

# ANTISEMITISM POLICY TRUST

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## Special Briefing



THE EFFECTS OF  
HOLOCAUST DENIAL

# Contents

- 3 Introduction**
- 4 Psychological Harm**
- 6 Physical and Wider Harms**
- 7 Has Counter Speech Failed?**
- 8 Holocaust Denial on Facebook**
- 9 Legal Challenges**
- 10 Conclusion and Recommendations**

## Introduction

Holocaust Denial, the act of denying the Nazi genocide against Jews, manifests in an assortment of forms. It might include denial of the gas chambers, the capacity of the crematoria in the camps or it can include denial of the scale of the crime of the Holocaust itself.<sup>1</sup> It is, in and of itself a form of antisemitic propaganda.<sup>2</sup> This form of anti-Jewish disinformation has been deliberately spread across the online space and has not been sufficiently dealt with by social media platforms' policies nor their enforcement.

Facebook and other platforms have taken action to prevent mocking or abusive content that includes Holocaust denial. The company says it will not remove denial posts from the platform that do not incite hate or violence against Jews. However, Holocaust denial that is supposedly 'factual' content or people 'getting it wrong', remains. This is the content which this paper is calling to be removed. That is pseudo-scientific content, falsely purporting to be historical or factually accurate.

Holocaust Denial is rooted in far-right antisemitic ideology and activism. It is a project to wipe the Holocaust from memory and convince people the Jews were behind a hoax narrative. That denial is now reaching vast numbers of people that would never consider themselves antisemites, in various global contexts, where knowledge of the Holocaust can be

frighteningly low and in which truth is under attack. Into that knowledge vacuum come Holocaust minimisers, revisionists and relativisers. New narratives both on the left and right accept the Holocaust happened but argue that the Palestinians are the new Jews or that various nationals suffered as much as Jews, reframing the Holocaust as a story of local victimhood and Jewish power. This is why on the left we hear claims of Hitler supporting Zionism and Holocaust survivor George Soros of Nazi collaboration. People choose their own facts on social media and in that context, the Holocaust can lose all meaning when denial is permitted. Counter-speech, as outlined below, is not having the desired impact.

This short briefing is not to evidence that the Holocaust happened; there is no legitimate debate. The Holocaust occurred. Six million Jews, alongside millions of other people, were murdered. As eminent Professor, Deborah E Lipstadt stresses, there is no 'other side' to the argument. This short paper aims to demonstrate the negative effects Holocaust denial has on both individuals who espouse it, those who are subjected to it and broader society in order to explain and evidence why such denial has no place on social media platforms and why they should protect their users by removing such content.

