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978-0-521-12786-8 - Post-Zionism, Post-Holocaust: Three Essays on Denial, Forgetting, and the Delegation of Israel

Elhanan Yakira

Excerpt

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## I

# Holocaust Denial and the Left

### A TRUE STORY, SOME FACTS, AND A BIT OF COMMENTARY

A number of years ago, I was fortunate – or unfortunate – enough to have a unique encounter. In a Paris drenched with summer sun, under circumstances that justify the cliché about reality being stranger than fiction, I happened to speak for five or six hours with an enterprising individual named Pierre Guillaume. Assuming that many of my readers have not heard of him, I had better say a few words about him. When I met him, Guillaume was running a bookstore and publishing house with the interesting name *La Vieille Taupe* (The Old Mole). Not far from the Pantheon, the burial place of the great figures of the French republic, this institution, which opened and closed and opened again over a period of many years and now no longer exists, was the principal power base of Holocaust denial in France.<sup>1</sup> From the late 1960s to the 1990s, Guillaume, his bookstore, and publishing house were the main focus of the activities of the Holocaust deniers. The 1970s and 1980s were their heyday, mainly by virtue of their collaboration with the Lyon literary scholar Robert Faurisson, the best known of the French Holocaust deniers, whose writings *La Vieille Taupe* published. As a result of that conversation, and thanks to the good offices of Mr. Guillaume (for which, it should be made clear, he received a handsome fee), the masochism section of my library was

<sup>1</sup> The inside covers of *La Vieille Taupe* books bear a quotation from Hegel: “Spirit often seems to have forgotten and lost itself, but, inwardly opposed to itself, it is inwardly working ever forward, as Hamlet says of the ghost of his father, ‘Well done, old mole’” (Georg W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simpson [New York: Humanities Press, 1974], 3:546–547). Marx used this image to describe the revolution being prepared underground, at the moment it emerges.

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enriched by a number of Faurisson's writings as well as several other literary productions of La Vieille Taupe, all of them furnishing abundant arguments and proofs that the thing we call "the Holocaust" never happened. The story of the systematic destruction of the Jews of Europe by the Germans during the Second World War was, in truth, a colossal lie.

Apart from a few historians and experts, Israeli public opinion does not appear overly troubled by the phenomenon of Holocaust denial. A few years ago, there was some mention in the press of the libel suit brought by the English historian David Irving against the American Holocaust scholar Deborah Lipstadt, who claimed that Irving had lied when he said there had been no systematic extermination of Jews during the war. Irving lost the suit. In the verdict, he was described as a "right-wing, pro-Nazi polemicist." The Israeli media brought up the matter again, when Irving, in an Austrian court, was convicted of Holocaust denial and sentenced to three years' imprisonment. (He was released after one year.) More recently, some attention was attracted to this matter by the Teheran convention of Holocaust deniers, organized by Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadian. On the whole, Holocaust denial is an activity confined to the neo-Nazi and neo-fascist right wing. At least that is how it is generally perceived by those who pay it any heed at all, scholars included, and, as such, we accord it the same significance given to other crude manifestations of old-fashioned European anti-Semitism: an ugly annoyance that belongs to a world that no longer exists. True, there has been talk here in Israel, and not only here, about the resurgence of anti-Semitism; but many think that what we are seeing is actually a new phenomenon. The violent attacks on Jews and Jewish institutions in Europe are mostly being carried out by North African and other Muslim immigrants and so appear to be an importation of the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than anti-Semitism in the old, classical, sense of the word. There is some truth in this: no doubt the wave of anti-Jewish violence in Europe in recent years is closely connected to the protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. But it is less clear that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and especially the extreme violence of its current phase, are the *sole* cause of this new Judeophobia.<sup>2</sup> Even if we ignore the stubbornness with which

