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Denying the holocaust

Section: Leader

Free speech

It is loathsome, but should not be a crime

FABRICATING history is an act of intellectual vandalism that poisons modern understanding of past misdeeds and heroism alike. But should it be a crime? In civilised countries, the truth is best policed by scholars, not criminal prosecutors. Historians who distort, inflate and invent find their credibility shredded by their peers, not the police. But David Irving, an author of books about the second world war, is now starting a three-year prison sentence in Austria (see page 57) for remarks he made in 1989 doubting the existence of gas chambers at Auschwitz. That has won him praise in Iran, where the president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, recently described the *holocaust* as a "myth".

Holocaust denial is ridiculous, but it is too common, and too damaging, to be a joke. It commonly makes four claims: that the numbers of Jews killed were wildly inflated; that any persecution was matched or exceeded by allied war crimes against Germans; that Hitler was ignorant of, or even opposed to, the killing of Jews; and that accounts of systematic extermination were invented to benefit Israel.

Holocaust deniers such as Mr Irving are expert at taking anomalies and contradictions in the historical record and erecting such pyramids of loathsome nonsense upon them. From the gaps (all explicable) in the surviving evidence about Auschwitz-Birkenau they infer that the gas chambers there were a propaganda invention. And not only that: other details of the **Holocaust** are invented too. In fact it didn't really happen: Hitler liked Jews. Or (as the Palestinian movement Hamas argues) Jews caused the war. **Holocaust** denial (or "revisionism" as its pseudo-scholarly advocates term it) uses quibbles, semantics and phoney logic to befuddle the gullible about the mass murder of millions of innocents.

To the fair-minded, such claims are preposterous. But among the prejudiced, silly and ignorant they flourish, especially on the internet. They gain a touch of intellectual legitimacy from a handful of cranky academics--though of these only Mr Irving has any claim to be a historian. His early works, particularly on military matters, were acclaimed. Nobody doubts his knowledge of German archives, or his skill in deciphering the crabbed handwriting of senior Nazis.

But there are plenty of doubts about his integrity. At a libel action in London in 2000, in which he had every chance to make his best case, the judge concluded that he was "anti-Semitic and racist", saying he had "persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence" and "portrayed Hitler in an unwarrantedly favourable light."

It is hard to see what the Austrian court's sentence can add to that. Keeping Mr Irving in jail at most may stop him going to a conference that Mr Ahmadinejad is convening to "rewrite and revise" the history of the **holocaust**. But against that small plus are two big minuses. One is that the sentence makes Mr Irving look a martyr. The other is that it makes the West look hypocritical: all too willing to bruise Muslim feelings, while protecting Jewish ones by law.

Laws against **holocaust** denial (which 14 countries have) were never a good idea. The best defence against neo-Nazis is reason and ridicule, not the criminal law. But at a time when the western world is battling to defend free speech against religious zealotry, they look particularly indefensible. It is punishment enough for Mr Irving that he has lost his professional credibility. He should not lose his liberty too.

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