

Najatian, James. "Gnawing at History: The Rhetoric of the Holocaust Denial." *Midwest Quarterly* 39 (1997): 74-78

**Thesis:** Najatian does not set out to argue with the deniers of the Holocaust. Instead, he analyzes the rhetoric, phrases, and other ways of speaking that are employed by the deniers. He says that his article "looks at the linguistic strategies with which Holocaust deniers try to persuade and unearths a rhetoric of denial." (75)

**Themes:** Since this work is "rhetorical rather than historical" the themes echo those from literary research. The overwhelming theme of the article is word choice. Najatian looks at how things are phrased more than anything, how using a passive voice approach by the deniers gives a kind of a scientific feel to the work. If the evidence sounds official then readers will more likely believe it.

Najatian also looks at small modifiers that give the "revised" works a different like. He analyzes many phrases throughout his work, but the most interesting is the take on the Crystal night. He looks at Ingrid Wecket's article that says, "Many Jews were arrested, some were beaten, and some were even killed." (79) Looking at the phrasing Najatian believes that using the word "even" in there, makes it seem like these deaths should have been shocking.

The article also delves into philosophy, both general thinking, and literary philosophy. The assumption that there are always two sides to any argument is a stronghold that the deniers use. When in fact, as Najatian points out, De Pres already examined how the two-sided argument has dehistoricized the Armenian genocide. (81)

The collective "Turkish amnesia" on the topic of the Armenian Genocide has also give Holocaust deniers a path to follow. They look at the explanations for the loss of Armenians within Turkey, which are emigration and relocation, and then apply them to the Jewish numbers in the Holocaust. The German's had official orders to "relocate" a large number of Jews, so this follows the pattern.

The final theme that Najatian's article examines is the fact that many of the deniers that deal with German paperwork tend to take the orders for "relocation" too literal. He spends the latter part of his article discussing German euphemisms for extermination. Quoting Butz's argument that the Germans could not and would not have used "figurative language" in their reports. Butz says, "There is no point in discussing further these efforts to make these documents mean other than what they say. The German policy, the final solution, was to resettle Jews in the occupied territories in the East." (86)

**Style:** Najatian writes in a very literary analytical way. Readers who are not familiar with some of the grammar, and writing philosophy that he uses may come out of the

article feeling a bit confused. The positive to this approach to this subject matter is that it provides strong evidence how word choice can affect the perception of the written work. His writing also “sounds” like it is written very similar to the way he speaks. This is only supposition, having never heard the man. This should be a warning, since soon all the survivors and those involved will be gone, leaving only what is written about the events that happened. Thankfully there are recorded, audio and video of many of these people and their words can be heard with all their inflections and emotions.

**Evidentiary Base:** Najatian uses mostly secondary sources, as there are few primary sources written denying the Holocaust. He does use Primo Levy as a primary source though. For a short article there were several books, and other articles researched to provide evidence for contextual use and misuse.

**Weaknesses:** If the reader is unfamiliar with literary terms and lacks a decent knowledge of the writing philosophy there will be times that the reader will be lost. Many times there are instances when Najatian may have to be taken at his word on his interpretation of rhetorical analysis.

**Strengths:** If the reader is the slightest bit familiar with literary practices and some of the analytical jargon that is associated with it, Najatian shows that simple sentence structure and word choice can be used to alter a phrase’s meaning even when it is used within its correct context. He also compares the ideology of the Holocaust deniers to that of the Armenian Genocide, Flat-Earth theorists and those who believe in the “oxymoronic” Creation Science.

This work should definitely instill a more analytical eye to anyone reading any kind of historical account. The article should also create a better self-awareness of word choice, sentence structure and phrasing that scholars put into their own works.

**James Burnes**

**Lamar University**