

# THE GAS CHAMBER OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

And Other Writings on the Holocaust,  
Revisionism, and Historical Understanding

By Samuel Crowell

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## DESCRIPTION

Among scholars and the general public, the prevailing consensus holds that millions of European Jews were sent to death in gas chambers as part of an official Nazi policy of mass extermination during the Second World War. So entrenched is this consensus that throughout the Western world those who publicly question its accuracy are now routinely subject to censorship, academic censure, and even criminal prosecution. In contemporary society, no other species of dissident scholarship is met with comparably illiberal reaction.

In an intellectual atmosphere poisoned by acrimony and haunted by the specter of persecution, *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes* stands as a calm, deftly reasoned, and highly original affirmation of intellectual freedom. Drawing on extensive empirical and documentary evidence as well as methods of cultural criticism conventionally eschewed by field historians, Samuel Crowell argues that the “canonical” Holocaust gassing claim can be traced to a fateful crisis of modernism — a crisis revealed in popular texts and long-forgotten cultural ephemera. Spanning from the earliest broadcast atrocity rumors to the extermination narrative that was sealed at Nuremberg, Crowell’s probing analysis permits us to consider how a grim story emerged and evolved in the cyclonic momentum of an era marked by social upheaval, total war, and unprecedented technological change.

Though it has achieved the status of an underground classic, *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes* has until now been available only in samizdat editions and on the Internet. This definitive edition has been updated and revised and includes a new introduction by the author. In addition to the title essay, supplemental texts include an appended restatement of Crowell’s important monograph, “Bomb Shelters at Birkenau,” as well as the never-before-published essay, “The Holocaust in Retrospect.”

## FROM SAMUEL CROWELL'S PREFACE:

ONE PURPOSE OF THE WRITINGS in this compilation has been to present and discuss documents that have never been discussed elsewhere and to engage issues that are not typically engaged in the currents of traditional or revisionist Holocaust scholarship. It is my hope that this approach will stimulate thinking among readers who may come to the text with differing views. I have also attempted to provide a fair and useful summary of revisionist positions, since most major revisionist arguments are referenced. While I find many revisionist arguments compelling, I tend to state my conclusions modestly and with some ambiguity. There is a reason for this: I am not interested in “proving” or “disproving” the Holocaust; I am only interested in talking about it, and preventing others from being put in prison for talking about it. If my potential reader can grant me that one point of freedom, then everything else will flow out of it eventually. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to dam up free expression in this area, we will only be asking for trouble. Of that I remain convinced.

No amount of revisionism will overturn the moral calculus as it pertains to the German mistreatment and massacre of the Jewish people, nor will any amount of revisionism overturn the sharp break in Jewish history that the Holocaust represents; for by the end of the Second World War the thousand-year-long history of Ashkenazi Jewry in Eastern Europe had effectively come to an end. All fair minded people should respect and honor these moral and meta-historical judgments. A painful chapter in Jewish history will not be rewritten or revised in an antagonistic or threatening atmosphere.

Nevertheless, history, if it makes claim to be an academic discipline, should never lead with moral judgments. To do so creates the risk of distorting history to make it comport with our preferences. Any kind of ideology that heightens distinctions among groups of human beings, that extols the virtues of one group while demeaning the humanity of another group, will rob an individual human being, somewhere, of his or her unique dignity. Therefore I hope we can agree that racism, anti-Semitism, chauvinist nationalism, or group hatreds of any kind are incompatible with a just and life-affirming approach to our brief and contingent human existence. Even so, these negative aspects of human thought are not kept in check by carefully crafted historical narratives, or by laws, or by the police. They are only defeated by their opposite, which manifests itself in a libertarian and egalitarian mood, which respects and tolerates difference, and which recognizes the dignity of the individual human being, who has the right to think, to speak, and even the right to be wrong.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH SAMUEL CROWELL

AUTHOR OF

## THE GAS CHAMBER OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

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**NINE-BANDED BOOKS: I guess I'll begin by asking about your background. Maybe the short version?**

SAMUEL CROWELL: Well, I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, attended public schools, went into the service, got out and went to my hometown school, Berkeley, on the GI Bill. Then I got fellowship to go east, and I went to Columbia for several years. I studied mostly history and languages as an undergraduate, with concentrations in Russian history and African American history and wrote my senior thesis on German-Jewish history with an emphasis on philosophy. At Columbia, I studied Russian and East European history and the history of ideas and got two masters degrees. Then I started raising a family. I did not finish my dissertation that focused on themes in late 19th Century Russian history of philosophy.

**9BB: Can you describe how you first encountered Holocaust revisionism? What were your first impressions? Most academics seem predisposed to reject this type of material without delving very far; what kept your attention?**

SC: I first encountered revisionism via a news article in the *Oakland Tribune* in I believe the summer of 1977: it was a 500 word treatment on Arthur Butz' book, *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*. At the time, I thought it was amusing, since I assumed that this Butz character did not know as much about the Holocaust as I did.

However, I did not hear much about it subsequently. Moreover, since I had read quite a bit about Nazi Germany and its atrocities back in the 1960s, I did not want to go back there and get bogged down in those things. So at this point in my life I was deliberately ignoring 20th Century history, at least as regards Europe.

Some years later I was tasked with reading a stack of books on Nazi Germany. Simultaneously, I was obliged, as part of my graduate training, to study the Soviet Union. In those days—early 80s—it was customary to dismiss the atrocities attributed to the Soviet Union, as promoted by the likes of Solzhenitsyn and Robert Conquest, and to claim that these atrocities had been exaggerated and were quite possibly not true, since the only evidence that was being offered was testimonial and anecdotal. (I should stress that this is a valid

criticism, even if it is sometimes carried to extremes.) So then I started reading these books on Nazi Germany and I realized that I did not know this field at all; so I started following footnotes and consulting the sources so that I could evaluate these books intelligently, and the first thing that surprised me was that most of the evidence offered for Nazi atrocities—particularly as it concerned the camps—was also testimonial and anecdotal.

At this point, I felt that I must be missing something so I started asking around for sources, no one really had a handle on these things other than to recommend Hilberg or Reitlinger, so then I looked at them and found the same problem, and so then I started consulting the primary sources and after that started going through the stacks at the library looking for whatever it was that I was missing. Eventually, I found some books by Rassiner and a few months later I found Butz' book as well, and rather than finding the fire-breathing German nationalism or anti-Semitism that I had expected, I found them focusing on exactly the problems or gaps in the record that I had found myself.

By this time the summer was over, so I evaluated my texts, and left the matter. However, I have to say that I was somewhat surprised and rather depressed to find that the history of Nazi atrocity on which I was raised was clearly inaccurate and required revision. I left my studies of Nazi atrocity—which includes the Holocaust—and just assumed that someone else would do it. I knew I didn't want to do it. Several years later, when I browsed Arno Mayer's *Why did the Heavens not Darken?* in a bookstore, I was satisfied that Holocaust revisionism had come of age and that it would only continue. You can imagine my shock when I found out some years later that a movement was developing to make Holocaust revisionism illegal in the United States of America.

**9BB: Your book is subtitled, "And Other Writings on the Holocaust, Revisionism, and Historical Understanding." As you know, most journalists and public intellectuals refer to self-described Holocaust revisionists as "Holocaust deniers," and it's interesting that so many other forms of "denial" seem to have emerged in recent years, notably in contentious scientific contexts, such as in the debate over anthropogenic global warming. What are your views on the concept of "denial" in the sphere of Holocaust studies**

**and otherwise? Is it meaningful to assert that some people “deny” that the Holocaust happened? And I would be remiss not to ask: Do you “deny” the Holocaust?**

SC: Well, in general I think words like “denier” and “denialist” are just sophisticated epithets. They contain no information other than, “You disagree with me, therefore you are bad.” I think it is poor form to use such epithets, and I think it is destructive of reasoned discourse and reconciliation. That’s really all I can say about that.

