



The age of denial

In his new book, Keith Kahn Harris argues that ‘denialism’ – the denial of everything from climate change to vaccines and, of course, the Holocaust – is the phenomenon of our times. But, says **Richard Rampton**, a more robust approach is needed to staunch the flood of untruths

In 1944, the Italian partisan and chemist, Primo Levi, was deported to Auschwitz.

In the preface to the last of the remarkable series of books that he wrote about that experience, *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi records that the SS guards at Auschwitz were in the habit of taunting the prisoners – the vast majority of whom, like Levi, were Jews – with a prophecy:

“However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world would not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed: they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the lagers.”

That recollection is cited by Keith Kahn-Harris early on in his book, *Denial*:

the unspeakable truth, in the chapter *Doing Denialism*.

But what is ‘denialism’? And how does one ‘do’ it? It is a term coined by the author (it seems) to connote a systematic course of denial designed to serve the interests of the denier, which are sometimes obvious and sometimes concealed.

The problem with such an approach is that both denial and its motives are a veritable Noah’s Ark of different creatures, with the result that ‘denialism’ becomes almost meaningless. Thus, the form of Holocaust denial foreshadowed in Primo Levi’s anecdote, and the falsification of history that it must inevitably entail, is primarily defensive: “Yes, we did it, but no one will believe you when you tell them”. This is akin, if not identical, to other species of denial noted by Kahn-Harris: for example, the tobacco companies’ denial of the causative link between smoking and

cancer, or the petro-chemical industry’s denial of the anthropogenic element in global warming, the Turkish government’s denial of the Armenian genocide or the South African government’s denial under Thabo Mbeki of the link between HIV and AIDS. The denial is an obvious, if futile, attempt to protect the denier’s interests against the consequences of accepting the truth. As Kahn-Harris points out, it

has similarities to the smoker’s refusal to admit to himself the dangers of smoking – and we characterise the addict as being ‘in denial’.

But there are other species of denial which are different, both

in character and in motivation. These may conveniently be labelled ‘offensive’. Among them, as its extensive treatment in the book suggests, the most egregious is Holocaust denial. It is offensive in both senses of the word: it attacks the historicity of the Holocaust, and at the same time

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causes offence to the memory of those who were its victims.

There are three main reasons why Holocaust denial should be pre-eminent amongst the abominable creatures emanating from the Ark of denial. First, the Holocaust (if it happened) was arguably the worst crime ever committed. Second, it did happen. While it may be possible to argue about precisely how many were killed, how and where they were killed, exactly who killed them, and so on, the central fact remains incontrovertible: in the course of about three years or less, the Nazis deliberately killed in the region of six million people. Third and last, the vast majority of those millions of people were Jews.

This analysis gives rise to some important questions. First, what purpose does Holocaust denial really serve; why has it survived and become increasingly widespread? Second, does this matter? Third, what can be done about it?

The later part of Kahn-Harris’ book offers answers to some of these questions, but not always with the directness they demand. The book would also benefit from more reference to the compelling evidence that exists to rebut the pseudo-scientific arguments so lovingly deployed by deniers.

Kahn-Harris raises what was at one time the ‘bible’ of Holocaust deniers, the so-called Leuchter Report. That document’s apocalyptic conclusion was that the concentrations of hydrogen cyanide found in the samples that Leuchter took from the brickwork at Auschwitz were insufficient to support the generally held belief that there had been homicidal gas chambers at Auschwitz. Leuchter’s foundation for this ‘revelation’ was, he said, that a much higher concentration of hydrogen cyanide than his samples had revealed would be required to kill humans than to kill the typhus-bearing lice whose extermination was, he opined, the sole reason for the presence of hydrogen cyanide in his samples.

In fact, the reverse is true: the concentration needed to kill humans is 22 times less than that which is needed to kill lice, with the result that the concentrations found in Leuchter’s scrapings were almost exactly what one would expect to find on the walls of a room that had been used, 40 or 50 years earlier, as a gas chamber. Such a catastrophic error in so ‘sacred’ a text should, perhaps, have been included in Kahn-Harris’ account of the Leuchter debacle. It was not.