1 <http://auschwitz.org/en/history/holocaust-denial/denial-forms>

2 <https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/holocaust-denial>

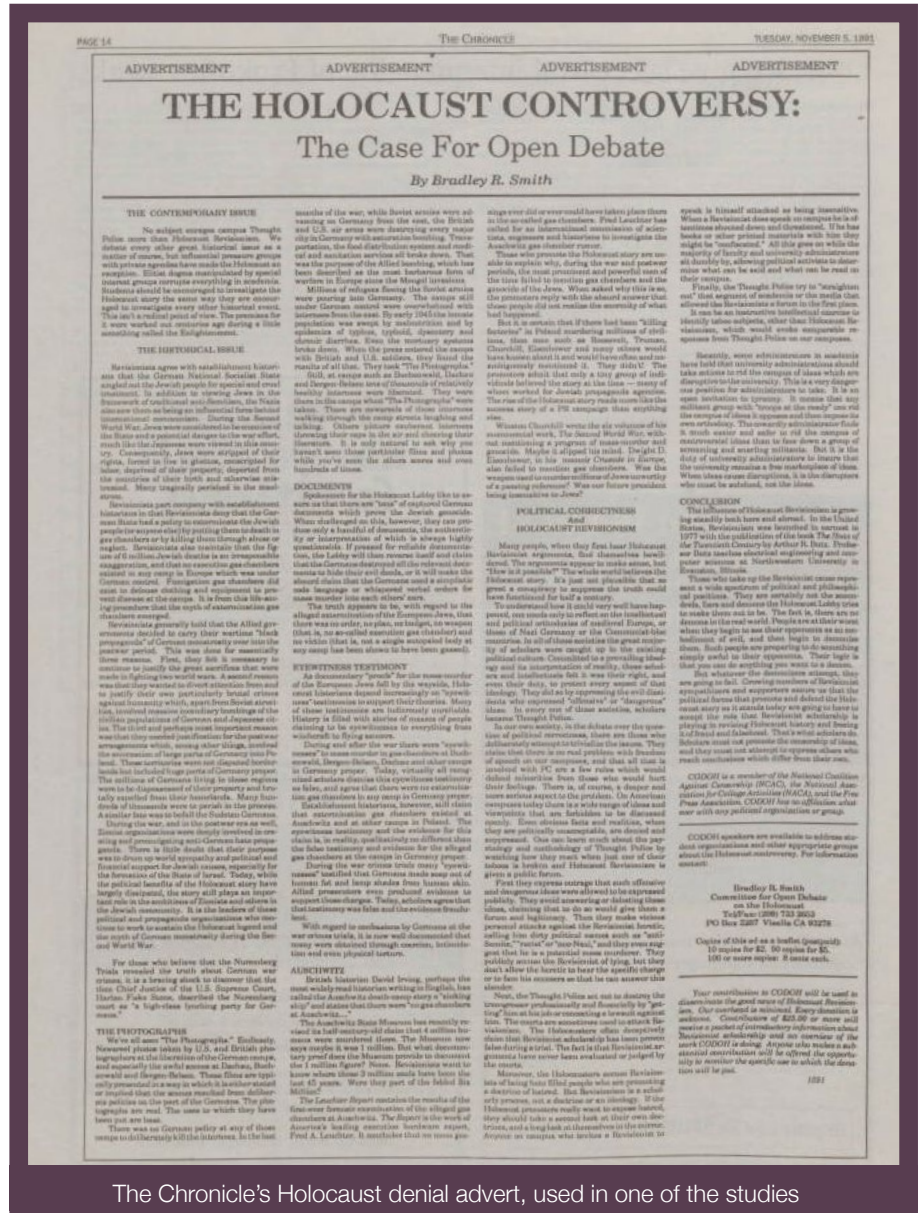
# Psychological Harm

Far from only affecting the person who espouses Holocaust denial, including those that unintentionally post Holocaust denial, such views have empirically been shown to cause others to begin to deny the Holocaust, causing a snowball effect of denial. In 1992, a study by Bob Altemeyer in Canada, exposed a group of university students to a pamphlet, written by Holocaust denier Thies Christopherson. The students, alongside a control group of students who had not seen the pamphlet, were tested for evidence of influence. Those exposed to the Holocaust denial pamphlet displayed significantly lower scores in Holocaust belief; exhibiting less confidence that the Holocaust took place.<sup>3</sup>

A second study was undertaken by Yelland and Stone, based on participants' level of authoritarian political stance, to analyse the effects of Holocaust denial material. Those with high levels of Right-Wing Authoritarianism, who read a Holocaust denial essay, believed less in the Holocaust than those who read the factual (non-denial) essay or the control essay.<sup>4</sup>

