the mass shootings of the Jews in the Soviet Union and Poland, I am reminded of the 8,000 Moslem men and teenage boys slaughtered in Srebrenica by their Serbian captors in 1995. It is true that the Moslem victims did not include women and small children, whereas the Jews were killed regardless of sex and age. Yet, that surely does not diminish the enormity of the mass murder committed in Srebrenica in the name of “ethnic cleansing.”

To reiterate, there is no ranking the victims of genocide through the ages in terms of their individual suffering. For the Jewish people, that killing has been going on for the past thousand years. The world is nearing the end of a millennium that has been marked from its first century—from the year 1096 when the Crusaders wiped out Jewish communities while on their way to the Holy Land—through to its last century with the mass murder of Jews. The Holocaust is how we have chosen to describe the culmination of a millennium of murder. Why should we be called to account for this? Why should we be accused of insensitivity—of “moral bookkeeping”—because we have sanctified a particular word to define the killing of six million of our people? Are we not allowed to mark that catastrophe without, at the same time, being obliged to recite the roll call of the non-Jewish victims of genocide? We do not diminish the tragic fate of others by invoking the “H” word as a shorthand description of our greatest tragedy. Nor do we ask others to include us in their accounts of their people’s martyrdom. All one can do is to recognise and condemn mass killings perpetrated in the name of one or another pernicious ideology.

Regarding “moral bookkeeping,” I wonder if Professor Stannard took note of a particularly outrageous example that occurred around the time of the Columbus quincentenary—the 500th anniversary of the landfall on 12 October 1492. There are indeed no sacred cows in history, and 1992 was the occasion for an outburst of Columbus-bashing. Critics, who were often, but not exclusively native-American, put the blame on his shoulders for the genocide, slavery, colonialism, and plunder that marked the European conquest of the New World.

In fact, native activist Russell Means went so far as to assert that Columbus “makes Hitler look like a juvenile delinquent.”²⁷ A juvenile delinquent!—a phrase that conjures up images of the misguided but still loveable teen-agers in Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story* who knock over garbage cans and steal hubcaps. I do not quarrel with Means’ anguish over the havoc wrought by Columbus and those who followed in his wake—a deplorable historical record that is brilliantly documented in Stannard’s *American Holocaust*. But the inaptness of Means’ sentiment surely speaks for itself.

The same can be said for a recent comment by Maurice Switzer, director of communications for the Assembly of First Nations, that the abuse of Aboriginal students in residential schools was “a genocide every bit as horrific to Canadian Indians as the memory of the Holocaust is to world Jewry.”²⁸ One cannot deny the magnitude of the havoc wrought by that experience: children sent to institutions where they were not allowed to speak their native language; where their culture was denigrated; and where they were physically and sexually abused. Even so, cultural genocide is simply not the same as physical genocide. However horrific, confinement and mistreatment in a residential school cannot be likened to being starved to death in a ghetto, worked to death in a labour camp, or families being herded together to be shot or gassed.

This “us-versus-them” theme is also found in an expression that one hears all too often: that so-and-so—be it Saddam Hussein, Fidel Castro, or whoever—is worse than Hitler. I will not belabour the point except to say that however one measures evil, there is no surpassing Hitler. History is replete with examples past and present of political leaders who match his boundless capacity for malevolence, but beyond Hitler one cannot go. When it comes to sheer depravity—to the magnitude of the crimes committed at his bidding—he is rock bottom, he is ground zero, he is the end of the line.

If one seeks to rank comparative evil-doers on the scale of history, there are no better qualified candidates for first place than two tyrants from our own century, Hitler and Stalin. In his marvellous book, *Explaining Hitler*,²⁹ Ron Rosenbaum asked historian Robert Conquest if he thought one more evil than the other. Conquest has catalogued Stalin’s crimes in publications such as *The Great Terror*, and as Rosenbaum comments: “[N]o historian has been harsher in his judgement of Stalin.”³⁰ Still, he told Rosenbaum that if forced to choose he would have to say

²⁷ “Columbus Anniversary: A time to Mourn, Commemorate and Reflect” *Associated Press* (5 October 1991).