As to whether I “deny” the Holocaust, I don’t think so. I mean, to me, coming from the 60s, the Holocaust concerns those Nazi atrocities directed against the Jewish people, and the calamitous destruction the Jewish people suffered as a result. I have never changed my mind on that level. I think some of these atrocities are self-evidently true, and I think others are debatable. That, to me, is what “Holocaust revisionism” is about.

However in fairness most revisionists are not just questioning specific atrocities, they are also focusing on the number of victims—which I consider an uninteresting argument—and furthermore are focused on diminishing the stature, both moral and political, of the Nazi destruction of the Jews. For myself, I am not interested in diminishing the stature of the Holocaust, but I should also stress that that is not even a historical question. I do think that our understanding of the Holocaust should be open to alternative interpretations, I also think that the Jewish catastrophe has to be looked at in context, and finally I think that someone who questions the facts or significance of the Holocaust should not be imprisoned or summarily ejected from polite society.

In this respect I have to note with a certain irony that, back in the 60s, I was mystified as to why historians did not discuss the anti-Jewish atrocities of Nazi Germany more often and in more detail. As such discussion became more common in the 70s, I recall feeling a certain satisfaction that the Holocaust, as such, had been mainstreamed. However, looking back, I think the concept over-extended itself over the next two decades. It was inevitable, therefore, that there would be a reaction, and in retrospect Holocaust revisionism constituted that reaction.

**9BB: It is commonly assumed that there is something inherently anti-Semitic about Holocaust revisionism. It seems clear enough from your writings that you are not motivated by animus, but suspicion will persist. How do you address this perception?**

SC: Charges of anti-Semitism are usually directed against revisionists because of the old argument that whatever happened

to the Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis has been exploited for political or economic gain. However, this idea was openly discussed in detail by Peter Novick and Norman Finkelstein at the end of the 90s, so that aspect is no longer relevant. Further charges of anti-Semitism arise because many revisionists argue that some Jews deliberately exaggerated their suffering, or that Zionists deliberately exaggerated some aspects of Jewish suffering for political purposes, and so on. Finally, and most clearly, many revisionists yoke their criticism of aspects of the Holocaust with what they perceive as the threat of “Jewish power.” I am not interested in any of these other aspects of revisionism, because I don’t think they have any relevance to the facts of the case, which simply turns on what did or did not happen in Eastern Europe during the Second World War.

Now you have to try to look at this from the Jewish point of view. The Jewish people—and this means primarily east European or Ashkenazi Jewry—has been threatened with violence and various assimilationist pressures for hundreds of years. This has not been a process of continual violence, but

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it has been a process of the erosion of Jewish identity, particularly in Eastern Europe. The Jewish people—like anyone else—have a history that emphasizes and encourages their unique identity. The Holocaust is part of that history. When someone comes along, from outside that community, and raises questions about the accuracy of that history, the response is predictable: it will be said that this person wishes harm on the Jewish community. Thus the accusation of anti-Semitism. The accusation is strengthened when the critic of Jewish history follows through with accusa-

tions of mendacity and raising the specter of “Jewish power” or associated concepts. It is not hard to see why Jewish people would look askance at Holocaust revisionism, of any kind.

From my point of view, Ashkenazi Jews—who form the bulk of European as well as American Jewry directly or by descent—are a national group like any other European group. However, they, like the Roma, or Gypsies, are among the very few European national groups without a homeland in Europe. This automatically makes the theme of national survival an issue. And I have no desire to diminish the national identity of any group, or threaten the national survival of any group. However, it is not in the Jewish interest to support the criminalization of historical interpretations that appear, at first glance, to be inimical to Jewish identity. So I have to encourage my Jewish brethren to be more tolerant of Holocaust revisionism, absent any explicit malicious accusations. I also feel a need to nudge Jewish history with regards to the Holocaust in a different direction: focusing on the “extermination camp” narrative and what is supposed to have happened at such

camps, is not, in my view, the right direction.

My personal experiences in talking about the Holocaust with Jews over the years is that they are just as perplexed as everyone else about what did or did not happen. At the same time, however, they bridle when someone from outside the community seeks to revise that history, especially with a lack of respect or outright malice. Taking a very long view, I am trying to direct the discussion into more pacific and reasonable paths.

At this point I think I should add something about the moral condemnation of the persecution and massacre of the Jews. I can understand why revisionists rarely condemn it in the strongest moral terms. The main reason is that all of the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe, including the German people, have grievances about the unjust seizure of wealth and property, cruel deportations, forced labor, shifting national borders, mass killings, mistreatment, and personal crimes such as rapes and so on. The attitude of some of these people is, why should we talk about the unique moral outrage against the Jewish people, when what happened to us is not only denied, it is not even discussed?

On the other hand, from the Jewish point of view, any attempt to put the persecutions and massacres in a wider context is going to come across as something less than a forthright denunciation, a reservation, as it were, about that destruction. I understand that point of view too, and certainly the Jewish people had to endure an agony of insecurity in Eastern Europe for a century until the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe were swallowed up either by Nazi persecution and massacre or by communist ideology.

Therefore, while it really has nothing to do with historical analysis as such, it should be said that what Jewish people experienced and suffered during this time can be explained, but it cannot be justified, and if someone takes a critical posture with regard to some aspects of that ordeal, or seeks to put it into context with the suffering and unjust treatment of other peoples, that should not be construed as an attempt to sneak a justification in through the back door.

**9BB: You describe yourself as a “moderate revisionist.” What does this mean? Or, to pose the question in a different way, where do you find revisionist arguments most compelling, and where do you find them unpersuasive?**

SC: Well, as I indicated in my previous answer, revisionism tends to involve a whole set of ideas, involving not only Jews, but also Germans, and Nazis, and so on. It also tends to involve intense rhetoric about Israel, and the Middle East—that is why Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, supports revisionism—and then it descends further, into a paranoid fantasy about the last days of the White Race and so on and so forth. I am not interested in any of those things.

Another aspect of revisionism is that it tends to be extreme

in its rejection of Nazi atrocities. I don't share this view. I think the history of mass gas extermination by the Nazis—directed either against Jews or against anyone, as in the euthanasia campaign—is, at least at this point, eminently arguable. I also think that the notion that the Nazis were out to kill all of the Jews of Europe is untrue, and, as I point out in “The Holocaust in Retrospect” that has been more or less conceded by standard historiography in recent years. Those two points, and free speech, are really the only issues that concern me.

**9BB: Over half of the content of *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes*—including the title monograph—is closely adapted from work that you did in the late 1990s. What was it like to revisit this material a decade later? Were you concerned that subsequent research might reveal serious flaws in your previous work?**

SC: Well, it was strange to go back and read what I had written back then, especially since I wrote a lot of it so quickly. My instincts are conciliatory, so I tried to write in a manner that would address both sides with respect. I tried to be accurate and fair in my evaluation of evidence, and I think I did that fairly well.

It did not, and does not, concern me if subsequent research reveals serious flaws. I wrote this material because I felt an obligation to do so. In the process, I learned a lot of things I did not know. I was also able to answer my own questions for myself. I fulfilled my social obligation. I have no regrets.

