

'We Will Win Because History Is On Our Side'

Historian Deborah Lipstadt exposed author David Irving for being a Holocaust denier in 1993. Now, she warns of the growth of what she calls "softcore" anti-Semitism. Trump and his kind, she says, are even more dangerous than those who openly agitate against Jews.

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Von Annette Großbongardt
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DER SPIEGEL: Professor Lipstadt, the trial of the Holocaust denier David Irving trial took place in London. How do you feel when you come back to the city today?

Lipstadt: Every time I come to London, I take the same hotel where I stayed then for 12 weeks during the trial. When we won in court, even taxi drivers and people in the street congratulated me. But the trial was not a pleasure, it was an ordeal, years of hard work. Luckily, I had wonderful lawyers and supporters. The court found Irving was a Holocaust denier, a racist and an anti-Semite.

DER SPIEGEL: He denied the mass murder of the Jews in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. He was also well connected with German neo-Nazis. He said that the Jews would keep coming back to the Holocaust because it was the only interesting thing they had ever experienced.

Lipstadt: It was unbearable how he made fun of Holocaust survivors. Before the trial, he once pointed to the tattooed camp number of a survivor and asked her how much money she had made from it. He claimed that more women had died in the backseat of Ted Kennedy's car in Chappaquiddick than in the Auschwitz gas chambers.

DER SPIEGEL: A reference to the 1969 car accident in which a woman in Kennedy's car was killed.

Lipstadt: That was his typical cynical attitude. It seemed that he got joy from the trial, as if it was somehow amusing.

DER SPIEGEL: Did you ever see him again after the trial?

Lipstadt: Never. He allegedly gives lectures and offers tours to former death camps in order to defend his lies. People regularly send me articles where he is quoted, then I write back that I'm no longer interested. This guy stole six, seven years of my life, that's enough.

DER SPIEGEL: At that time, you were under enormous pressure. Holocaust survivors were imploring you to save their history. What was your answer to them?

Lipstadt: I told them: We will win because history is on our side. So were the facts. We had very good evidence.

DER SPIEGEL: During the trial, Irving posed as an allegedly unjustly accused historian.

Lipstadt: Oh yes, that was his big show. He defended himself all by himself and there I was with all my lawyers. He loved to play the victim. But he had sued me, not the other way around. And he had many supporters, I believe, who also helped him with money. I feared the judge might come to the conclusion that although Irving did not tell the truth, he had done so in error.

DER SPIEGEL: Could you prove that he had lied deliberately?

About Deborah Lipstadt

Abbie Trayler-Smith/ DER SPIEGEL

Deborah Lipstadt was born in 1947 in New York to a family of Jewish immigrants. Her father was from Hamburg. A well-respected historian, she is a professor at Emory University in Atlanta. In her 1993 book "Denying the Holocaust," she unmasked the British author David Irving as a Holocaust denier. He sued her for defamation but lost the case in 2000. In early November, her new book "Antisemitism Here and Now" will be published in German ("Der Neue Antisemitismus").

Lipstadt: Yes. We followed even his footnotes back to the sources and were able to show how he had twisted the facts in order to exculpate Hitler. For example, about the "Endlösung" (final solution). In a book, Irving mentions the meeting in April 1943 between Hitler, Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Miklos Horthy, the Hungarian head of state. The Hungarians persecuted the Jews, mistreated them, but the Germans demanded more radical steps. He could not possibly murder them all, Horthy said. Hitler answered by saying that wasn't necessary. This was on the first day of the meeting. But on the second day, when Horthy protested again, Ribbentrop said the Jews had to be exterminated and sent to concentration camps. Hitler then broke into an anti-Semitic harangue: the Jews were like tuberculosis bacilli that would infect a healthy body. He agreed with Ribbentrop. Irving reversed the sequence, as if the meeting had ended with Hitler saying no need to deport the Jews.

DER SPIEGEL: Your success in court in the year 2000 is seen as historic. The newspapers spoke of a "victory of history." The Daily Telegraph even compared it to the war crimes tribunal of Nuremberg in 1946 and to the Eichmann trial of 1961. Wasn't that a bit much? Even today, Holocaust deniers still haven't disappeared. You yourself write in your new book: "They feel stronger than ever."