<sup>2</sup> The political scientist Pierre-André Taguieff suggests using the term "Judeophobia" in preference to "anti-Semitism" to describe the outburst of anti-Jewish violence, both physical and verbal, in France since 2000 and the virtual absence of opposition – political or even intellectual – to this hatred, which came mainly from North African immigrants. See Pierre-André Taguieff, *Rising from the Muck: The New Anti-Semitism in Europe* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2004). Leo Strauss had made a similar suggestion, for similar reasons: the term "anti-Semitism" could conceal the specificity and uniqueness of the hatred of Jews. The

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good old-fashioned, traditional anti-Semitism continues to reassert itself, it could still be that the Middle Eastern conflict only partly explains the manifestations of anti-Jewish hostility we are now seeing from time to time and that the conflict is, in fact, serving mainly as the vehicle, or occasion, for an outburst of hatred whose sources lie elsewhere. In fact, the tendency of some experts, Israelis among them, to present what is going on in the Middle East as virtually the only cause of the new anti-Jewish sentiment and (occasionally) violence relies not on historical or political analysis but rather on ideology. At the root of this ideology is the desire, or need, to blame these events, explicitly or implicitly, on Israel. In the final analysis, this is merely an updated version of the classic rhetorical ploy of anti-Semitic propaganda, that it is the Jews themselves who are actually responsible for the hatred and violence directed against them, hence for their own suffering.

In the face of this old-new anti-Semitism, the question of Holocaust denial comes up from time to time. But what people here in Israel (and other places as well) seem not to realize fully is that in certain places, especially but not only in France, denial of the Holocaust is often associated with the left and not only the radical, neofascist right. So I spent several hours, that summer Saturday in Paris, with Pierre Guillaume. At that time, as I have said, this man was one of France's most important and effective Holocaust deniers. He could be credited with turning denial from something marginal and half-covert into a salient issue that broadly engaged French public opinion. As always happens in such cases, the very fact that denial became a public issue, and even that it was challenged and criticized, was already a strategic victory for the deniers.

Monsieur Guillaume did most of the talking at that strange encounter. He seemed a bit surprised that a foreigner like me took such an interest in the existence, or nonexistence, of gas chambers and had the kind of knowledge of the subject that my questioning revealed. (Revolutionary that he was – and perhaps still is – Guillaume was very polite and discreet and only after several hours of conversation dared to ask where I came from.) But he never lost patience with me and even took great pleasure in enlightening me about the lie of the Holocaust, where it had originated, who was responsible for disseminating it, and who was profiting from it – especially who was profiting from it. As Guillaume took pains to point out again and again, not only was he a man of the left, committed to his leftist views and to the great proletarian

Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Anti-Semitism and Racism monitors anti-Semitic incidents and publications all over the world, publishing annual reports as well as other material. See <http://www.tau.ac.il/anti-Semitism/>.

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revolution, but in his view what we call “Holocaust denial” – and what he called unmasking the great lie of the annihilation of the Jews – was a decidedly left-wing activity, an expression of the revolutionary spirit. He did not deny the Holocaust *despite* his belonging to the radical left, as we might have thought, but precisely *because* of it. In fact, Holocaust denial had become, for Guillaume and his comrades, their principal activity and more or less the core of their revolutionary ideology.

This Guillaume, along with a small group of collaborators and ideological sympathizers (among them, incidentally, some Jews), was at one time part of the revolutionary ferment that took place in France in the 1960s, briefly taking political center stage in May 1968 and continuing to some extent into the 1970s and '80s. In 1965 Guillaume opened his bookstore, La Vieille Taupe; he belonged at that time to a small group calling itself Pouvoir Ouvrier (roughly, Workers' Power) and was active in another group known as Socialisme ou Barbarie, which published a journal by this name. In 1967 he left Pouvoir Ouvrier and, together with some friends, established a small opposition group – generally referred to by the name of his bookstore, which served as its base of operation – a group that located itself on the extreme ideological fringes of the world revolution. The bookstore itself became an important distribution center for revolutionary literature. In the turbulent spring of 1968, when the revolution came, Guillaume discovered the writings of Paul Rassinier, the founding thinker of left-wing Holocaust denial, and they came as a revelation to him.<sup>3</sup> That summer Saturday in Paris – and this was actually the occasion of my strange meeting with him – Guillaume came into a small copy shop where I was doing some business of my own to copy dozens of pages of arguments and documents for distribution to Socialist Party activists, with the aim of clearing Rassinier's name and convincing them to lift their ban on him.