If someone had found, or at some future time, finds, the cache of evidence that proves that millions of people were killed by gas both at the camps or at the euthanasia centers, that's fine with me. I would be interested in seeing such evidence. At the same time, I don't think that invalidates my argument concerning the folkloric background to the mass gassing claim. Whether that has any real significance to the history of this time period is not a question I can really answer.

**9BB: On a related note, it's my understanding that until you began working on this book you hadn't really written about the Holocaust controversy since the early 2000s. Is there anything to account for your decade-long silence on the subject?**

SC: Well, I had intended to stop writing on the subject when I wrote “Bomb Shelters in Birkenau” in May, 2000, and I only wrote that article because I felt an obligation to defend the bomb shelter thesis one last time since it had been raised in the Irving-Lipstadt trial and I had finally obtained some primary documents about Auschwitz bomb shelters. However, it's hard to just walk away so I fulfilled some other requests over the next year or so.

The main reason why I got out of the subject is that I felt my main point about freedom of speech had been gained. I

recall that there were several comments defending freedom of speech in Britain during the trial. I took that to heart. Another reason I got out of the discussion is because, at that point, the only further direction to go would be to unravel the knot of Jewish labor exploitation in Eastern Europe, and while I have a good idea about how to go about doing that, I really do not want to devote my life to studying or writing about the Holocaust.

Looking back, one thing that disinclined me to continue is that I had answered my own questions to my own satisfaction. Once you get to that point, when you are studying something, the subject becomes a lot less interesting. I am not one of those people who thinks that it is important to win an argument, or to be recognized for having won an argument. Furthermore, I have a lot of other intellectual interests that are much less contentious than this subject. So it was not hard to move on.

**9BB: In all of your major writings on the Holocaust, you avow that your primary aim has been to defend the free speech rights of revisionists. Critics may argue that this stance is disingenuous since you go on to present arguments that are, to whatever degree, revisionist in nature. If your work is truly motivated by a libertarian sensibility and out of concern over censorship, why not simply present a case against prohibitive laws in more abstract terms? In other words, why engage the *content* of revisionist theory at all? Isn't it enough to quote Voltaire or Thomas Paine and assert that the marketplace of ideas should sort out the rest?**

SC: The problem with defending revisionism on purely intellectual grounds is that one is then trying to write a footnote to John Stuart Mill's "On Liberty," or even to out-write Mill, and that is just not possible. The other problem is that if you start with such a lofty abstraction and then move on to say that that is why we should be able to argue whether there were gas chambers at Auschwitz (for example) one really is going to appear disingenuous.

The main problem with revisionists is that their opponents think they are dishonest. I don't think revisionists are always right, but I know enough about the evidence to know the seed of their doubts. It seems to me that that point has to be made; otherwise, we end up with an argument defending the free speech rights of people who are popularly assumed to be liars. I don't think such an argument is going to be very effective.

Naturally, I think revisionists are right about some things. I had to do what I could to prepare the ground so that someone else at some later time can revisit this history with minimal constraints. If you think there is a historical error outstanding, but yet there is a taboo or legislation suppressing the correction of that error, then the proper procedure is to simply try to set the table. One has to take the long view, which, in this case, means being tolerant, respectful, and just

putting the facts out for everyone to evaluate.

**9BB: On the subject of free speech, I am struck by your optimistic tone, particularly in the book's new closing essay, "The Holocaust in Retrospect," where you suggest that the movement to criminalize Holocaust revisionism is losing steam. Skeptics will point to recent and ongoing cases in Europe and Australia, where revisionists have been or stand to be incarcerated. In light of such events, where do you see a silver lining for free speech?**

SC: The main reason I am optimistic is because revisionism was not outlawed in my country, the United States, nor has it been outlawed in Britain. I am aware—but not very thoroughly aware—of some prosecutions in other countries, and particularly in Europe. However, in most of these cases, as with Germar Rudolf and Ernst Zündel, or even the gratuitous and cruel confinement of David Irving in Austria, the prosecution has had less to do with actual current alleged speech crimes than with the fulfillment of prosecutions that were a decade or more old. It also has to be said that in some cases these prosecutions—which nowadays are framed more in terms of hate speech than revisionism as such—have been inevitable, insofar as people have at times gone out of their way to be prosecuted.

Now, I am not a big fan of hate speech legislation. But I also do accept that there is such a thing as hate speech. Each country has to decide the trade-off between social peace and freedom of speech in each case. I would prefer that such legislation did not exist, but, quite frankly, I wish some of this speech didn't exist either. It contributes nothing. On the other hand, I don't think that intellectual activity as such, and certainly not historical study, should be criminalized. My read of current trends is that revisionist historical study of the Holocaust can avoid criminalization, but it depends on how it is done, and how it is expressed. I have few problems with such a limitation.

**9BB: A name that comes up a few times in your more recent writings is Fritjof Meyer, who is not known as a revisionist. Who is Fritjof Meyer and why is his work significant?**

SC: Fritjof Meyer is a retired German journalist of the first rank. He started writing on the Holocaust back in 2002, by which time I had quit the field, and he has sought to revise the history of Auschwitz. Basically, Meyer's argument is that the death toll at Auschwitz was about 500,000, of which about 350,000 were gassed, and he also argues that the four crematoriums at Birkenau were not used for gassings, but rather for disinfection, showers, and bomb shelters. I think his arguments about the Birkenau crematoriums are correct, and they coincide with my assessments in "Bomb Shelters in Birkenau"

written in 2000. It is very heartening to me that a German can express such views and not be put behind bars.

I am aware that Meyer has been harshly criticized by some revisionists because his conclusions do not go far enough, which means that his conclusions do not coincide with theirs. I think such a stance misses the significance of his achievement. When someone can argue—in Germany, and as recently as 2009—that the Birkenau crematoria were not used to kill hundreds of thousands of people that is an enormous shift in perception for the Auschwitz camp and tends to render all prior histories of the camp disputable. That Meyer is able to do so in Germany without molestation is also an enormous step forward. Historians must inevitably follow suit. And eventually they will.

**9BB: I want to turn to each of the major components of the anthology, beginning with the title monograph, “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes.” It seems to me that this work has long been distinguished from other revisionist writings in a number of ways. Perhaps most curious is the way you approach Holocaust historiography through the lens of comparative literature, discerning themes and motifs in once-popular books and films that shed light on the cultural context in which specific atrocity rumors—and particularly gassing rumors—could have germinated and evolved without necessarily being literally true. Can you give readers some idea of your analytical method and explain why you felt compelled to approach the subject in this way? And do you have any thoughts on why a similar approach has been little pursued by others?**

Revisionists in general are mostly interested in proving something false; they are not usually interested in the actual cultural source of a false claim or a false belief.

SC: I took the analytical approach to gassing claims over time because there are various elements in Holocaust history that suggested it to me. For example, Gerstein said that the hair from gassed victims was used for submarines, fifteen years later, and Eichmann claimed that the engine at one of the camps came from a submarine. I felt intuitively that there was some borrowing going on here.

Another element concerns the “geysers of blood” motif, which I had seen in a wartime discussion in which a witness saw some blood or other bodily liquids seeping out of a mass grave. Again, the issue of derivation came to mind.