Lipstadt: The trial weakened the hardcore Holocaust deniers, those who say Auschwitz did not exist and there were no gas chambers. They are still around, but we amassed such historical evidence against their lies that they are far less of a threat. Today, we have the softcore deniers who say: Enough Holocaust, it's enough, it wasn't actually that bad. And: Israelis are also Nazis.

DER SPIEGEL: Alexander Gauland, head of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, recently said that Hitler and the Nazis were just a "speck of bird shit" on more than 1,000 years of "successful German history." Is that what you mean?

Lipstadt: Exactly, that's softcore denial. It's like Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the right-wing extremist Front National in France, who said the gas chambers are just a "detail" of history. The softcore deniers do not claim that it did not happen, but they put it in relative terms and say one also has to be proud of our history. They are even more dangerous than the hardcore deniers and harder to fight.

DER SPIEGEL: How so?

Lipstadt: Someone who is obviously lying is easier to identify. How do you fight a David Duke ...

DER SPIEGEL: ... a leading U.S. neo-Nazi and a former Ku Klux Klan leader. But he openly denies the Holocaust.

Lipstadt: He's a hardcore denier. But "white supremacists" among his followers, who believe in the supremacy of the white race, would not deny, but would say: "Hitler was not that bad, he wanted to create a pure ethno-state." Under Trump, they are experiencing an upswing. The question is: How do you defeat them without giving them more importance?

DER SPIEGEL: That's something we were hoping you might be able to answer.

Lipstadt: If I had a simple answer to that, I would have already published it as an op-ed in DER SPIEGEL. It is a big challenge that we all face. It always depends on the case. When students come to me saying, David Irving is going to speak in Atlanta, we'll go and protest! I say: Don't do that. If you go, the press will go there too and he'll get the front page. I'm not saying that you should simply ignore them. My point is: You have to fight smartly. Do not go berserk.

DER SPIEGEL: There is a lot of uncertainty among German lawmakers on both the state and federal level when it comes to dealing with AfD representatives. Initially, many just wanted to ignore them, but that's obviously hard to do in the day-to-day of politics.

Lipstadt: It's also not going to work. They have already gained a political foothold. You have to deal with them in terms of substance. You have to do your homework and ask: Do you have any evidence at all? Show me the facts. When Trump says George Soros paid the people protesting against Judge Kavanaugh, then I say: While Soros does support some organizations that reject Kavanaugh, there is no evidence at all that he paid women to testify or protest against him.

DER SPIEGEL: Do you think Trump supporters are even interested in facts? He just creates his own so-called "alternative facts."

Lipstadt: I don't want to condemn all Trump supporters, though many have fallen for his lies. We must try to unmask them. Today, truth is under attack and we must defend it aggressively and talk to those who may be fooled by his swindle. During the U.S. presidential campaign, a woman came to me who was unsure if she should vote for Hillary Clinton. She said: Hillary is sick. I asked: How do you know that? From the internet. Where on the internet, whose website? I do not remember. What evidence is there? She had none. On the fourth question, she gave up, realizing that she had believed a rumor.

DER SPIEGEL: Martin Schulz, the Social Democrat who ran against Chancellor Angela Merkel in the last election, recently got a fair amount of positive attention when he said in German parliament that Gauland belonged on the dung heap of history.

Lipstadt: Calling someone a shit may feel good, but it's not the answer. It does not help. Again, we must fight smartly. Many have compared Trump's policy of separating children from their parents at the border to the Holocaust. But that comparison is wrong. It's horrible, it's reprehensible, but it's not genocide. What we fight today is not fascism -- or

maybe, not yet fascism. It is populism, from the right and from the left. I am wary of Nazi comparisons, but what I see is a kind of ugly populism whose hateful rhetoric reminds me of how the National Socialists in Germany came to power. It's an ethnocentric populism, it feeds a dangerous mood, a sort of tyranny of the mob. Many Americans think Hitler came to power by a revolution, but he won elections. We should not forget that.