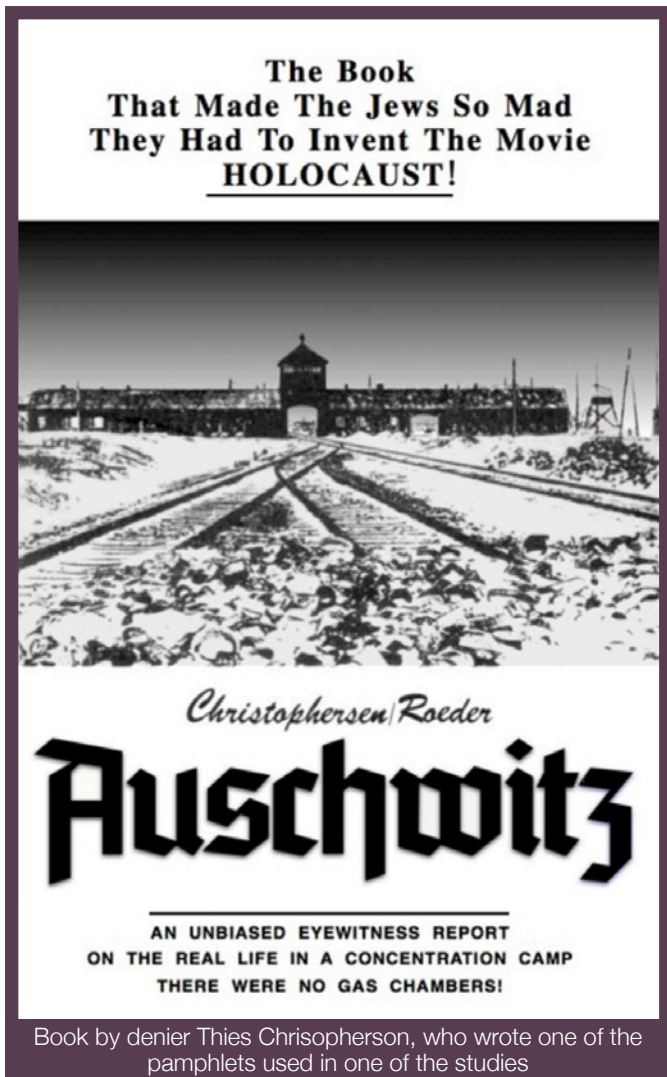
Studies have shown that even those with great knowledge of World War II are not immune to Holocaust denial propaganda, although those with significant prior knowledge of the Holocaust were less susceptible to such propaganda.<sup>5</sup> Another study, testing reactions to Holocaust denial advertisements placed in American college papers, was undertaken to understand the persuasiveness of

such material. The researchers found that statistically, those subjected to such denial material were more likely to place disbelief in the notion that the Holocaust took place.<sup>6</sup> The decline in certainty, from those not-exposed to such material, was labelled as “statistically significant” by the researchers, at 0.53 difference on a 0-100 scale.<sup>7</sup> The same study shows participants were prone to underestimating their peer’s certainty that the



The Chronicle's Holocaust denial advert, used in one of the studies

- 3 Lina Yelland & William Stone, 'Belief in the Holocaust: Effects of Personality and Propaganda', Political Psychology, Vol.17 (No.3), 1996
- 4 Ibid
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Vincent Prince, David Tewksbury and Li-Ning Huang, 'Third-Person Effects on Publication of a Holocaust-Denial Advertisement, Journal of Communication, Spring 1998
- 7 Lina Yelland & William Stone, 'Belief in the Holocaust: Effects of Personality and Propaganda', Political Psychology, Vol.17 (No.3), 1996



Holocaust took place,<sup>8</sup> emphasising the perception of an echo chamber beginning to emerge.

Sources which are profoundly hostile against a subject, such as groups and individuals pushing Holocaust denial as their sole agenda, are more likely to be trusted by those consuming such content.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that

in an online age, where sources are not always obvious, trusting users that view content perpetuated by other users, with strong records of promoting denial, are more likely to trust such content.

Fear of Holocaust denial itself, especially fear exhibited by Jews, has been proven in response to the publication of Holocaust denial material. In testing “third-person effects” of a series of Holocaust denial advertisements in American college newspapers, researchers found that Jewish students recognised the material as hostile and likely to cause others to believe in the harmful content.<sup>10</sup> The permission for such material to exist on social media platforms, including Facebook, one can hypothesise, might cause Jewish users to feel fearful of their effects, countering Facebook’s guidelines protecting people from material that can intimidate or exclude others.<sup>11</sup> Anecdotally, this is certainly the case. By allowing such content on the platform, social media companies are sending a signal to hostile actors that Jews are fair game; that they can be a legitimate target of revisionism which seeks to undermine a tragedy which still has a large effect on the Jewish community today.

Failing to remove Holocaust denial gives unlimited scope to those seeking to harm Jews to do so. Platforms professing to be tolerant and progressive, to have globally admirable values, cannot be said to be true to them when they permit denial on their platform. In reality, they are saying this antisemitic project has the platform’s backing.

