Reconciling With History

By Warren L. Miller
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Last month, a state-run Iranian university hosted a conference entitled Holocaust: Myth or Reality, which challenged the validity of the Holocaust and vilified its victims. Meanwhile, in Latvia, President Vike-Freiberga rededicated a restored synagogue and will soon host a conference memorializing the victims of the Nazi genocide – including roughly 70,000 Latvian Jews.

The contrast could not be clearer: Iran, though an admirer of Nazi Germany, was a way-station for European Jews seeking refuge in Palestine during World War II. One group of 1,000 orphaned Jewish children became known as the Tehran Children.

Meanwhile, Latvia was a killing zone. In just two days in 1941, the Nazis and their Latvian accomplices murdered 25,000 Jews in the Rumbula forest.

What explains why one nation – complicit in mass murder – is taking pains to admit its past crimes, while another nation – bearing no direct responsibility – seeks to deny those crimes nonetheless?

This paradox plays out in numerous ways. In nations which played a direct role in the Holocaust, both laws and public opinion effectively prohibit Holocaust denial. In Germany and Poland, educators often take the lead by bringing students to the historical record – or the death camps themselves. A judge in Vienna, Austria recently sentenced a notorious Holocaust denier, David Irving, to three years in prison for claiming the Nazi gas chambers were a myth.

Yet in Arab nations, largely unaffected by the Nazi onslaught, Holocaust denial runs rampant. There are countless indications that in these countries, the destruction of European Jewry is, to put it lightly, a disputed fact.

The evidence of the Holocaust is incontrovertible. We have today extensive records kept by the Nazi death machine itself, thousands of photographs and films, countless books and histories, and dozens of museums containing artifacts of the martyred.

In addition, those who perished in the Holocaust left behind a sweeping historical legacy: synagogues, schools, cemeteries, and other important landmarks – evidence of their presence.

To anyone who has doubts about the Holocaust, such a mass of evidence must settle those doubts – unless, of course, something else is at work.

In fact, something is. Europe did not come to its current view of the Holocaust overnight. For decades, other European nations allowed Germany to take full blame for the Holocaust, ignoring their own citizens' complicity in turning in Jews and participating in the killing.

Even now, remaining landmarks of Jewish life across Europe are endangered. In Bulgaria, vandals raided Jewish graves. Three large crosses now stand atop a Jewish cemetery and

Holocaust site in Ukraine. At the graves of Holocaust victims and a memorial to them in Germany, neo-Nazis vandalized the site and desecrated it with the severed head of a pig. Synagogues that thrived before the war are now abandoned, their glory long passed.

But most of Europe has responded to this degradation of history by affirming the value of history. Europe's leaders recognized that by preserving physical proof of the lives once lived in Europe, we force truth upon the deniers and liars. We show them, and future generations, that before the Nazis there were flourishing communities of Jews in Germany, Poland, and elsewhere throughout Europe. Only one reason can explain their near-total disappearance: Mass murder.

Most importantly, by confronting painful truths about the past, as many European nations have now done by acting to preserve these sites and acknowledge their past complicity with the Nazis, we have a path toward reconciliation with history. This is a difficult admission to make, given decades of denial, opposition from neo-Nazis, and latent anti-Semitism.

Ultimately, many of these nations work with the United States, and the federal commission I am privileged to lead, because they understand that any modern society must fight prejudice and hatred, even when it is directed at a building, a gravestone, or other historic site.

Some say such a mission is mundane. What use is it, they say, to preserve a synagogue few use, or to clean up a cemetery few visit? But this work is not done solely for the dead. It is done for the living as well.

Time and again, the Holocaust – its victims, its record, its legacy – has been denied by the same people who would happily see it recur. The Iranian government's preoccupation with Holocaust denial comes at the very same time that is has vowed to destroy Israel, the Jewish state. This is, to be sure, no mere coincidence.

These deniers and distorters of history do not simply seek to wipe out the past. They are also looking to wipe out the future. We must safeguard the truth against their onslaught for the sake of the millions who did not survive to bear witness – and for the sake of future generations so they may be spared future genocides.

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