And there are many others. For example, many years ago I read a description of Wilhelm Kube—a high official in occupied Russia—tossing candy into a mass grave of Jewish children who had just been murdered. Many years later, while browsing a report from 1942 by an SS officer complaining about Kube’s solicitude towards Jews, I saw this officer complaining that Kube had given candy to Jewish children. That

this coincided with the Jewish holiday of Purim (a traditional candy giving holiday) convinced me that the SS complaint was accurate and that the later legend was a malicious reworking of the event, which again pointed to the migration and distortion of events. (I should add that Christian Gerlach in “*Kalkulierte Mord*” succeeded in finding a document in which Kube confessed to handing out some sweets to Jewish children on this occasion.)

As to the mass gassing claim, one frequently finds witnesses discussing blue or yellow clouds of gas, or corpses that are green or yellow or even polka dot. A basic examination of the gases involved—cyanide or carbon monoxide—tells you that these descriptions cannot be accurate, so then the next question is, where did these descriptions come from if not from reality? The answer can only be that they came from the minds of the observers, which in turn would contain the cultural assumptions of their time. In this particular case, the yellow coloration suggested mustard gas, the blue coloration suggested “*Blausäure*” or “blue acid” which is what cyanide is called in German speaking countries, and the coloration of the corpses—including the polka dots—suggested the putrefaction of bodies that had been dead for several days.

Why haven’t others done this before? I do not know. Revisionists in general are mostly interested in proving something false; they are not usually interested in the actual cultural source of a false claim or a false belief. Holocaust historians, on the other hand, are usually interested in setting forth a narrative that everyone already knows, with perhaps some new detail. I should say that Butz briefly touched on this comparative approach in his book, particularly in his discussion of the “crumpled testament of despair.”

**9BB: “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes” has been criticized—perhaps most notably, if I’m not mistaken, by Robert Jan van Pelt—for exemplifying the most damnable excesses of postmodernist and deconstructionist scholarship. How do you respond to this line of criticism? I know this is something you discuss in some depth in “The Holocaust in Retrospect.”**

SC: Well, there really isn’t anything deconstructionist in “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes.” All I am really doing is examining the elements of gassing claims across time and attempting to account for known false elements by tying them back to the overall culture. As a cultural historian, van Pelt should know exactly what I am doing; and what is required here is not abstruse pomo theory but simply a knowledge of cultural history and cultural ephemera and an awareness of how ideas and concepts flow up and down from elite culture

to popular culture and back again.

As to the charges of the excesses of deconstruction and post-modernism, I discussed this to some extent in the “Holocaust in Retrospect” largely because of the arguments of Lipstadt and Richard J. Evans, who made what I considered to be invalid comparisons, as well as the writings of Michael Shermer, who made what I thought was an honest but somewhat simplified discussion of the issues involved.

What I did, then, in the section on “Two Worlds,” was to riff on a well-known fable by Nietzsche to discuss the dual nature of reality, as it has been understood to exist for most of recorded history. This, in turn, showed the essential inevitability and ordinariness of post-Second World War intellectual trends insofar as prior notions of duality have become more and more subjective over time, and have focused more and more on the structure of the human mind and language.

In addition, by engaging these metahistorical issues I was able to address many other themes. For example, it is absolutely necessary to isolate the word “Holocaust” as a name, or a label, or a concept, from its constituent facts. I did something like this ten years ago when I reviewed the books of Novick and Finkelstein. However, in terms of the sloppy rhetoric that frequently characterizes discussions of the Jewish catastrophe the distinction has to be made: the Holocaust is a name, it is not a thing. How does one deny, or prove, a name? People should be focused on the facts of the matter, and either reach a consensus or agree to disagree.

Also, in traversing some of these more abstract ideas I was able to address many other issues, for example, the current proliferation of categories of “denial,” the Freudian roots of the concept, which in turns explains why revisionists are compared to Jeffrey Dahmer and child molesters, the distinctions that have to be made between facts and our moral interpretation of them, between facts and their interpretation as such, and the extent to which people see, not what is there, but what they want to see, or expect to see.

**9BB: Another criticism of “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes” holds that your interpretive model is inversely conceived; that the rumors and feedback loops and intertextual recursions that you identify as evidence of mass social delusion are more plausibly interpreted as essentially accurate, if flawed, fragments of evidence for the reality of a nascent program of systematic extermination that was being implemented in secret. What is your response to critics who insist that you have it backwards?**

SC: I could have it backwards, but I addressed that in my conclusion, and elaborated on it in “The Holocaust in Retrospect”

when I discussed the nature of conspiracy theories, which have flourished in recent decades. Simply put, the mass gassing claim is a conspiracy theory which assumes that the people involved—no more than a few hundred—not only managed to kill millions of people, not only managed to conceal the remains of these millions, but succeeded in concealing the evidence of what they were doing to such a degree that to this day there is no documentary, material or forensic evidence for gas chambers at many camps, and the evidence everywhere else is scarce, ambiguous, or non-existent. The likelihood of this being historically accurate is low, just because of the disparity between the claim and the hard evidence supporting it. The likelihood is further decreased when we note that there is abundant evidence for the killing of Jews by shooting or injections, and for the killing of euthanasia patients by sedatives and injections: it is only the gassing evidence that is lacking. The likelihood is decreased even further when we note that the Nazis were accused of just such gassings chronologically before they are supposed to have started them. Thus I conclude that the mass gassing claim is a cultural construct that

took hold in the minds of Europeans—not just among Jews, but among everyone—and became truth after the war was over.

I should elaborate a bit on my allegation of a “few hundred” participants. If we consider every German or German ally who was involved in persecuting or killing Jews in the Second World War, we would probably involve hundreds of thousands. But the number of people involved in the mass gassings, according to the standard account, was very small. There were only about one hundred Germans at the three camps where it is some-

times claimed that two million Jews were gassed, and these same people are supposed to have carried out the euthanasia gassings as well. At Auschwitz, which had a guard force of a few thousand, only a few dozen people were supposed to have been involved in the mass gassings, and even then in secret from the rest of the people at the camp.

**9BB: More generally, many people consider doubt regarding the mass gassing claim to be incredible (if not malicious) on its face, since it seems to imply that eyewitnesses were lying about what they saw and experienced. How do you meet this objection?**

SC: Well, the evolution of the theory of false memory syndrome in recent decades has made it clear that memory is not a reliable guide if not tethered to empirical reality. Of course, that has been well known on a common sense level for a long time. That is why historians always try to tie testimonial narratives to documents or archaeological data. Nor am I trying to necessarily impugn anyone’s memory. However, in the first

... it is absolutely necessary to isolate the word “Holocaust” as a name, or a label, or a concept, from its constituent facts.

place, memory is not reliable on quantitative matters and cannot be considered reliable if it contradicts empirical fact.

It is hard to speculate successfully on why someone would say something that just isn't true. There may be selfish motives, vengeful motives, or simply survival motives. There may be cases of sincere false memory. There may be cases of memory inspired by noble motives of testifying on behalf of the dead, or one's family, but which, regrettably, cannot be regarded as truthful when compared to the facts of the case. I generally soft-pedal these issues. I am trying to justify revisionist doubt, and reconcile what I consider to be a dangerous opposition between two sides: I am not interested in calling anyone out. Normally, when a historian considers an account unreliable, he or she leaves it out of their narrative. That's all that need be said here.