8 Lina Yelland & William Stone, ‘Belief in the Holocaust: Effects of Personality and Propaganda’, *Political Psychology*, Vol.17 (No.3), 1996

9 Vincent Prince, David Tewksbury and Li-Ning Huang, ‘Third-Person Effects on Publication of a Holocaust-Denial Advertisement’, *Journal of Communication*, Spring 1998

10 Ibid

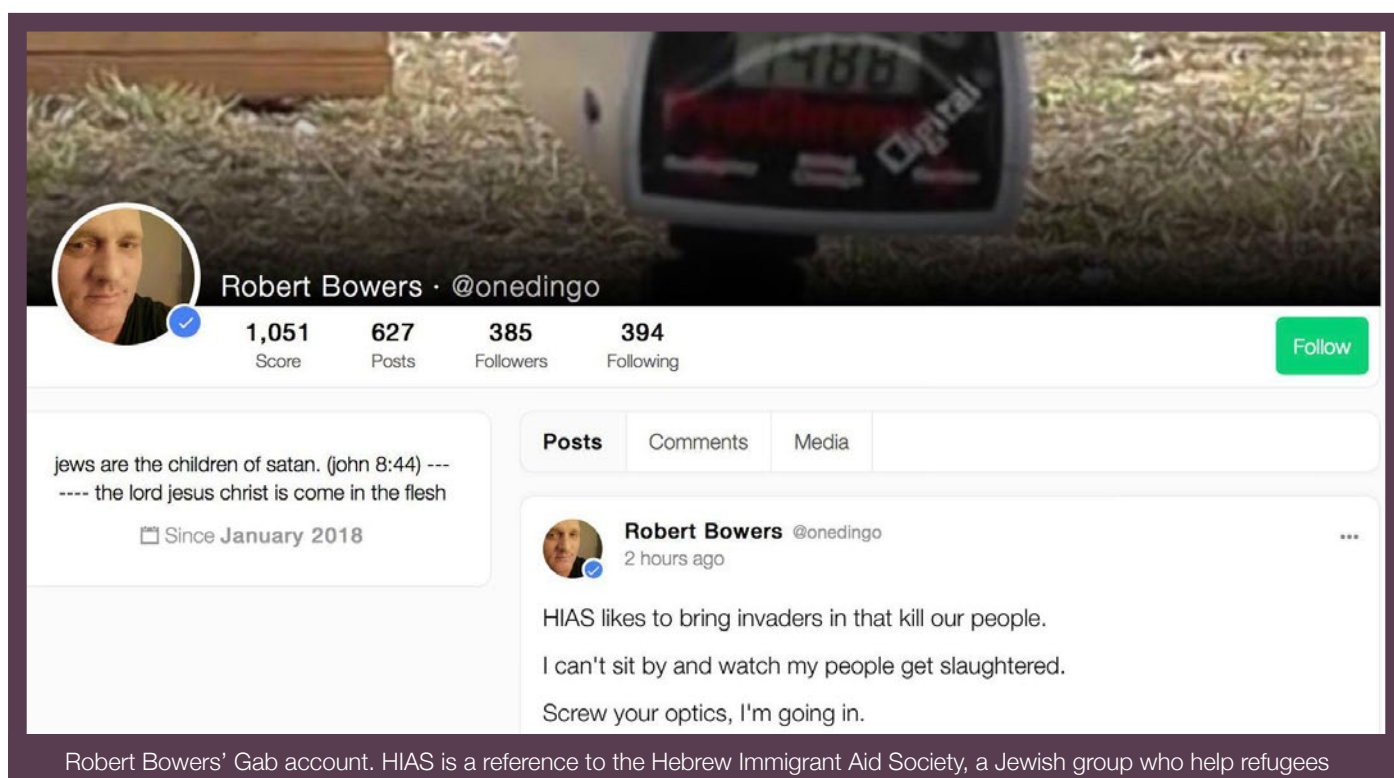
11 <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/>

## Physical and Wider Harms

Those who believe in Holocaust denial are also more likely to promote false conspiracy theories about Jewish control of the government and the media, in order to undermine the Jewish experience of the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> The European Union’s counter-terrorism coordinator, Gilles De Kerchove has highlighted the increase in such conspiracy theories in the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, and the violence and “new forms of terrorism” associated with such beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Bowers, who murdered 11 congregants in a Pittsburgh synagogue in 2018, was radicalised on the alternative platform, Gab. Bowers’ antisemitic posts were boosted by those on the platform who deny the Holocaust.<sup>14</sup> That his comments were posted to and consumed by those on Gab, should act as a warning sign to mainstream social media services that those engaging in violent extremism consume Holocaust denial content, and such content should have no place on their platforms.

