

Historical Negationism with Regard to Nazi and Communist Crimes

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In the 20th century, the German Nazi and communist regimes committed mass crimes on a huge scale. Historical negationism is most often assumed to refer to the Holocaust (also known as the Shoah), that is the extermination of Jews by the Germans and their allies. In fact, however, this phenomenon also applies to other crimes for which both totalitarian systems are responsible, as well as to the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire.

Contrary to the evidence and facts

At the end of the [Second World War](#), the Allied forces liberated German concentration camps, showing the world films and photographs with piles of murdered bodies. Despite the good documentation of the German crimes, including a large number of survivor testimonies, the first attempts to deny their existence had already been made shortly after the war. The fact of genocide was directly denied or its extent minimized and plausible excuses were sought.

One of the reasons for lying about the past was the desire to rehabilitate Nazism, especially by former functionaries and supporters of the regime as well as by the governments that had collaborated with it, seeking to free themselves from co-responsibility.

The main reason for denying the Holocaust is anti-Semitism, that is hostility towards Jews and people of Jewish origin.

Such a standpoint often takes the form of a conspiracy theory, according to which the Holocaust was a story made up from the beginning in the interests of an 'international Jewish conspiracy' controlling the world or of Israel. Incidentally, it also denies the genocide to which national groups other than the Jews fell victim.

According to the denialists, the evidence of the Shoah's existence (including the testimonies of the survivors) was falsified by the Allies or by the Jews themselves. Others deny the genocidal nature of the Shoah, claiming that it was merely a plan to expel all Jews from Germany. They portray the Auschwitz concentration camp as an industrial complex in which the prisoners constituted a workforce. They also significantly understate the number of victims. They look for excuses. They emphasize Hitler's alleged role in the fight against communism or claim, for example, that German policy was no more brutal than that of the United States of America and the United Kingdom. The term the 'Holocaust of bombs' has appeared in Germany, referring to the Allied raids on Dresden. Some deniers also blame the victims, claiming, for example, that they brought the Holocaust on themselves by participating in the introduction of Bolshevism.



➤ A demonstration by extreme right organizations held in Dresden in February 2017 on the anniversary of the bombing of the city. The photo shows a banner with the inscription *Allierter Bombenholocaust der deutschen und tschechischen Städte* ('a bombing Holocaust of German and Czech towns staged by the Allies').

Negationism is promoted particularly by pseudo-researchers, often linked to extreme right or extreme left-wing groups. The best known are David Irving from England, David Duke (former leader of the Ku Klux Klan, an American racist organization) and Ernst Zündel (founder of a major pro-Nazi propaganda centre in Canada).

These pseudo-researchers mainly challenge the existence of gas chambers – facilities used to kill people with poisonous gas (Cyclone B) in the camps – questioning the mass nature of the crime. To this end, they have drawn up seemingly scientific expert opinions, referring to the allegedly objective results of the chemical tests on the plaster collected from the walls of the gas chambers. The denial of the Shoah is supported by some Middle Eastern governments in conflict with Israel (for example Iran and Syria).

The conscious or ignorant use by politicians and the media around the world of the term 'Polish concentration/death camps' to refer to German Nazi concentration camps set up on the territory of the Third Reich and in the countries it occupied can also be regarded as a denial of German crimes.

It leads to the blurring of the issue of German responsibility for the crimes committed by assigning the burden to Poles. Promoted since the end of the Second World War, the so-called 'myth of the pure *Wehrmacht*' (the false claim that German soldiers were not involved in Nazi crimes during the Second World War) has also served to free them from responsibility.

In a similar way, the claim that Austria was Hitler's first victim, granted victim status to Austrian society in general. It collectively suppressed the fact that, in reality, Austrians were clearly over-represented among the perpetrators of the Holocaust.

Associates of a lie

Crime and terror had been present in the first communist state since its creation in [Russia in 1917](#). Information reaching the West about mass murders, torture, executions, concentration camps (gulags), slave labour and organized hunger was not, however, available to those for whom Bolshevik Russia was a dream come true of a new, better world and a political or economic partner. At the same time, the Soviet Union, in order to hide its crimes from the world, conducted an intensive propaganda campaign. Its valuable allies turned out to be Western supporters whom the Soviet leader Lenin was supposed to describe as 'useful idiots'. **Numerous Western intellectuals – people of culture and the arts as well as journalists – took**

part in hiding Soviet crimes and the consequent deception. Propaganda fell on fertile ground especially in the 1930s, during the [Great Depression](#) and after Hitler came to power, when the USSR was seen a positive counterweight to Western problems. Those who spoke the truth about communism were treated as supporters of Nazism. When Stalin became an ally of Western countries during the Second World War, their governments tried to silence information about communist crimes. It was only after the start of the [Cold War](#) (a USSR–Western conflict) in 1947 that the Western Allies stopped covering them up. **However, the testimonies of survivors from the gulags who found themselves in the West were long challenged by numerous supporters of the USSR.** For example, in France, where communist influence was particularly strong, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's book *A World Apart* containing memories of the gulags could only be published in 1985, that is more than thirty years after its first edition.