**9BB: If the mass gassing narrative can be understood as a social construction, this would seem to constitute one of the most extraordinary popular delusions of all time. Can you identify other episodes in history where great masses of people have been deceived on a comparable scale?**

SC: Deception may not be right word, because it implies a deceiving agent. However, I don't think mass delusions develop in that manner. The witchcraft trials—and accompanying tortures—of the early modern period seemed to have been carried out under sincere delusions. To use another example, one can find messianic movements at many points in history—in China, among Native Americans, among East European Jews, and many others—that, viewed from the outside, definitely involve delusional beliefs and expectations. There are also numerous shorter and localized panics one finds in various cultures; such as the “War of the Worlds” panic of 1938, which I discuss in detail. Although Mackay and LeBon wrote the seminal works on the subject of mass delusion over a hundred years ago, social scientists are only just now turning their attention to these kinds of mass beliefs, in terms of typology, structure, and causality.

To give another more contemporaneous example of mass delusion: The beliefs about weapons of mass destruction, which dominated American thinking from the late 90s through the invasion of Iraq, would certainly fit the bill. I referenced this obliquely in the introduction to “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes” precisely because even in the late '90s I could see that it was no mere coincidence that Saddam's weapons were always supposed to be somewhere other than where people were actually looking.

Oftentimes people look to blame someone when there are delusional problems with perception. I do not. Sometimes cultures, like individuals, make mistakes. You avoid such mistakes in the future by having freedom of speech, the possibility of dialog, and by avoiding groupthink or other recursive and reinforcing mechanisms. Yes, it makes life more irritating. But it avoids mistakes.

**9BB: What about the Satanic Ritual Abuse panic of the 1980s and early 90s? That seems like a textbook case of a mass delusion. If you begin with the McMartin daycare case, you can see the germ being transferred from one episode to the next, with these dark rumors converging on a fixed narrative in the cycle of media-facilitated feedback and rehearsal. It seems very much like the process you outline in “Sherlock,” and it might be significant that millions of people—most of them evangelical Christians—still believe that these things actually happened.**

SC: You are right, and I discussed some of this in “Retrospect.” I should add that the insecurity that fosters such mass delusions is the same that, in previous times, focused on conspiracies against Jesuits or against Jews. In fact, if we really stop to think about it, the main characteristics of the delusional accusations you mentioned—instrumentalization of the victim, child abuse or murder—are identical to those made in the periodic panics and mass delusions that were directed against the Jewish people over many centuries in the form of “Blood Libel” accusations. To go even further, when we reflect on some of the accusations against the Nazis—particularly in terms of soap making accusations, human skin products of all kinds, and routine head shrinking—we find another instance of this particularly ugly brand of mass hysteria.

Now, of course, since National Socialism is itself a pitiless ideology we might, at first glance, think that it makes no difference what we say about it or its adherents. But here we have to think again. I have seen too many times how unbridled attacks on Nazis have led to extreme denunciations of Germans and their entire history and culture. In general, this kind of anxiety- and gossip-driven speech should be avoided. It does no good and can only lead to further accusations against other groups.

**9BB: The second major part of your book, “Bomb Shelters in Birkenau,” is a fairly detailed exposition of an interpretive model concerning German civil defense infrastructure during the Second World War. What prompted you to turn your attention in this direction? And how does it tie in with the thesis of “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes”?**

SC: Well, the seed crystal to the bomb shelter thesis lay in my decision to approach the gassing claims chronologically. This led me to the liberation of Majdanek in the summer of 1944. I remembered reading Alexander Werth's description decades earlier, so I dug that up. Two elements stuck in my mind, the fact that he mentioned the actual maker of the gas chamber door at that location—a firm called “Auert”—and the description of some chalk scribbling on the floor. The chalk scribbling reminded me of something else, and that became the framing device for my narrative.

Now, the fact that a gas chamber door had a manufacturer's name on it seemed to me a solid clue. If I could establish that the Auert firm actually made gas chamber doors, then that would settle the argument for the traditional view. On the other hand, if I found that the Auert firm made fumigation chamber doors, that would support the revisionist view. I did not know how that would pan out, but it did make me very sensitive to any references to gastight doors or doors with peepholes. Over the next several weeks I found out that bomb shelter doors typically had peepholes and were gastight. As I have related in "Bomb Shelters in Birkenau," that is how I set about juxtaposing the civil defense literature and the Criminal Traces of Jean Claude Pressac in my first bomb shelter article.

Neither bomb shelters as such, nor even Arthur Butz' "gas shelter" thesis from the previous summer, had any role in my thinking until I was well along with my research for "The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes": I simply assumed that when I got to the Pressac evidence chronologically I would fall back on the traditional revisionist explanation, which considered this evidence as merely indicative of disinfection chambers. I must say that I didn't think that was a conclusive explanation, but, remember, my aim was to justify revisionist doubt, not to prove anything one way or the other.

**9BB: For those who are not familiar with the competing arguments, what is the "bomb shelter thesis" and how is it distinguished from other interpretive theories?**

SC: The "bomb shelter thesis" simply argues that "gastight" evidence in the concentration camps can be explained by reference to German civil defense measures, because of the war-time concern not only for bombings but for aerial gas attacks. The normative thesis, of course, holds that gastight evidence is about gassing people. The typical revisionist rejoinder is that gastight evidence is about fumigating objects, and this thesis is also often true, inasmuch as there were fumigation vaults for that purpose in every camp.

**9BB: Your promotion of the thesis places you at odds not only with traditional Holocaust scholars but with some prominent revisionists, such as Carlo Mattogno. Was this intentional?**

SC: No. My intention, in the beginning, was simply to juxtapose a previously unused literature with the gastight evidence provided by Pressac. I found the fit to work very well, and I was able to connect the dots tying in my thinking with Arthur Butz' prior discussion of gas shelters. I had expected the establishment to credit the revisionist website where I posted the article—that was the whole idea, I mean, how can you censor someone once you engage them in dialog—but I wasn't really surprised that traditional scholars completely ignored the thesis. I *was* surprised at the vehemence with which many

prominent revisionists rejected the thesis. But I felt I was on to something so I just continued to pursue it. Ultimately, as it turns out, Robert Jan van Pelt discussed the thesis extensively during the Irving-Lipstadt trial, as well as in his expert report, as well as in his book, *The Case for Auschwitz*, and he also referenced the CODOH website where the materials were posted. That was what I wanted in the first place, so, regardless of anything else, I felt I had achieved my aim.

Clearly, the "bomb shelter thesis" changed my thinking for the yet unwritten "Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes," so I had to revise the structure in my mind to account for this.

**9BB: The version of "Bomb Shelters in Birkenau" that appears in the *Sherlock* anthology is only slightly modified from previous editions. However, it is appended with a new "Postscript" in which you summarize additional documentary evidence that has come to light in recent years. Do you think that this new material will compel critics to reevaluate their conclusions? Also, do you anticipate further developments in this area?**

SC: Well, I felt that "Bomb Shelters in Birkenau" had proved the "bomb shelter thesis" inasmuch as I found several documents referencing gastight bomb shelter doors in Auschwitz and Birkenau that I presented in that article. However, these documents came from the spring and summer of 1944, and both van Pelt and Mattogno ignored this evidence. I also presented for the first time the evidence concerning the showers in the basement of Crematorium III, for which van Pelt has never offered a satisfactory reply, and which both Mattogno and Fritjof Meyer have used. This evidence fits the "bomb shelter thesis" but does not fit the alternatives, because of the bomb shelter door on the shower space.

The most important of the new evidence in the new postscript concerns the "Gaskeller" document, which I referenced in "Bomb Shelters in Birkenau," but which was not made public until 2005, after Jean Claude Pressac's death. I list in that postscript about a dozen usages of the word in German during the 1930s and 1940s, and this leaves no doubt that the normal meaning of "Gaskeller" during this time was "gas shelter" or "gastight bomb shelter" and that fact, along with the bomb shelter doors affixed to the relevant spaces, provides additional proof in support of the "bomb shelter thesis" as it pertains to the crematoriums.