<sup>3</sup> In recent years, many studies of Holocaust denial in France have been published. The most comprehensive, it seems, is Valérie Igounet, *Histoire du négationnisme en France* (Paris: Seuil, 2000). There is an interesting analysis of the denial phenomenon on the French left in Alain Finkielkraut's earlier book, *The Future of a Negation: Reflections on the Question of Genocide*, trans. Mary Byrd Kelly (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). A direct confrontation with the French deniers, especially Faurisson, and their arguments is to be found in Pierre Vidal-Naquet's earlier work, *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present*, trans. and ed. David Ames Curtis (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). For a broader perspective, locating Guillaume and his friends in a shifting scene of the radical (mostly Trotskyite) left, see Jean-Jacques Becker and Gilles Candar, *Histoire des gauches en France*, vol. 2: *XXe siècle: À l'épreuve de l'histoire*, 2nd ed. (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), esp. 119–134. See also Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (London: Penguin Books, 1994). In this comprehensive study, unfortunately, Lipstadt does not seem to fully recognize the specificity of the left-wing denial.

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## THE ORIGINS OF AN IDEOLOGICAL PERVERSION: THE ANARCHO-PACIFISM OF PAUL RASSINIER

Paul Rassinier (1906–1967) was a key figure in this affair.<sup>4</sup> His story is not only inherently interesting but also quite instructive. What at first glance seems merely a bizarre and meaningless curiosity is, in fact, a tale of some significance. First of all, Rassinier was widely influential; his writings, revelatory as they were to our friend Guillaume, became thereby an important factor in making Holocaust denial a public issue in France. Even more significantly, Rassinier's story, in its very dubiousness, illustrates a kind of perversion to which ideologies – in this case an ideology of what is called “the left” – are prone. It is no accident that Rassinier ended up collaborating with the radical, anti-Semitic right; no accident that he had successors like Guillaume and his friends; and no accident that the message he preached was widely accepted.

As a youth, Rassinier joined the Communist Party; he later became an activist in the Socialist Party, and all his life he held pacifist and proto-anarchist views. Despite his pacifism, he joined the Resistance in World War II, though he never took part in any activity of a violent nature. He was caught by the Gestapo, tortured, and sent first to Buchenwald. A while later, he was transferred to Dora, a work camp where thousands of slave laborers (along with German and non-German volunteers) were employed building the V1 and V2 rockets. Very few survived the terrible conditions in this camp.

After the liberation, Rassinier was politically active for a short time in the Socialist Party, even being elected to the National Assembly (the one that, immediately after the war, laid the foundations for the Fourth Republic). When his brief political career came to an end, Rassinier began to write. He composed and published a long series of books and other works dealing mainly with what we call denial of the Holocaust. In his first work, which appeared in 1948, he described his life as a camp inmate. This essay is of considerable interest as testimony to the terrible reality of the concentration camps. But we already see in it the writer's intention to provide a counterweight to other descriptions of the Nazi concentration camps, provided by other survivors as part of a literature that began to appear at this time. Rassinier, as an eyewitness, tried to show that there was nothing unique about the Nazi camps.

<sup>4</sup> On Rassinier, see Florent Brayard, *Comment l'idée vint à M. Rassinier: Naissance du révisionisme* (Paris: Fayard, 1996); and Nadine Fresco, *Fabrication d'un anti-Semite* (Paris: Seuil, 1999). What follows here relies mainly on Fresco's book.

