

Holocaust denial and libraries

Should libraries acquire revisionist materials?

by John A. Drobnicki

Historical revision is a valid practice whereby historians reinterpret the past from different viewpoints and in the light of new documents or research. Those who deny the Holocaust, however, call themselves "revisionists" in an attempt to gain scholarly legitimacy, trying to align themselves with the historians of the 1920s and 1930s who reinterpreted the causes of the first World War.

But these present-day "revisionists" are not reexamining *causes*, they are denying *events* and twisting the truth to suit their own ideological purposes. Not only do they deny the attempted extermination of European Jewry, they further claim that this "hoax" has been perpetrated by "Zionists" to discredit and blackmail Germany for reparations, and to gain Western sympathy for the State of Israel.

Holocaust revisionists (known as "negationists" in France), therefore, seek to disprove one of the most fully documented events in modern history, which is testified to by survivors, perpetrators, collaborators, witnesses, and bystanders—and this documentation will continue to grow with the opening up of former Soviet archives.

In short, Holocaust-denial materials are based on deliberate fabrications of the historical record and are offensive not only to Jewish persons, but to anyone who believes

that history should be an accurate record of the past (or as accurate as possible).

Certainly these people have a right to say and publish whatever they want; but should we buy any of it, or accept donated copies of any of it, for our libraries? Should we block access to it on the Web?

Although this material is hate literature, the Library Bill of Rights says that "libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues."

I believe that libraries *should* acquire some revisionist materials (and not filter online access to it), not just because of intellectual freedom, but because they, like the earlier forged *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, are examples of anti-Semitism and prejudice that could, and should, be utilized by students and teachers as primary source materials to illustrate firsthand the ugly face of bigotry.

Rather than ignoring the Holocaust deniers, or deliberately blocking access to their Web sites (which would make them forbidden fruit that would be much more desirable), teachers and scholars should expose and refute their lies. That is the goal of several Web sites, including The Nizkor Project (<http://www.nizkor.org>) and The Holocaust History Project (<http://www.holocaust-history.org>).

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How to classify?

Aside from acquisition, access is the other problem relating to these materials. Neither the Library of Congress nor Dewey have created a separate classification for Holocaust revisionism, so libraries that own these books generally have them classified in the Holocaust history section, shelved side-by-side with the standard works. However, libraries that do not find this suitable could classify Holocaust-denial to more accurately reflect its content—anti-Semitism and prejudice are but two of the examples that have been offered as alternative classifications in the literature, which would move them from the history section.

Admittedly, this is a very sensitive issue, but it is one that is not going to just go away. Although we have tried to ignore them, revisionists continue to publish and distribute this material (which now includes videos) and the deniers have become very active on the Internet, frequently targeting young people, who are by nature skeptical of “established history.” The major purveyor of this material in the United States is the Institute for Historical Review, which (along with its sister organization The Noontide Press) is a subsidiary of the Legion for the Survival of Freedom.

Within the next decade or two, there may be no Holocaust survivors still living, leaving no one able to point their finger at a revisionist and say, “You’re a liar! I was there.” As librarians, we believe in intellectual freedom and abhor censorship, nevertheless, doesn’t fighting to include Holocaust-denial literature in library collections leave a terrible taste in one’s mouth? ■

(“Collaborative . . .” cont. from page 460)

misrepresents the complexity of the issues. No single library can or should acquire and retain everything. To do so would be to disregard our home institution’s mission and to squander its resources. However, collectively we should be concerned with the survival of the print record broadly conceived. The Preservation of the Artifact Task Force is right to urge greater collaboration; however, the collaboration that is most needed, I believe, is collaboration among librarians themselves. Collecting, preserving, reformatting, and deaccessioning decisions should all be made with a sensitivity to the range of historical evidence the book embodies and with attention to the collecting programs of our colleagues in other libraries.

As I hope we all recognize, the problems facing research libraries are big ones. While there are many good reasons to embrace electronic texts, restraining the growth of a library collection is not one of them. The solution—or solutions, I should say—will continue to include big library collections. They will involve a substantial commitment of resources for unfashionable things like shelving and preservation measures. In order to serve our institutions well and serve the long-term interests of scholars, part of the solution must also be meaningful collaboration among librarians.

We should applaud the efforts of the Preservation of the Artifact Task Force for pushing for a greater recognition of the issues and for its advocacy on behalf of libraries. Even as we do so, however, we must also recognize that the 19th-century print record will survive or not, based on decisions librarians are making today. What we need are forms of collaboration that advance the mission of our research libraries, rather than strategies that retreat from that mission.

Notes

1. The “MLA Statement on the Significance of Primary Records” was drafted under the auspices of the MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of the Print Record and included representation from both the scholarly community and the library profession. The statement appeared in *Profession* 95 (New York: Modern Language Association, 1995): 27–28.

2. For a report on that discussion, see *C&RL News* 59 (September 1998): 570–71.

3. Deanna Marcum, “We Can’t Save Everything,” *New York Times* (July 6, 1998): A15. ■

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