Will the new evidence compel others to revise their views? I do not know, and I do not care. Given the extent to which the argument has been ignored up to now, I would expect that it would make no difference. However, my responsibility only extends to updating the evidence about my interpretation, since you have chosen to publish it. It's not my job to tell other people what to think about history.

As far as further developments, I don't know what will happen here either. I would like to see someone do some research

and publish on the subject of bomb shelters, gas shelters, and decontamination facilities in the concentration camps. Perhaps my writings will serve as a stimulus in this area.

**9BB: The closing section of the book, “The Holocaust in Retrospect,” is entirely new. What was your aim in writing this essay?**

SC: Well, to be honest, as with the postscript to “Bomb Shelters in Birkenau,” I did this at your request. What this meant is that I spent about a year re-orienting myself to the literature on the Holocaust on both sides, and seeing what had happened in the past ten years. There were some new things very much worth mentioning: for example, the recent writings on forced labor by Christopher Browning and Wolf Gruner, and the writings of Barbara Schwindt, Wendy Lower and Christian Gerlach. There was some new information, in particular, the authentication by David Irving of the Franke-Gricksch duty report of May, 1943, which I was able to use. On the whole, however, I used “The Holocaust in Retrospect” to further my plea on behalf of revisionism, to expand, sometimes quite extensively, observations that had been buried in the footnotes of “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes” and finally to look at the Holocaust in a broader historical framework for the future.

**9BB: You also address a number of meta-historical and epistemological issues that are tangential to revisionism. To me, one of the most interesting areas concerns the relevance of “conspiracy theory” to revisionism. Holocaust revisionism is often identified as a kind of conspiracy theory, sometimes with comparisons to 9/11 Truth movement. You have a different view. I know you’ve already touched on this, but I’d like for you to elaborate. Is revisionism a conspiracy theory?**

SC: It is typical to deride “Holocaust Revisionism” as a conspiracy theory, and this is accurate, insofar as some revisionists argue, or pretend, that the Holocaust as we know it was made up by mendacious Jews and then foisted upon an unsuspecting world. But as I argued in “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes” many years ago, the conspiracy accusation actually goes the other way: The entire notion that a few hundred Germans would gas millions of people and conceal the evidence of this is obviously a conspiracy claim; and since neither the documentary, material, or forensic evidence exists, I argue that at that point the argument moves from a conspiracy claim to a conspiracy theory, that is, a non-existent conspiracy.

I also try to tie this into psychological dualism and hoax

accusations as well. In other words, the entire argument for the mass gassing claim involves a narrative with little or no empirical support. The disjunction between the narrative and the evidence is profound. So how do we account for this? The hoax concept is one way, and that argues that a small group of people knowingly created a false story and then presented it as the truth. Another way is to accept the argument that a small group of Nazis were able to pull off these mass gas exterminations and managed to hide or destroy virtually all of the evidence. I really cannot accept either of these explanations because they both have the typical conspiracy theory elements of unseen and hidden agency and the lack of empirical evidence. I should add two points: the first is that to a conspiracy theorist, the absence of evidence is actually a plus, because it points to the extraordinary cunning of the alleged conspirators. Second, I should further add the Arthur Butz’ discussion of the “hoax” concept is much more subtle than the normal usage, or the usage outlined above.

So then it’s back to the original disparity between claim and evidence. My argument is that the human mind is hardwired to impose order on an oftentimes challengingly complex external world, and that, particularly when there is a need to explain terrible events, the mind falls back on explanatory models that become in effect the precursors of an explanatory model for what we would call nowadays a “conspiracy theory.”

... to a conspiracy theorist, the absence of evidence is actually a plus, because it points to the extraordinary cunning of the alleged conspirators.

**9BB: I think the late Jean Claude Pressac, who you’ve already mentioned and whose work you discuss extensively, was the first scholar to prominently challenge forensic revisionist arguments in a methodical—rather than merely rhetorical—manner. Pressac published his opus in the early 90s, and it seems that a few years later there was a spate of anti-revisionist output from major publishing houses—with books by Michael Shermer and Alex Grobman, Robert Jan van Pelt, Richard Evans, John Zimmerman and others that addressed and rejected (and sometimes even cited) specific revisionist claims in explicit terms. At various turns in “The Holocaust in Retrospect” you appraise this critical literature, but I’m curious about your general impressions. Have such critics raised issues that seriously undermine the framework of revisionist doubt concerning key issues (i.e., mass gassing and systematic extermination)? Have such works promoted a more civil discourse and helped to normalize revisionism as a legitimate species of free inquiry?**

SC: Pressac wrote two books and a couple of articles in the late 80s and early 90s: in all cases his professed aim was to put the history of Auschwitz on a firm material and documentary footing, because he felt the emphasis on eyewitnesses was

unsatisfactory. As a result, in his writings, he set forth a lot of documentary evidence which has taken on a life of its own.

In contrast, the other authors you have mentioned have largely abandoned the document based approach and have instead gone back to dependence on eyewitness testimony. I find it rather interesting that neither Richard Evans nor Saul Friedländer referenced either van Pelt or Zimmerman, whose books were supposed to constitute refutations of revisionism. Instead, both relied almost exclusively on eyewitness testimony and a brief “research note” published in the *Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, which was not very well sourced. So, no, I do not feel traditional scholarship has done anything to seriously undermine revisionist doubts. Indeed, it seems to have simply decided to ignore such issues altogether. Under those circumstances I don’t believe it has either helped or hindered the legitimizing of revisionism as an acceptable, albeit minority, point of view.

**9BB: If there is one critic who tends to receive special attention in “Retrospect,” I suppose it would be Michael Shermer, who is probably best known as the editor of *Skeptic* magazine. In his book, *Denying History*, Shermer—along with his coauthor Alex Grobman—argues that revisionist critiques tend to collapse once we zoom out to consider the “convergence of evidence” that supports the mass gassing and extermination claims. More rhetorically, he compares the ostensible failure of revisionists to discern this gestalt to the intellectual obtuseness of Creationists who focus on anomalous details in the fossil record while ignoring the overwhelming weight of evidence for evolution. I think that’s a reasonably fair summary of his position, and it certainly sounds like a deep and compelling indictment of the whole revisionist project. What is Michael Shermer missing?**

SC: The main thing Shermer is missing is that he, like many others, tends to look at the Holocaust as a large organic unity, as though it were a dog, whereby the muzzle is proof of the tail. But here he is falling victim to the idea that the Holocaust is a thing, rather than a collective noun, that pertains to many separate things.

Hence in his writings, Shermer tends to conflate all of the known, and fairly obvious, facts of the Nazi persecution and massacre of the Jews with the mass gassing claim, which is what 80% of Holocaust revisionism is about (most of the rest has to do with whether there was an extermination plan or not). Yes, the Germans shot hundreds of thousands of Jews in the East: that is what the documents say, and there is much corroborative detail. But that does not mean that they were

also gassing millions of others in other locations while leaving little or no trace of their activities. It is especially hard to maintain that position when the current historiography is just now turning its attention to the hundreds of thousands of Jews who were engaged in important war-related work, along with the concessions by Browning and Gruner that there never was a global “extermination through work” imperative operating in these work camps. I discuss some of this in “Retrospect” and have discussed it before, when reviewing research on the fate of Hungarian Jews. The argument could certainly go further, if we take into account the numerous cases of Jews incapable of work who were not killed at various subcamps of Belsen or at the Kaufering subcamps of Dachau.