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In 1950 the book that was to prove such a revelation to Guillaume, *La mensonge d'Ulysse* (Ulysses' Lie), was published. It was here, in effect, that explicit Holocaust denial on the part of the left began.<sup>5</sup> In Rassinier's view, the memoirs of former prisoners and survivors of the Nazi concentration camps presented a distorted view of the phenomenon of the camps. Telling what the hardships of the camps had been like, they were like Ulysses, who, each day, embarked on another adventure in his odyssey: they painted an unnecessarily black picture. Rassinier was particularly opposed to efforts to present a Manichaean view of the modern world, to depict Nazi Germany as the incarnation of absolute evil and what had been done in the concentration camps as uniquely wicked. Rather, he sought to be precise and truthful. Among others, Rassinier took issue in his book with the interpretation of the world of the Nazi camps presented by another former Buchenwald inmate, David Rousset. Rousset's writings represent, on the whole, an important attempt, one of the first and most significant made after the war, to understand the Nazi phenomenon. Rassinier disputed Rousset's interpretation of the camps, according to which the real purpose of what went on there was the absolute destruction of whole categories of human beings whom the Nazis saw as mortal enemies. It was not only physical destruction, that is, systematic murder, but also symbolic destruction – humiliation and, in fact, eradication of the victims' humanity – that necessitated keeping them alive as prisoners over long periods of time. According to Rassinier, the camps were merely another manifestation, however extreme and cruel, of the universal logic of exploitation and enslavement. Holding prisoner masses of people who were on the verge of death, while negating their dignity and humanity, was not part of a policy of destruction (indeed, had no symbolic significance) but rather flowed from utilitarian considerations and was done according to the inexorable logic of war *qua* war. The Germans needed the prisoners' labor, and wartime conditions meant that putting masses of people to work for the good of the Reich – employment that did not differ in principle from the way all countries exploit the labor of their citizens – would result, in an

<sup>5</sup> In 1979 La Vieille Taupe published Rassinier's first two works in a single volume entitled *Mensonge d'Ulysse*. The first part, originally titled *Passage de la ligne*, was renamed *L'expérience vécue*, and the second, originally titled *Mensonge d'Ulysse*, was renamed *L'expérience des autres*. An English translation of the combined work was first published as *Debunking the Genocide Myth: A Study of the Nazi Concentration Camps and the Alleged Extermination of European Jewry* (Los Angeles: Noonday, 1978) and later retitled *The Holocaust Story and the Lies of Ulysses: A Study of the German Concentration Camps and the Alleged Extermination of European Jewry* (Los Angeles: Noonday, 1978). The latter can be accessed at <http://www.ihr.org/books/rassinier/debunking.shtml>.

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unusual way, in the death of many prisoners. But the Nazi camps, Rassinier said, were not the result or expression of any particularly murderous philosophy, different in principle from anything else produced by the state or the enslavement and exploitation upon which it depended.

*Ulysses' Lie* purports to be an original contribution to the debate that began in the French left after the nature of the Stalinist regime and its gulags came to light. Rassinier was opposed to presenting the Nazi camps as the embodiment of a special wickedness. He also opposed singling out the Soviet and German camps as the sole expressions of an unprecedented evil, that of totalitarianism. He had been against the tendency before the war among historians, political scientists, and other intellectuals to comprehend these two twentieth-century regimes, the National Socialist and the Soviet, under the rubric "totalitarianism." According to him, Nazi concentration camps were not really a unique historical phenomenon. Not only did they not differ from Soviet camps; they did not differ from French penal institutions either: a camp is a camp is a camp, as we were to hear fifty years later from various self-styled progressive writers.<sup>6</sup> It is merely an expression, more or less severe according to circumstances, of the essence of the state as such, not just of the Nazi SS state or even the totalitarian state. For Rassinier, the underlying logic of the essence of the state is the logic of war and enslavement. The task of the intellectual of the left, especially one who himself has witnessed such events, is, on the one hand, to warn against the Manichaeism that places all the blame on one side, thus provoking war, and, on the other hand, to strip the other side of its claim to moral superiority. It is war itself that is the absolute evil, not one warmongering party or another.