DER SPIEGEL: Populists are gaining broad support by claiming that only they speak for the people, for the underprivileged, for the losers of globalization who have lost their jobs and see no prospects for the future.

Lipstadt: It's too easy to say that populism is all about the worker who used to earn \$25 an hour, go on vacation, had a cottage in the countryside and a boat to go fishing boat -- and who now works in a 7-Eleven for \$9, or maybe \$7, an hour.

DER SPIEGEL: Why is that too easy?

Lipstadt: Trump's voters are not just angry workers. Among his followers are many successful, well-educated and wealthy middle- and upper-class Americans. Hitler's followers, too, were not all unemployed and disgruntled angry street mobs. Many "respectable" citizens ignored his extremism, his anti-Semitism, because they liked other parts of his policy. Something similar to this is what we are seeing in the United States today.

DER SPIEGEL: German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier recently said that the growing contempt for democracy reminded him of the Weimar Republic, Germany's pre-Nazi era democracy. Your publisher has even posed the question: "Are we going to return to the poisonous systematic brutality of the 1930s?" Are we?

Lipstadt: There is a lot of poison and brutality. But is it like in the 1930s? No, thank god. Or maybe not yet? There are disturbing signs on the horizon, Steinmeier is right. My colleagues Timothy Snyder and Chris Bowning have also been pointing out some parallels. When Hitler became chancellor, the conservatives who supported him believed that they could control him. They couldn't. So it is with Trump and the Republicans today. But the fact that Trump, with his narcissistic and autocratic tendencies, sometimes reminds us of Hitler at the beginning of his power does not mean that everything that took place between 1933 and 1945 will happen again. That it will end up in a genocide. But there is cause for concern.

DER SPIEGEL: What exactly do you mean?

Lipstadt: How the president is undermining confidence in the democratic institutions. How he calls an American judge of Hispanic origin a "Mexican judge." How he is casting doubt on the courts and on the integrity of the FBI as part of the judiciary. And on the media, which he just calls MSM, mainstream media, and repeatedly attacks them without any proof. This is extremely dangerous. In the United States, as in parts of Europe, we are witnessing a persistent attack on liberal democracy and an attempt to create an illiberal democracy, a soft version of dictatorship.

DER SPIEGEL: Do you think Trump is an anti-Semite?

Lipstadt: No, but he knows that his followers include many white nationalists, racists and anti-Semites. He will avoid anything that displeases them. That's why, after the race riots in Charlottesville in August 2017, where neo-Nazis shouted, "Jews will not replace us!" and "Our blood, our soil!", he spoke about "good people on both sides." He did not invent

hatred and racism, but he helps legitimize it by sending these extremists this message: Your racism, your hatred is OK. This happens also on the Left. Jeremy Corbyn, head of the British Labour Party, may not be an anti-Semite himself, but when it comes to the anti-Semitism of others, he shuts more than one eye, thus encouraging them. We are experiencing an irrational populism that feeds people's prejudices, their fears, their concerns for the future.

DER SPIEGEL: Do you believe it is possible to counter emotion with facts?

Lipstadt: A diehard populist or anti-Semite will probably not be impressed with facts, but perhaps people who might be attracted by the simplistic solutions of the populists will, if we show them how absurd the populist theses are.

DER SPIEGEL: Populists like to invoke the freedom of expression when bending the facts.

Lipstadt: It may surprise you, but I am against laws prohibiting the denial of the Holocaust. I understand very well why there is such a law in Germany and in Austria and in Poland. But I believe in freedom of expression. If anyone doubts the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, he should be able to say that.

DER SPIEGEL: You think it's OK to just let people claim that 9/11 never happened, or that it was some Jewish-controlled conspiracy?

Lipstadt: That's the price of freedom of speech. I find it more dangerous to let politicians choose what can and cannot be said. Just think of the U.S. at the moment and imagine President Trump and the new Supreme Court defining what you still can say! The media does have a special responsibility here.

And they do not have to spread such conspiracy lies. They can show that such claims are nonsense and entirely made up.

DER SPIEGEL: That sounds good, but how far can you really get with facts in times of fake news and filter bubbles? You yourself spoke in the Guardian last year of a "general sentiment out there that you have your facts, I have my facts, and whoever yells loudest wins."