**9BB: On the other side, there have been a number of revisionist books and articles in the years since you were actively publishing. Do you see new ground being broken in this more marginal literature? Or are we nearing the point of diminishing returns?**

... the reason I got into this was not only because of the censorship issue but because of the numerous violent acts committed against revisionists, and the many threats of violence.

SC: I would say that, yes, we are at the point of diminishing returns. Most revisionism in the past twenty years has been focused on the same six camps where mass gas exterminations are supposed to have taken place. Thanks to revisionism, we now know a lot more about these camps than we knew before. Carlo Mattogno, in particular, has done great work in document discovery and in pulling together various documents and testimonies in his books on the camps Majdanek, Treblinka, Belzec, Sobibor, Chelmno, and, of course, Auschwitz Birkenau. However, these books are largely compilations of rare materials.

In 2009, Thomas Dalton published *Debating the Holocaust* and this is a good summation not only of Mattogno’s arguments but also the relevant arguments of Zimmerman, van Pelt, Pressac, and several others. It’s a good summary, with a strong revisionist slant, but it is largely concerned with forensic issues.

The closest thing to groundbreaking research has to do with the discovery and analysis of materials about deported Jews either in southern Poland or the occupied Soviet Union during the war. Thomas Kues has done some praiseworthy digging here. However, what is really needed at this point are the supporting German documents, and I am sure that they exist somewhere.

**9BB: Any thoughts on Timothy Snyder’s book, *Bloodlands*, and his public row with Daniel Goldhagen?**

SC: Well, Timothy Snyder is a professor at Yale and has recently become the go-to guy for reviews on central and east

European history for the New York Review of Books, a role previously filled by people like István Deák, Gordon Craig, and A.J.P. Taylor.

What probably happened here is that Snyder received a number of books with a request to write a review of them. In that case, the nature of the review is going to be determined by the content of the books, and the challenge is to write a review that combines the heterodox elements in a coherent manner.

In this case, Snyder's ingredients included some memoirs, Hilberg's book, Friedländer's second volume, and a book by Daniel Goldhagen, the author of *Hitler's Willing Executioners*. Now Goldhagen is a political scientist: he operates on the realm of concepts and concept creation, things like "eliminationist anti-Semitism" or just plain "eliminationism." His concepts, which grow out of the data, are then confirmed by the data, and then a lot of judgment, including a lot of moral judgment, is added. This sort of thing doesn't make much sense to historians and it apparently didn't make much sense to Snyder. So he criticized Goldhagen somewhat.

The sequel is that Goldhagen wrote a blistering rebuke and then Snyder offered a more measured reply. What I remember most about the exchange is that it seemed to focus entirely on issues of personal guilt and responsibility, yet centered on the ethnicity of the individuals: issues like, Germans were more willing than Poles, who were or were not responsible, as opposed to Jews, who were or were not willing or responsible, and so forth. I don't consider this very worthwhile history. It doesn't even appear as good political science; it comes across as borderline sociology with a lot of heavy duty moralizing going on. I fail to see the usefulness of this kind of thing.

Now that gets me back to Snyder's *Bloodlands*. I did reference it briefly in "Retrospect" and I consider it one of a number of attempts in recent years to look at the events in eastern Europe during this time synthetically, or as a whole. Nevertheless, I think there are a few problems with Snyder's approach. First, he somewhat arbitrarily limits himself to the 1939 Polish borders and the western republics of the Soviet Union. This inevitably puts a pro-Polish slant on his analysis, which is not in and of itself a bad thing, but which leaves much out. For example, a third of present-day Poland comprises lands that were populated by Germans for many hundreds of years. All of these millions of Germans were driven out, and lost all of their property, and in that respect at least their fate is very similar to that of the eastern Europeans that are Snyder's focus. However, they are barely mentioned in Snyder's book, and if they had been, they would tend to subvert what I take to be Snyder's main thesis, about the shared suffering of east Europeans.

The other problem is that while Snyder is engaging in some very praiseworthy shifts of emphasis towards the Slavic victims of Hitler and Stalin, in so doing he automatically creates

a tension with many Holocaust narratives that tend to focus almost entirely on Jewish suffering. As a result, in many of his reviews, and in responses thereto, including the one with Goldhagen, Snyder has been forced to engage in moralistic exchanges over relative guilt, responsibility, or unique suffering that have little to do with historical understanding but a lot to do with the master narrative claims of different groups.

**9BB: In "Retrospect" you also provide a concise summary of the various forensic issues that revisionists continue to emphasize. For readers who may not be inclined to wade into a body of literature where cremations rates, Prussian-blue stains and the physics of diesel combustion are discussed in excruciating detail, what do you see as the most relevant points to take home from this line of inquiry?**

SC: Mostly that revisionist strides in this area add to our knowledge. For example, I point out that we know a lot more about Zyklon B now than we did in 1945, and that is entirely due to revisionist investigations. Generally speaking, nearly any forensic investigation, whether it concerns the characteristics of the alleged extermination gases, or the operation of diesel engines, or the normal size of mass graves, or the normal rate at which bodies can be burned, all tend to support revisionist theses in one way or the other. In turn, that should not only support revisionism's right to exist unmolested but also provide some impetus for thoughtful students to start looking for alternative explanations.

**9BB: It's no secret that "Samuel Crowell" is a pen-name. Are you concerned that this diminishes your credibility? How do we know you're not David Duke, or for that matter, Elaine Showalter (as I once suspected)? Why do you write under a pseudonym?**

SC: Well, when I told a family member last year that someone wanted to publish the stuff I had written back in the 90s, I was asked if I was using a pseudonym. I said yes, and the reply was: "Good: then we don't have to worry about our house being firebombed."

I have to stress that the reason I got into this was not only because of the censorship issue but because of the numerous violent acts committed against revisionists, and the many threats of violence. An early Rumanian Jewish revisionist, J.G. Burg, was apparently beaten because of his association with revisionism. Robert Faurisson was severely beaten and had to be hospitalized because of his revisionist work. David Cole, another Jewish revisionist, was threatened with death. Ernst Zündel, a German citizen living in Canada, had his home firebombed. I could cite several other instances of threats and harassment.

Of course, violence goes the other way, too. A couple of years ago a mentally deranged old man attempted to shoot his

way into the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. and killed a security guard: among other things, he was involved with Holocaust revisionism.

It seems to me that all of these instances of violence are based on, first, the taboo nature of the subject of Holocaust revisionism, and second, and conversely, the essentially sacrosanct nature of Holocaust history as such. This tension creates an opposition that makes either the defense of or the assault on the subject irresistibly attractive to true believers of all kinds. Moreover, inasmuch as revisionists are frequently characterized as less than human, one can see a kind of discourse that enables and justifies violence. I mean, clearly the people involved in violence or arson or what have you are not very stable; the discourse against revisionists seems to offer them an opportunity not only to engage their impulses for sadism and cruelty but even to justify them with an aura of righteousness. Of course, those revisionists who carry on endlessly about purported Jewish wickedness are doing the exact same thing on the other side.

It seems to me that the responsibility of anyone who can write or speak is to promote a more relaxed and tolerant point of view on these matters. However, since I do not see such calls forthcoming from the intellectual classes, I prefer to fulfill my social obligations while not exposing either myself or my family to unwanted attention or harm.

