
Reference To 'Denial: History On Trial' And Meaning Of Good History

Denial: History on Trial is a film that portrays a court case between David Irving and Deborah Lipstadt. In Lipstadt's book, she calls Irving, a writer of books on World War II, "one of the most dangerous spokespersons for Holocaust denial." This eventually led to Irving filing a libel suit against Lipstadt and her publisher. Some, as the movie name suggests, thought of the case as putting history and the Holocaust on trial; however, as David Cesarani writes, "The outcome of the trial will not alter events from 1933 to 1945. What was at issue – it can't be said too often – was Irving's methodology and historiography, not what happened in the 1940's." Yet, is a history not all about interpretation? Are historians not merely giving their opinions about the past? Why, then, was Irving's opinion "at issue"? Through examining Irving's case, this essay analyses the good history and what makes good history with reference to second-hand sources of other historians' views on the matter.

When Irving argued in his book that Hitler had not known about the extermination of the Jews, let alone ordered it; and instead had tried to stop the antisemitism of his generals; it, most obviously, went against the years of research historians had done and the conclusions historians had developed about the Third Reich. The occurrence of the Holocaust and Hitler's involvement in it was so factual that in Germany, "the historical reality of the Holocaust was anchored in law as legally indisputable." Despite Irving claiming on multiple occasions that he had discovered the objective truth about Nazi Germany, it is not. It is a product of his selective use of sources and manipulation of evidence, of which he himself had commented about, "Every historian has to be selective." Good history, on the other hand, is the truth. Although Taylor and Trevor-Roper faced disagreements upon the Taylor's book *The Origins of the Second World War*, they agreed unanimously that "the truth matters above all, that indeed truth is the real priority for good historians." What makes it so difficult, however, is the nature of historical truth. While there is "nothing absolute about historical truth... and only an estimation," it has to be "based upon what the best available evidence tells us." The truth is also "elusive and at times unbearably hurtful." American scholar Iris Chang unveiled the truth of what happened in the Nanking Massacre in 1938 and found it so brutal that she took her own life. However difficult the search for truth is, good history is about the truth as "the past has reality and this reality is susceptible to objective study by historians and that historical truth and falsehood have demonstrable meaning," which is eventually reflected in the final judgement of Irving's trial.

Macmillan writes, "Bad history tells only part of complex stories." Thus, good history would be complete and whole, no matter how complex it is. Irving does not do this. As mentioned above, he himself believes that "Every historian has to be selective," when asked whether he was a partisan historian in 1993. That is not good practice for history. An example of incomplete history would be record of history during World War II. Winston Churchill was given free run of the records by the government to allow him to write his history of WWII which resulted in a "sweeping and magisterial account which glossed over many awkward issues." Debates within cabinet in May 1940 was mentioned rarely with little detail; there was no discussion recorded of what Britain should do when France had been defeated by the Nazis, only unanimity that it must fight on. In truth, records show that alternatives were considered properly, for example, whether

Mussolini was willing to negotiate peace. Histories “were not meant to whitewash the record.” Good histories painted a complex and whole picture, where things are seldom absolutely black or absolutely white. Too often does bad history “make a sweeping generalisation for which there is not adequate evidence and ignore awkward facts that do not fit.” Macmillan raises an example where the Treaty of Versailles made between the Allies and Germany was thought to be the reason for World War II, which actually overlooked several factors such as treatment were not as severe as Germans claimed and many Americans later thought; reparations were cancelled by Hitler when he came to power while the financial problems in the 1920s in Germany were a result of the Weimar Republic’s fiscal policies. Good historians do not ignore these loopholes which do not fit into their arguments; and instead, consider the past in all its complexity.

Although history has to be whole, it would be immensely difficult to read over every single origin source as the material historians have to deal with is so vast and research is ever so time-consuming and financially demanding. Therefore, historians should “rely on each other’s work”. It is an important part of the process of historical research. There is fault in only considering first-hand sources, which Irving did during his research of the Third Reich, as “the idea that those who actually took part in great events or lived through particular times have a superior understanding to those who come later is a deeply held yet wrong-headed one.” “Being there does not necessarily give greater insight into events,” and taking Macmillan’s own experience into account, she was alive during the Cuban missile crisis and only knew of what was reported in the media; she had no idea of the debates in Washington and Moscow about how to deal with the crisis, nor would she have any idea of Kennedy’s secret channels of communications with the Soviet. Writing a historical account based on her memories would not provide anywhere near an accurate depiction of the Cuban missile crisis. Moreover, with the advancement in psychological knowledge, it is understood that “memory is not only selective, it is malleable.” Primary sources are valuable, but not entirely trustworthy, thus history that is based on solely first-hand sources, as Irving prided himself in, is not ideal. The assertions and judgements made by good historians should always be supported by evidence and argument, with argument being opinions of other historians.

Lipstadt argued that Irving’s denial of the Holocaust was the product of political bias and political extremism, which was later vindicated by the court’s judgement. Objective history makes good history. Clearly, Irving fails to do this. Lipstadt also argues that Irving, being so familiar with historical evidence, “bends it until it conforms with his ideological learnings and political agenda.” This is a serious issue as when biased history is published and the public reads it, non-specialized people who do not have an in-depth knowledge of the subject are likely to believe it, and it is possible that their values, such as definitions of justice and equality, are affected. In Irving’s case, without the consideration of the Holocaust being commonly acknowledge, his work, reflecting his antisemitic values and anti-Jewish political agenda, could possibly affect the public’s views on Jews. Good historians, therefore, should attempt to put aside their own biases, including political views, to produce objective history.

Writing skill and tone is a crucial factor to good history as well. Writers who “hoped to make money by writing sensational exposes” with history is an example of bad history. Irving could be considered one as he goes against what is publicly and commonly known of the Nazi Regime. His writing tone is criticized by Professor David Cannadine to be “at best casually journalistic and at worst quite exceptionally offensive,” which places bias into the writing, making Irving unaccountable as a good historian. Good historians should “want to communicate,” in their

writing. With a vast amount of research that took an immense effort, historians should hope to present their discoveries to the public and an “exhaustively researched project might be in danger of sinking under the load of its own documentation,” and literacy skills are required to ensure this does not happen.

In conclusion, many elements build to good history, significantly truthfulness, completeness and complexity, being supported by other historians’ arguments or secondary sources, objectivity and literacy skills. Irving, having lost the libel suit, is proven to be none of most of the above; he might have been a good writer, but he was not a good historian and he did not produce good history. Due to limited resources and time, a detailed investigation into the libel suit between Irving and Lipstadt was not conducted, and analysis of good history was mostly formed based on other historians’ approaches to the controversy. There are other aspects that contribute to good history which is not discussed above, such as research methodology or referencing, but the main arguments of what makes good history have been laid out with evidence of support.

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