I’ll return to the first question: since Holocaust denial has no historicity, what is

the motive for it? This question is crucial, and demands a direct answer, such as that once given to me by the late writer and scholar, Dan Jacobson. To paraphrase: The Holocaust denier will have three strands to his thinking: the first, a kind of secret delight that the Holocaust happened, and that all those millions of people were killed in the space of three years; second, an inexpressible pleasure at the insult which Holocaust denial offers to the memory of the dead, to the survivors and to the descendants of both; and, third, the ‘recollection’ that almost all those millions of victims were Jews.

The final step in this ghastly diagnosis is another question, but one that is rhetorical: how, then, can categorical Holocaust denial ever be anything other than antisemitic? It is either antisemitic in its effect, or in its intention, or, as one would suppose was usually the case, both.

Kahn-Harris’ book, which fairly addresses the evils of denial(ism) in general, would have benefited from a similarly direct demonstration of the reasons why Holocaust denial is so repugnant. After all, the answers to the remaining two questions depend heavily upon the clarity of the answer to the first.

The answer to the second question, does Holocaust denial matter, is easy: yes, of course it does. It matters because truth matters, and Holocaust denial is a falsification of the truth. It also matters because antisemitism matters; and, further, because, as the later chapters of Kahn-Harris’ book suggest, the (barely) covert antisemitism that underlies Holocaust denial may easily convert into the overt ‘Hitler-was-right-to-kill-all-the-kikes’ version; and, thence, if unrestrained, into the kind of dynamic antisemitism that one had hoped might have been extinguished by the defeat of Nazism. In these latter respects, this part of Kahn-Harris’ book is informative, thought-provoking and, in the end, rather frightening, especially where the threat represented by the internet is concerned (many will remember Mark Zuckerberg’s bizarre defences earlier this year of the Holocaust denials on Facebook: they were “unintentional”, or constituted

to give a definitive answer, perhaps because he feels that it is impossible.

But it is an important question: antisemitism generally, and Holocaust denial in particular, would appear to be on the increase. In the UK there has been a significant increase in antisemitic incidents since 2016: the Community Security Trust (CST) recorded 727 such incidents in the first half of 2018 – the second highest number on record.

In 16 European countries, Holocaust denial is a criminal offence. But not in ours. Perhaps rightly. There is ample scope in our laws for the prosecution of hate speech; and there is the risk that such prosecutions may give a platform to the hate speaker and allow him to be positioned as a martyr. Kahn-Harris tentatively suggests that one solution might

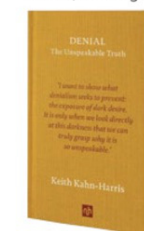
be to offer deniers this choice: “either say what you really want or forever be silent”. Surely not, if that means, “Cry, ‘Havoc!’ and let slip the dogs of war”?

It may be better that we stay as we are.

Refutation of denial by evidence and argument may yet win the day. Kahn-Harris rather derides such measured refutation because it is unlikely to persuade the denier to recant. But that mistakes its purpose, which is not to convert the unconvertible, but to persuade the rest of mankind that the denier is mistaken, leaving him to bay the moon in miserable isolation. At the end of the Irving case, the *Guardian* published a cartoon showing Adolf Hitler up to his neck in a pool of infernal boiling oil. Over him looms a sneering devil who is clutching a trident and bringing poor Adolf the news from court: “Tough luck. He lost. You stay.” ■

Denial: The unspeakable truth by Keith Kahn-Harris, Notting Hill Editions, 2018. **Richard**

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The entrance to Auschwitz; Tom Wilkinson plays Richard Rampton in the 2016 film *Denial*, about the Irving trial

“freedom of expression”, he explained).

The third question, how should Holocaust denial be dealt with, is the most difficult. Kahn-Harris does not attempt

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