**9BB: Even if key points in made by revisionists are eventually conceded—however tacitly—the most salient revisionist arguments presently remain very much at odds with received scholarly opinion. It seems to me that there are generally very good reasons to respect consensus opinion, however cautiously, on matters that have been studied extensively and written about voluminously by dedicated scholars, but those who adhere to heterodox views can always point to famous historical examples where some deeply entrenched consensus turned out to be flat wrong. I suppose this sort of tracks back to where we were discussing instances of mass delusion throughout history, but I wonder if you can cite examples of “false consensus” that would provide precedent for the turn that would come if the core of the revisionist critique were ever to become widely accepted?**

A couple of examples that come immediately to mind are the Germ Theory of disease, and the Theory of Continental Drift. The idea of the contagiousness of disease was quite radical in the early 19th Century when it was first being developed. The “false consensus” was that disease was due to foul odors or miasmas, rather than germs, which were not yet understood. If we take Oliver Wendell Holmes’ famous article on the contagiousness of puerperal fever as a start point, from around 1840, we can say that our modern understanding of the contagiousness of germs coexisted with

the false consensus for over sixty years, until the germ theory became universally accepted in the 20th Century.

In the case of Continental Drift, when von Wegener first proposed his notion of drifting continents in 1910, the consensus interpretation was that the continents rose and fell. It took another fifty years until data started emerging that could not be explained in any other way except by recourse to von Wegener’s theory.

So, just in these two cases, what we might call a “false consensus” in the sciences coexisted for fifty years or more with a minority point of view which only gradually became the new consensus.

The lesson I take from this is twofold. The first is that today’s “certainty” could well be tomorrow’s “false consensus.” So we have to be modest about what we think we know and therefore tolerant of those who think differently. The second lesson I take from this is that radically different points of view can co-exist for many decades. This also points to tolerance, modesty, and a willingness to re-think one’s beliefs.

**9BB: I’ve received inquiries from Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts who are curious about the title. While I doubt that your book will be of particular interest to “Baker Street Irregulars,” Conan Doyle’s influence can be felt at various turns. You’ve already dropped one hint and I don’t want you to spoil any surprises, but can you talk a bit about how you came to connect the fictional sleuth to the question of Nazi gassings?**

SC: Well, the title of the book comes from the main essay, and the title of the main essay was meant to pique interest. Remember that this project started at the beginning of February, 1997, after I had read yet another article quoting then candidate Tony Blair’s intention to ban Holocaust revisionism in Britain if elected Prime Minister. My original intention was to write maybe 20,000 words and then email my plea for tolerance—because that’s all it was meant to be—to various historians and opinion makers in the United Kingdom. So I selected that title deliberately thinking it might cause a Briton to take a look.

On the other hand, the title does encapsulate a fundamental theme of the book, which is that fully articulated, but imaginary, gassing narratives existed decades before the Holocaust, and if we compare such prior imaginary narratives to Nazi-era gassing narratives we find essentially no difference. The question then naturally arises, how do we tell the difference between a story and a fact? Clearly, other evidence, including material, documentary, and forensic evidence, is needed. Yet that is precisely the kind of evidence that is either non-existent or in short supply. Therefore doubt about the mass gassing claim is not only natural, but justifiable. That, in essence, is my position.

The bomb shelter articles took me in a completely different

direction. Here I was arguing a positive thesis about civil defense materials; that argument really has nothing to do with mass gassing at all. Of course, the rightness or wrongness of the “bomb shelter thesis” has implications for the veracity of gassing claims as well as for the accuracy of previous historians who have written on the subject. Everyone understands this. However, acceptance of the “bomb shelter thesis” does not necessarily mean that gassings did not take place.

Sherlock Holmes enthusiasts shouldn't be seeking to read this book because their beloved detective is in the title; although, anyone familiar with the Holmes character should be able to rattle off at least three contexts in which Holmes is associated with poison gas: in a play, an early silent film, and a short story. In fact, the short story was probably inspired by the play, which was not written by Conan Doyle.

Because of the title I had selected, I took the opportunity in the introduction to say a few words about Sherlock Holmes, and referenced Samuel Rosenberg's *Naked is the Best Disguise* as an example of literary analysis that looked back to cultural ephemera. That, in turn, helped explain the context of a lot of my research, because I spent a good deal of time looking for, or trying to remember, references to poison gas, or chemical delousing, or cremation, that popped up in news articles, or short stories, or novels years or even many decades before the Second World War.

**9BB: *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes* will be released next month. How do you anticipate it will be received? Most Holocaust revisionist publications are read by the same small group of people and ignored by mainstream critics and public intellectuals. Do you think *Sherlock* has a better chance of being noticed?**

Well, a book is evaluated by style and substance. I cannot comment on style, but I do know I strove for an inclusive tone that would try to address and respect the interests of all parties. That might make the book a bit less obnoxious to non-revisionist readers.

I don't expect anyone will agree with my arguments; certainly not in public, given the nature of the taboo. With reference to the Snyder-Goldhagen dustup cited above, at one point they seemed to be debating the relative importance of the gas chambers in the destruction of the Jews. In a recent blog post, Snyder devoted himself to a judgmental argument as to whether Hitler or Stalin was more responsible for the carnage of the Second World War. If this is the way in which the war and the Holocaust continue to be discussed, I do not think my writings will have much of a place.

On the other hand I think the book has some merits. First, anyone who has seriously studied the subject knows that

there are numerous unreliable testimonies. In “The Gas Chamber of Sherlock Holmes” I provide an explanation for this that avoids accusations. Second, I think the “bomb shelter thesis” is pretty solidly supported at this point, and anyone interested in “gastight” evidence at concentration camps would gain something from the documents discussed in the book.

On the other hand, while I am satisfied that I have justified revisionist doubts, and my own doubts, about mass gassings, it is impossible to prove a negative and if revisionists are right on that issue it will take a long time for such a future consensus to emerge.

Another potential use of the book is that it sets forth a number of documents and testimonies that are rarely, if ever, discussed. In addition, I address a number of metahistorical issues concerning historical knowledge and historical understanding, the nature of conspiracy theories, and the modern-day usage of the concept of denial. These latter issues may, in particular, spur some thinking for those who are concerned with them.

Keep in mind that I walked away from this many years ago feeling that I had done my bit on behalf of free speech for historical inquiry, and towards leading the study of the Holocaust, and its revision, into a calmer and less acrimonious atmosphere. Evidently, I did not succeed in all of my aims. However, the offer to publish *The Gas Chamber of Sherlock*

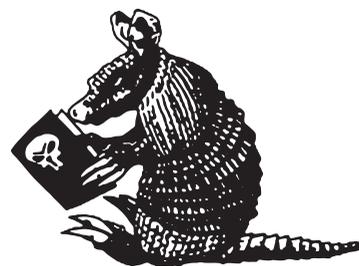
*Holmes* gave me a chance to clean up and correct some old texts, to offer an updated review of both texts, as well as a retrospective review of the field as a whole in the second decade of the new century. I am glad I had the opportunity to do this, but the main rewards, as before, come from the process of study and understanding, not from the end result, or whatever might ensue thereafter.

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*The preceding interview was conducted by Chip Smith, founder and managing editor of Nine-Banded Books.*



## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Samuel Crowell is the Pseudonym of a self-described “moderate revisionist” who has written extensively on the Holocaust controversy and other subjects. He is a graduate of the University of California (Berkeley), where he studied philosophy, foreign languages, and modern European history. Mr. Crowell continued his studies in history at Columbia University and taught on the college level for six years.

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