The spread of Holocaust denial, once the domain of fringe groups such as the Institute for Historical Review, has seeped into the mainstream, including politics. Studies show that those exposed to Holocaust denial material are less likely to take issue with printing Holocaust denial advertisements in mainstream newspapers<sup>15</sup>. It can be hypothesised therefore, that once a person is exposed to such denial content, they are likely to then accept Holocaust revisionism elsewhere, such as in politics or online. For example, Arthur Jones, an eight-time US House of Representatives Candidate, has called the Holocaust the “biggest, blacked lie in history.”<sup>16</sup> Although Jones has failed to succeed in his election bids, in November 2018 he received 26.5% of the votes; his repugnant views have not turned people away from him.<sup>17</sup>



Robert Bowers’ Gab account. HIAS is a reference to the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, a Jewish group who help refugees

12 <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/holocaust-denial>  
13 <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/eu-security-chief-warns-over-new-terrorism-rooted-in-conspiracy-theories-1.506163>  
14 <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/holocaust-denial>  
15 Lina Yelland & William Stone, ‘Belief in the Holocaust: Effects of Personality and Propaganda’, *Political Psychology*, Vol.17 (No.3), 1996  
16 <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/holocaust-denial>  
17 Ibid

## Has Counter Speech Failed?

The idea that people can be educated against Holocaust denial, including online, has been proven to be partly false. Endeavours to implement campaigns and legislation to combat this form of hatred have been used by those who propagate such hate, as evidence for Jewish control of the mainstream media and government.<sup>18</sup> Studies into the effectiveness of counter speech itself, have also reflected this disappointing finding. One qualitative study undertaken in relation to YouTube, which analysed comments below a video aiming to provide counter speech against radical Islamist narratives, found that far from deradicalizing users, it attracted and promoted further hate speech.<sup>19</sup> Other studies have used big data to illustrate how speeches, such as that by former American President Barak Obama, whilst seeking to counter anti-Muslim hatred, in fact inspired an increase in anti-Muslim searches online.<sup>20</sup> Counter speech may work at

reaching larger audiences, not those engaged in harmful content, but the behavioural change effect is not proven.

If counter-speech and related campaigns fail in their objective to legitimately provide an alternative viewpoint which will be trusted by the user consuming harmful content, the only way to curb this hate and the consequences that flow from it is to remove it at its source. Third party groups cannot nor must they bear the burden of countering Holocaust denial, in place of such content being removed.

18 <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/holocaust-denial>

19 Julian Ernst, Josephine B. Schmitt, Diana Rieger, Ann Kristin Beier, Peter Vorderer, Gary Bente, Hans-Joachim Roth, 'Hate Beneath the Counter Speech? A Qualitative Content Analysis of User Comments on YouTube Related to Counter-Speech Videos', *Journal for Deradicalisation*, 2017

20 Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, *Everybody Lies*, 2017

## Holocaust Denial on Facebook

It is out of the scope of this briefing to perform a deep dive analysis of Holocaust denial which is present on Facebook, this has been shown in several studies.<sup>21, 22</sup> However, at least two of the six groups designated as Holocaust denial hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Centre<sup>23</sup> are operating in some capacity on Facebook, as of 2nd September 2020:

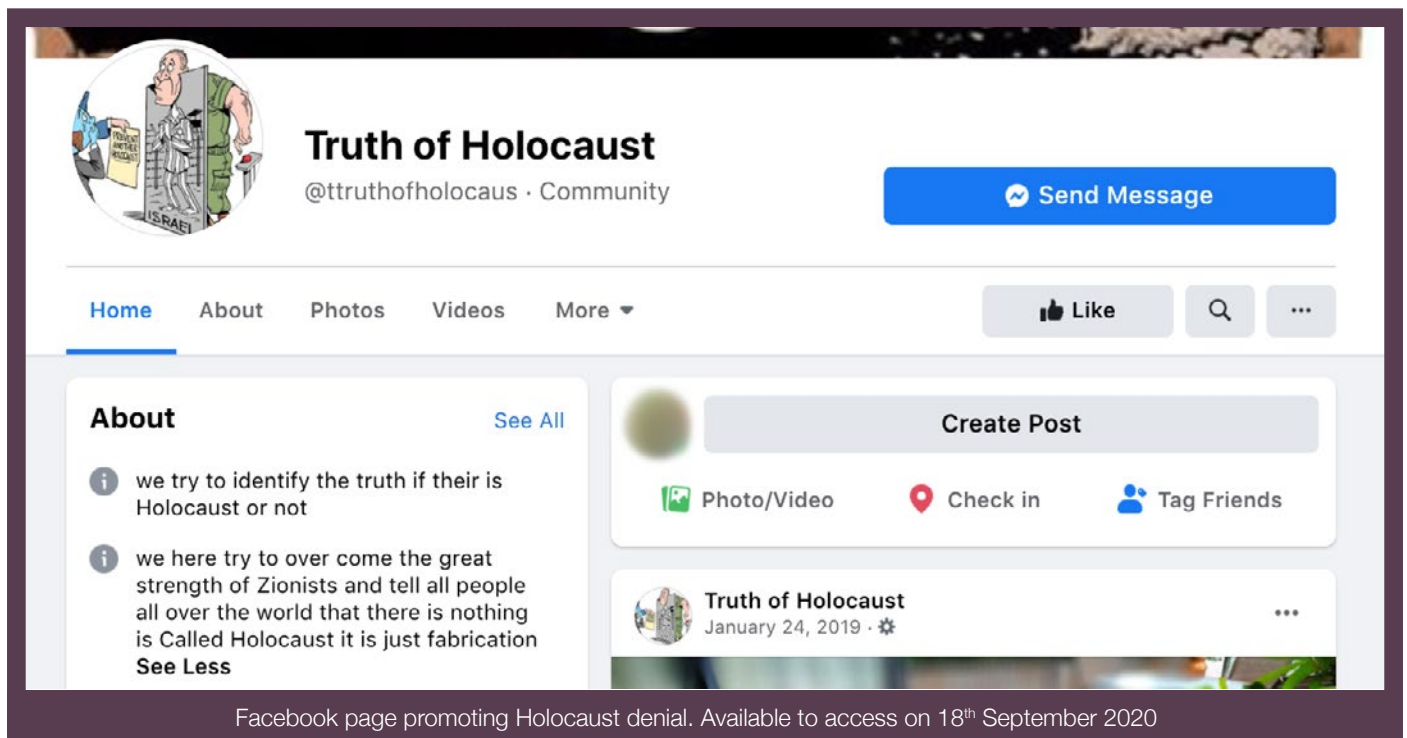
- Institute for Historical Review<sup>24</sup>
- Friends of The Barnes Review<sup>25</sup>
- The Reality Report<sup>26</sup>

A study by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) found that Facebook has allowed algorithms to “actively promote” Holocaust denial. By searching the

term “holocaust”, pages denying the holocaust and those dedicated to convicted Holocaust denier, David Irving, are promoted to users.<sup>27</sup> ISD found at least 36 groups, with a combined 366,068 users, dedicated to Holocaust denial content.<sup>28</sup>

As of 2nd September, by searching ‘holocaust’ in the Facebook search bar and choosing ‘Pages’ as a filter, pages dedicated to Holocaust denial are offered up the user, in addition to legitimate pages:

- Truth of the Holocaust<sup>29</sup>
- Holocaust Revisionists United<sup>30</sup>
- One Third of the Holocaust<sup>31</sup>