What makes this anarcho-pacifist argument somewhat questionable is, of course, the gas chambers. About these, Rassinier has the following to say: one of the fixed features of life in the camps was the "selection," a result of the need to distinguish between prisoners fit to work and all kinds of sick and handicapped people who could not. The brutality of the selection in certain camps was such that those who survived believed they had been saved from the gas chambers. The accepted claim that the gas chambers were used for extermination cannot, he admits, be completely denied. But, he says, if one day we discover in the Nazi archives documents showing that gas chambers were built for purposes other than extermination – and we can never

<sup>6</sup> This is the view of Giorgio Agamben, for example, a new prophet with disciples in Israel as well. See my discussion in Chapter 2. For a comprehensive history and critique of "progressive" ideologies, see Pierre-André Taguieff, *Les contre-réactionnaire: Le progressisme entre illusion et imposture* (Paris: Denoël, 2007).

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know what “the terrible scientific genius of the Germans” was capable of inventing – “then we shall have to admit that the use [of the gas chambers for killing] was, in certain cases, the work of one or two mad SS men” or of some camp bureaucrats. One way or the other, he adds, there is a revealing fact that must be pointed out and has never been properly stressed: “In those few camps where gas chambers were found, they were next to the sanitation facilities, used for disinfection and showering, ... and not next to the crematoria.” What is more, the materials used in the gas chambers do not necessarily indicate intent to kill. Yes, thinks Rassinier, there were indeed gas chambers, and people were killed in them, but the numbers killed were much smaller than those generally given. In the last analysis, what is really bad about the gas chambers is that the rumor about them has contributed to the myth that the Nazi concentration camps were unique.

Jews are hardly mentioned in Rassinier’s book, and extermination is not dealt with there as a particularly Jewish matter. The argument is on a general political level, as it were, largely within the left-wing camp. But the Jewish context is not absent from the postwar literature of denial. The first of the French deniers was Maurice Bardèche, a professor of literature, a rightist, and an avowed anti-Semite, who immediately after the war maintained that both Vichy and the collaboration had been legitimate and that the tale of extermination was a distortion and a lie. Bardèche also claimed, as early as 1948, that it was actually the Jews who had been responsible for the world war, and it was mainly they who had invented the lie that the Germans had been responsible for it, a lie they were spreading in order to win control of Palestine. What motivated Bardèche, above all, was the struggle against De Gaulle’s republicanism and, especially, his sharp opposition to hunting down the *collabos*, that is, those who had collaborated with the German occupation of France, in the course of which his brother-in-law Robert Brasillach, one of the leading intellectuals of the fascist, Vichy-supporting right wing in France, had been executed.<sup>7</sup> Bardèche is a typical Holocaust denier, a rightist anti-Semite of the nationalist, racist, Catholic variety. He is of interest to us for two main reasons. First is the very early date – almost immediately after the war – that, in his writing and diverse public activity, he began a systematic campaign of denial that the Jews had been exterminated by the Nazis. The other, more important reason is the alliance that was quickly made between him and Rassinier. In fact, it was Bardèche who was mainly responsible for bringing Rassinier to public attention and making

<sup>7</sup> On Brasillach, see, e.g., Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).



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him a significant public figure in France, beginning in the early 1950s. The connection between Bardèche and Rassinier made for an alliance of radical right and radical left concerned mainly with denial of the Holocaust. Thus, by a kind of perverse osmosis, the basic themes of this denial crossed the boundary separating the two political camps, creating a shared ideology: anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, anti-Israelism, anti-Communism, and pacifism. Rassinier himself, incidentally, was drawn more and more to the radical right, although he continued to be tied in various ways, particularly in the many articles he published, to several anarchist and pacifist groups on the radical left. Eventually, most of his left-wing friends distanced themselves from him, not so much because of his anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, or Holocaust denial, but because of his close ties with the neofascist right; but this estrangement was never complete. The theory disputing the claim that the Jews had been exterminated gained a real foothold among some radical left-wing groups. In different guises and incarnations, it became an ideological mainstay of certain not-insignificant circles on the left, especially in France but also in Europe generally and in North and South America.