However, the lie about Soviet crimes slowly began to crumble. In 1956, at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev revealed the truth about some of the 'distortions' under Stalin. The fact that this information came from the Soviet leader himself made an impression on the West. He disproved the claims that the crimes were an invention of anti-communist propaganda. Still, however, there was no shortage of those who claimed that they had only taken place under Stalin and denied their scale. Others searched for excuses for the crimes: for example, they preached the false theory that they fitted into the 'logic of history' and were an essential condition for the rapid modernization and industrialization of Russia. There were also those disillusioned with Stalin who transferred their sympathies to other mass criminals, especially the Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong.

The real earthquake in the West was only caused by the publication in 1973 of *The Gulag Archipelago* by the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a testimony confirming the existence of the gulags. This indictment against communism fundamentally changed the attitude in the West towards communist crimes and their victims.

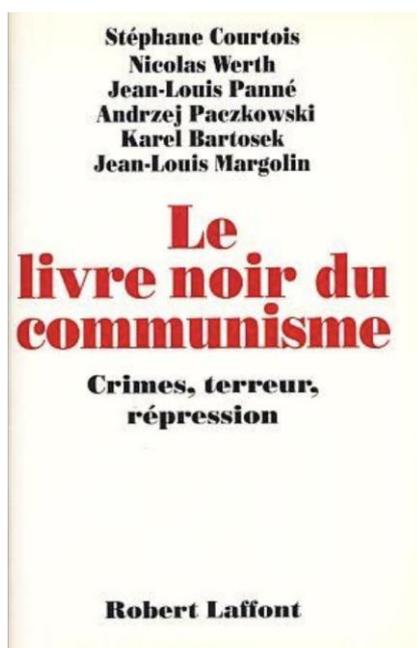
The atrocities of the communist state could still be denied, but no longer within the mainstream of public debate.

After the fall of communism, the silence about the crimes in Central and Eastern Europe was broken. Although in Russia, a country that cannot come to terms with its communist past, the historical facts are still being denied with the support of the authorities: denial of the Katyn Massacre is increasing and the genocidal nature of the Holodomor (also known as the Great Famine) – a famine deliberately caused by the USSR authorities that claimed at least three million victims – is called into question.

The problem of negationism is still relevant

In 1997 *Le Livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur, répression* (*The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*) was published in France. This attempt to estimate the number of victims of communism from different parts of the world, and especially the introduction by the historian Stéphane Courtois, provoked extremely heated discussions in the West. Communist and left-wing circles especially heavily criticized these points: the number of victims that the publication put at 100 million, the claim that violence is an inherent feature of communism and the juxtaposition of the communist and Nazi regimes. Attempts have been made to justify and diminish the significance of communist crimes (including politicians such as the French prime minister Lionel Jospin [1997–2002]).

Le Livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur, répression – cover of the first edition, 2016 (accessed 07.04.2021). Available on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_Livre_noir_du_communisme.jpg



← *Le Livre noir du communisme. Crimes, terreur, répression* (*The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*) is the result of work by historians led by Stéphane Courtois. It was first published in French in 1997 and translated into 16 languages.

The arguments known earlier were used, for example, about Stalin's role in the fight against Hitler. It was also alleged that the comparison of both totalitarianisms is a whitewashing of Nazism and a banalization of the Holocaust.

The denial of Nazi crimes (mainly the Shoah) is now treated as a crime and prohibited by law in many countries – mainly in Europe.

Legal consequences are being drawn up for denialists. For example, Irving was sentenced to one year in prison by an Austrian court for spreading his ideas, and Zündel was sentenced to three years. It is publicly condemned to deny Hitler's crime. This is due to the fact that Nazism was recognized after the Second World War as the incarnation of absolute evil.



↑ A man wearing a T-shirt adorned with 'СССР' (the Russian acronym for 'the USSR' in Cyrillic) and holding a hammer-and-sickle flag in front of the Monument to Soviet Soldiers, Tiergarten, Berlin, 8 May 2020 (the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War).

It is a different matter with communism, which is still alive in the world today – there are communist states, Communist Parties in many countries operate legally and the Marxist-Leninist ideology still has its followers. In many left-wing circles, communist crimes are still a taboo. Only a few countries in Europe have legislation that bans denying them. Communist symbols are commonplace in pop culture. The hammer and sickle or portraits of communist revolutionary leaders, such as Mao and Che Guevara, decorate T-shirts and gadgets despite symbolizing a system that is responsible for more victims than that represented by the swastika or Hitler's image.

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