21 See: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Hosting the Holofoax, 2020

22 See: <https://www.adl.org/blog/facebook-has-a-holocaust-denial-problem>

23 <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/holocaust-denial>

24 <https://www.facebook.com/ihrpage/>

25 <https://www.facebook.com/friendsofthebarnesreview/>

26 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1875998969316320>

27 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/16/facebook-algorithm-found-to-actively-promote-holocaust-denial>

28 Ibid

29 <https://www.facebook.com/ttruthofholocaust/>

30 <https://www.facebook.com/nonconformist101/>

31 <https://www.facebook.com/One-Third-of-the-Holocaust-124671387669477/>



## Legal Challenges

Legally, Holocaust denial does not fall into the category of protected speech. The European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2019 against a British Bishop who was attempting to challenge a German court conviction for remarks he made on a Swedish television show.<sup>32</sup> Richard Williamson had claimed that there were no gas chambers under the Nazi regime. The Strasbourg court, to whom Williamson was appealing, threw out the case citing that Williamson had “sought to use his right to freedom of expression with the aim of promoting ideas contrary to the text and the spirit of the [ECHR].”<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, although Holocaust denial is not explicitly banned in the United Kingdom, blogger Alison Chabloz was prosecuted under Section 127 of the Communications Act for grossly offensive content, in the form of videos, posted onto YouTube.<sup>34</sup> The videos mocked the Holocaust and survivors in an attempt to deny the Holocaust through satire.

On Facebook, an unnamed Austrian woman had posted Holocaust denial and glorified Nazism. She was found guilty of publishing the post on the social media site, in 2017 and handed down a suspended sentence and fined.<sup>35</sup>

Holocaust denial is already criminalised in several states, including as Austria, Germany, Hungary and Romania. The 2003 Additional Protocol to the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime has required states to criminalise Holocaust denial online if its intent is to incite hatred, discrimination and violence online.<sup>36</sup> Due to national laws, Facebook is therefore bound to remove Holocaust denial material in those states. Enforcement of a new policy to remove Holocaust denial on Facebook will simply need a scaled-up approach of procedures which already exist on the platform, due to Facebook’s legal obligation in states which outlaw Holocaust denial.



Bishop Richard Williamson on Swedish television espousing Holocaust denial



Alison Chabloz, convicted for grossly offensive communications for Holocaust denial song

32 <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/law/strasbourg-throws-out-britons-holocaust-denial-free-speech-claim/5069120.article>

33 Ibid

34 Mike Whine, Countering Holocaust Denial in the 21st Century, April 2020

35 Ibid

36 Ibid

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Holocaust denial propaganda can directly lead those exposed to it to doubt the existence of the Holocaust. People subjected to and influenced by this content, unchecked by social media platforms, are more likely to then engage in further anti-Jewish conspiracy theories and harms, which have been banned by Facebook,<sup>37</sup> Instagram,<sup>38</sup> and that has been deleted by YouTube in the past.<sup>39</sup> In order to stop the spread of the inflammatory anti-Jewish conspiracies and harmful content which contravenes platforms' policies, it is clear that all platforms should ban Holocaust denial and enforce that ban effectively. YouTube has already implemented this policy, by banning content that denies established violent events took place, including the Holocaust, or the shooting at Sandy Hook school.<sup>40</sup> After its implementation, the spread of linked material

on YouTube significantly decreased, protecting users from this form of hateful content.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the removal of such content from Facebook, the groups, users and pages, whose sole purpose is to actively engage in Holocaust denial, or "review", and often anti-Jewish hatred, such as those outlined by the Southern Poverty Law Centre and ISD, should also be banned from the platform.

37 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/aug/12/facebook-and-instagram-ban-antisemitic-conspiracy-theories-and-blackface>

38 Ibid

39 <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52517797>

40 <https://blog.youtube/news-and-events/our-ongoing-work-to-tackle-hate/>

41 Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Hosting the HoloHoax, 2020



The Antisemitism Policy Trust's mission is to educate and empower parliamentarians, policy makers and opinion formers to address antisemitism. It provides the secretariat to the British All-Party Parliamentary Group Against Antisemitism and works internationally with parliamentarians and others to address antisemitism. The Antisemitism Policy Trust is focussed on educating and empowering decision makers in the UK and across the world to effectively address antisemitism.

## Contact APT



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