In any event, Rassinier did not rest content but continued to write books and articles on a variety of subjects. In 1962 his book *La véritable procès Eichmann ou les vainqueurs incorrigibles* appeared (published in English as *The Real Eichmann Trial, or The Incurable Victors*).<sup>8</sup> In this book, and in a kind of ongoing crescendo throughout his writings (Rassinier wrote and published twelve books), there was an increasing focus on two main points, between which there was an interesting dialectical relationship. On the one hand, Rassinier's opposition to the attempt to present Nazism and the concentration camps as a unique historical phenomenon became a more and more explicit rehabilitation of Germany and of Hitler. On the other hand, in a strange kind of mirror image, Rassinier found a decided uniqueness in the Jews and Zionism. More and more, his writings turned into a campaign of blame: Israel was the true enemy; it, rather than Nazism, was the embodiment of evil; and it was also different from all other countries. Rassinier's last book, published shortly before his death, is entitled *Those Responsible for the Second World War*, and its main argument is that Jewish influence (on leaders like Roosevelt, Churchill, and Leon Blum) caused the outbreak of the war. As he noted in *The Real Eichmann Trial*, "Massed at the foot of a world-sized wailing wall, day and night for fifteen years, Zionists from all over the world – all Israelis are not, happily, Zionists – have cried unceasingly,

<sup>8</sup> Paul Rassinier, *The Real Eichmann Trial, or The Incurable Victors* (Silver Spring, Md.: Steppingstones, 1979; Ladbroke, Southam, Warwickshire: Historical Review Press, 1979).

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every day more gruesomely, every day more agonizingly. The purpose is to publicize what they consider the true and apocalyptic proportions of the horror and the tortures the Jewish world suffered from Nazism, and thereby to increase the amount of reparations which the State of Israel receives from Germany” (p. 47). Rassinier also announced on the flyleaf of his last book that he was about to publish a history of the State of Israel.

Rassinier’s main factual claim, one that became the symbolic focus of the entire phenomenon of denial, was that systematic murder in the gas chambers never took place. On the basis of numerous, exhaustively documented calculations, he reached the conclusion that the number of Jews in Europe before the war was some seventeen million, of whom about a million died in the course of the war. On this basis, he posed a hermeneutical question: what conclusion may be drawn from the fact that the Jews had been concentrated in special camps? The answer was: nothing, except that this was a logical outcome of the racist character of Hitler’s Germany. True, he maintained, there were no moral grounds for discriminating against the Jews, “but then, the fact that in no country in the world is an alien given a post of command is not the question” (*ibid.*, p. 108). Hitler, whose sole objective was to protect Germany’s racial purity, was prepared to allow the Jews to emigrate. But no one, including those who today attack Germany so self-righteously, was prepared to take them in. The only difference between Nazi Germany and other countries was that, in the latter, “foreignness” was determined by citizenship, whereas in Germany it was a matter of race. “But in Israel there are no Arabs who are schoolmasters, finance administrators or administrators of a kibbutz, or ministers. What takes place in Israel does not justify what took place in Germany, I repeat – if only because one cannot justify one wrong with another” (*ibid.*). This is worth repeating: it is not that Israeli actions cannot be justified by Nazi evil but, on the contrary, that Israel’s crimes do not justify (retrospectively, of course) those of the Germans. Israel is radically evil and, indeed, the standard of evil by which other manifestations of it are to be measured.

Quite a bit has been written about Rassinier in recent years. The story of a man of the left, a member of the Resistance, who had been imprisoned in the camps and was among the few to survive the depredations of Dora, but who, when he came back from the war, became one of the chief Holocaust deniers and an associate of the extreme, fascist, anti-Semitic right wing – while continuing to view himself as a socialist and pacifist – has made him an object of curiosity and wonderment. What is ostensibly unique about this perversion but, in fact, not characteristic of it alone is the path taken by Rassinier from the pacifist, anarchist left to the radical, nationalistic, Vichyite, pro-Nazi