Lipstadt: That's why I say: It's not easy. And that's why I wrote this book -- in order to contribute my analysis as a historian and to help understand what's going on. Because as long as we do not understand it, we cannot deal with it well.

DER SPIEGEL: You call it the new Anti-Semitism. What's new about it? Is it not just the same old stereotypes of the rich Jew who supposedly rules the world?

Lipstadt: For a long time, anti-Semitic conspiracy theories came from the right. Now we are seeing them on the left as well. Much of today's anti-Semitism also comes from parts of the Muslim community, with immigrants bringing it with them to Europe.

DER SPIEGEL: Yet in Chemnitz, during the far-right demonstrations there in September, it was German neo-Nazis who shouted: "Get out of Germany Jewish swine!"

Lipstadt: Yes, and they also hate Muslims. Yet we can't ignore the fact that there are Islamist anti-Semites who are also against an open society. In many other ways, anti-Semitism is as old as the New Testament.

DER SPIEGEL: The German government has adopted an anti-Semitism definition that also includes certain forms of criticism of Israel. Many find it hard to tell the difference between legitimate criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism?

Lipstadt: This intense hatred against Israel is relatively new in Europe, it gives the anti-Semites new energy. To say it very clearly: Of course one can criticize Israel's policies. And Israelis should be careful what they brand as anti-Semitism. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was wrong when he said that an EU-planned labeling of settler products was like the Nazi yellow star. But those who scorn Israel as a Jewish collective, who deny Israel's right to exist, who defend anti-Semites by saying, "see, what bad things Israel is doing." That is anti-Semitism.

DER SPIEGEL: What lessons can be drawn from the Irving trial for the fight against anti-Semitism and the denial of history today?

Lipstadt: You cannot fight every battle. But some battles you have to fight, and then you can't wait too long, otherwise it will be too late. If someone collapses in the street, it's too late for a first-aid course. Now is the time to prepare, to inform yourself and to get ready. And: It helps to connect with people who share the same values. Jews, non-Jews, Americans, Germans, all who are worried about the future of democracy now.

DER SPIEGEL: That also means intervening when you see anti-Semitism?

Lipstadt: Yes! When evil happens, there is no neutrality. If someone gets beaten up in the street and I just walk by, I'm on the side of the perpetrator. It is not only about Jews: Anti-Semitism should also be feared by non-Jews because it threatens the basic values of a democratic society. What begins with the Jews never ends with the Jews. If the Nazis had won, they would have killed millions more people.

DER SPIEGEL: Do you have a kind of compass when it comes to identifying "soft" anti-Semitism?

Lipstadt: If it's about Jews and money, Jews and power, "the Jews" who allegedly control the media. Mark Zuckerberg is Jewish, but the Jews are not Mark Zuckerberg.

DER SPIEGEL: What did you think of Zuckerberg's recent decision to not block Facebook for Holocaust deniers?

Lipstadt: I think that's a serious mistake.

DER SPIEGEL: In Berlin and other cities, many Jews no longer dare to take to the streets wearing a kippa.

Lipstadt: It is very depressing. I know about the attacks, I sometimes go to Germany too. A Berlin acquaintance who is Jewish told me about her daughter who saw an orthodox Jew walking down the street and she shouted: "Mommy, he can't walk around like that, that's way too dangerous!" When even a child thinks that you can no longer openly show that you are Jewish, something is very wrong.

DER SPIEGEL: Do you think it's wrong to hide the kippa under a baseball cap, or to avoid wearing one at all?

Lipstadt: I can understand that in some places. Where it is dangerous, you have to be careful. But in the long run, it is more dangerous if Jews suppress their identity. It reminds me of the British Jews who warned me before the trial against Irving that I that I shouldn't make such a fuss and find a compromise with him instead. I asked: What number of victims should I set for a deal? One million dead Jews? Two million?

DER SPIEGEL: What was the answer?

Lipstadt: Silence.

DER SPIEGEL: Professor Lipstadt, thank you for this interview.

<https://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-anti-semitism-historian-deborah-lipstadt-a-1235929.html>