²⁸ Op-Ed, “Message to the Media: All Canadian Issues are Aboriginal Issues” *The Globe and Mail* (27 March 1998) A11.

²⁹ R. Rosenbaum, *Explaining Hitler* (New York: Random House, 1998).

³⁰ *Ibid.* at 392.

that Hitler's degree of evil "just feels worse" than Stalin's.³¹ In *The History and Sociology of Genocide*,³² by Chalk and Jonassohn, co-directors of the Montreal Institute for Genocidal Studies, the authors provide a capsule overview of the Holocaust that lends support to Conquest's intuition.

Consider Hitler's weapons for carrying out the Holocaust in Occupied Europe: special registers and identity papers for Jews; mass deception of the victims through skilful propaganda designed to lull them into a sense of security; centrally directed and highly mobile killing squads; the concentration of Jews in ghettos; deliberate starvation and unchecked diseases; recruitment of anti-Semitic allies to kill Jews in almost every country; the death camps with their specially developed gas chambers; medical experimentation upon the victims; numbers tattooed on the forearms of concentration camp inmates; a continent wide bureaucracy dedicated to tracking down and killing every single survivor; and participation in the running of the machinery of mass murder by every highly skilled professional group in German society, including railroad administrators and crews, diplomats and lawyers, engineers and military personnel, scientists and physicians, and economists and anthropologists. Individually a few of these features of the Holocaust are detectable in earlier cases of genocide, but no people in history had ever been attacked by such an array of scientific, industrial, and administrative weapons in a program specifically designed to insure its complete and immediate biological destruction.³³

If Russell Means were familiar with Biblical accounts of the havoc wrought by Satan, he would have been closer to the mark if he had said that Hitler "makes Satan look like a juvenile delinquent."

III. THE HOLOCAUST TRIVIALISED

ON AN US-VERSUS-THEM CONTINUUM, we descend from relativity to triviality when, for example, political commentators such as Rush Limbaugh refer to radical feminists as "femi-nazis." It is one thing to compare the Holocaust to other cases of genocide; here, however, we are in the theatre of the absurd. In a *New York Times* article, "Increasingly, Political War of Words is Fought With Nazi Imagery,"³⁴ Michael Janofsky writes that American politicians have taken to use comparisons to the Nazis and the Holocaust as somehow relevant to their perceived victimisation. In Idaho, the state superintendent of education compared herself to Anne Frank because of the hassles of her first six weeks in office. Two Democratic congressmen have said that the social program outlined in Newt Gingrich's

³¹ Rosenbaum, *supra* note 29.

³² F. Chalk & K. Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

³³ *Ibid.* at 324–5.

³⁴ *The New York Times* (23 October 1995) A12.

Contract With America would treat blacks and other minorities the same way the Jews were treated under Hitler. One of them went so far as to say that the Republicans were "worse than Hitler." During a Virginia campaign for the office of county sheriff, the challenger produced a television commercial coupling pictures of the incumbent and Hitler and referring to his opponent's aides as "goose-stepping Gestapo." The commercial also contained a brief scene from the film, *Schindler's List*.

One could go on *ad nauseam*. From the animal-rights movement there is Ingrid Newkirk, who enlightens us that the Holocaust pales in comparison to the killing of chickens! As she told the *Washington Post*, "Six million people died in concentration camps, but six billion broiler chickens will die this year in slaughterhouses."³⁵ It is true that Canadian writer Farley Mowat does not regard the Newfoundland seal hunt as worse than the Holocaust. He simply ranks them the same, saying that, "I do not make a distinction between the mass killing of any kind of animal, whether it be human or non-human."³⁶

From the legal profession there is Johnnie Cochrane and his playing of the "race card" in the O.J. Simpson case. In seeking to discredit L.A.P.D. detective Mark Fuhrman, a key prosecution witness, he compared the hapless police officer to Hitler, telling the jury:

[T]here was another man not too long ago in the world who had those same views, who wanted to burn people, who had racist views ... People didn't care. People said he's just crazy. He's just a half-baked painter. And they didn't do anything about it. This man, this scourge, became one of the worst people in the world, Adolf Hitler ...³⁷

Holocaust histrionics from the defence bar is one thing, but even more appalling is when a judge gets into the act. In Quebec, Mr. Justice Bienvenue was passing sentence on a woman convicted of murder for slicing the throat of her estranged husband with a razor blade. As reported by the Associated Press,³⁸ he used the occasion to condemn her crime as worse than the gassings in the death camps: Even the Nazis did not eliminate millions of Jews in a painful and bloody manner; they died in gas chambers without suffering.

In response to the widespread denunciation of his remarks, the learned judge proclaimed that criticism was "totally unwarranted." As he stated,

I still maintain there is no pain involved when gas drops on you from a shower nozzle. It's like people who end their days by poisoning themselves by turning on their car engine and closing the garage door.

³⁵ D. Grossman, *On Killing* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1995) at xxvii.

³⁶ *Winnipeg Free Press* (22 December 1997) B3.

³⁷ *The [Winnipeg] Jewish Post and News* (11 October 1995) 1.

³⁸ "Council Wants Judge Dismissed" *Associated Press* (20 September 1996).

He then insisted that death was more painful for the husband whose throat was cut because it took him "three full minutes to bleed to death." Well, Mr. Justice Bienvenue, let me tell you very briefly what happened once the victims had set out for the death camps. There was the unspeakable railway journey in the closed cattle cars; the disembarkation amidst the din of barking dogs and guards screaming orders and cracking whips; the herding of the naked victims into the death chamber; the shrieks of terror when the gas was released; and finally the bodies stacked in a pyramid as the victims desperately tried to crawl upwards to get away from the fumes. If this was death "without suffering," then no one has ever suffered death.

In his recent book, *The Nazi War on Cancer*, historian Robert Proctor notes that pro-tobacco advocates have taken to play the "Nazi card," branding their opponents as "NicoNazis" and "tobacco fascists."³⁹ When the Board of Health in Winthrop, Massachusetts, considered a city-wide ban on all tobacco sales, a local tobacco merchant proclaimed that it was "taking up where Hitler left off."⁴⁰ To the same effect was an article in the *Toronto Star* with the headline: "The New Rednecks: NicoNazis Pushing Bigotry's Borders."⁴¹ All this was bad enough but as Proctor concluded:

The most stunningly offensive case I know of ... (was) when Philip Morris of Europe ran ads in many European magazines seeking to identify smokers with ghettoized Jews and anti-smokers with Nazis. The ads showed a map of Amsterdam with an area near the traditional Jewish quarter cordoned off and labelled "Smoking Section." The headline asked, "Where will they draw the line?"—implying that society's efforts to restrict smoking are comparable to Nazi efforts to isolate Jews.⁴²

No wonder that Elie Wiesel has written that the "H" word:

[H]as become so trivialised that I cannot use it anymore. Whatever mishap occurs now, they call it "holocaust." A commentator describing the defeat of a sports team, somewhere, called it a "holocaust." So I have no words anymore.⁴³

So, whether it be the invoking of the Holocaust, Hitler, or the Nazis, let us have done with those who trivialise the martyred millions, Jews and gentiles alike, who a half century ago were reduced to dust and ashes by a reign of terror that still

³⁹ R. Proctor, *The Nazi War on Cancer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) at 271.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ R. DiManno, *Toronto Star* (10 March 1997) A7.

⁴² The ad appeared in *Newsweek* (European edition) (25 June 1995) 272.

⁴³ S. Katz, *The Holocaust in Historical Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) at 1.

casts its pall over a conflict-ridden world approaching the end of the second millennium. I too have no words anymore.