

# H-Net Reviews

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**Stephen H. Norwood.** *The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower: Complicity and Conflict on American Campuses.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 339 pp. \$29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-76243-4.

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## Academic 'Elites' and the Complicity of Bystanders

One of our more inherently contradictory tasks as educators is to impress upon students the essential role of education in improving human society, as we simultaneously demonstrate that the worst perpetrators of crimes against humanity in history are often to be found among the best educated elite in most any society. This is certainly the dilemma for those of us who teach courses on the history of anti-Semitism, Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust. When discussing with students the infamous meeting at Wannsee on January 20, 1942, for example, one must explain the reality that of the fourteen Nazi officials at that meeting, called to discuss the logistics of mass murdering the entire Jewish population of Europe, eight were holders of doctoral degrees.

Stephen Norwood's new book, *The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower: Complicity and Conflict on American Campuses*, certainly reminds us of this sad but ever present contradiction, within the context of modern American history and the history of American higher education. It is the story of the ways in which top administrators, faculty, and large numbers of students at the most prestigious colleges and universities in the United States were clearly, if at times unwittingly, complicit in efforts by Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime to improve its image in the United States during the 1930s. These actions included a refusal to publicly criticize Nazi persecution of the Jews and other heinous aspects of Hitler's police state, the warm welcome extended to visiting Nazi officials to

American campuses, and the enthusiastic participation of students and faculty in exchange programs with nazified German universities, just to name a few. These and other examples of bystander sympathy for Hitler's Germany among America's academic elite are presented within a context of significant organizational and popular opposition and protest in American society as a whole against Nazi policies in Germany. Although academicians in America were obviously the ones most familiar with the situation in Germany, they appear to have been the least engaged in what Norwood presents as significant popular protest against the Nazi regime and its policies. In so doing, the book also illustrates the huge divides of class, ethnicity, and race between the American elites, particularly at American universities, and the larger American society in which they functioned.

The author considers a variety of institutions of higher learning, including Ivy League universities, elite private men's and women's colleges, a few public universities, and some of the top Catholic colleges and universities in the United States. He is unambiguous in his identification and virtual indictment of these institutions, and their top administrators; faculty, professional, campus, and student organizations; and even prominent alumni. Long-time Harvard president James Conant is a particularly glaring example of an academic leader who openly sympathized with Nazi Germany. Motivated in large part by his own anti-Semitism, Conant consistently

refused to criticize the persecution of Jews in Germany and the nazification of German universities for most of the 1930s. He also remained unmoved by pleas to accommodate refugee Jewish scholars and students from Germany, while always welcoming visiting officials from Hitler's Germany and Benito Mussolini's Italy. He frequently traveled to Germany, usually aboard German ships. Conant later served as U.S. High Commissioner in Germany from 1953 to 1955 and U.S. ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany from 1955 to 1957. During those years, he actively worked for the early release of convicted Nazi war criminals, including notorious former Waffen-SS leader Josef "Sepp" Dietrich, who was released in 1955 after serving just ten years.

Other universities, like Yale and Columbia, were much like Harvard in terms of their administrations, faculties, and student bodies, and their attitudes toward Hitler's Germany. Norwood alludes to Columbia president Nicholas Butler's anti-Semitism, to his unwillingness to criticize in any way the policies of Hitler's government in Germany, and to his personal friendship with and sympathy for Mussolini. Like Conant, Butler usually welcomed Nazi and Fascist officials to Columbia's campus, and like many of the other institutions, he favored carefully limiting the enrollment of Jewish students. Of course, Butler had to face a much more active anti-Fascist student body than most of the other presidents, given his university's location in New York City and its larger Jewish student population.

Much like Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and other such institutions, the elite women's colleges in those days were also generally averse to criticizing Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy. The "Seven Sisters Schools," Vassar, Smith, Mt. Holyoke, Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, Radcliffe, and Barnard, also tended to restrict Jewish enrollment, perhaps with the exception of Barnard which, like Columbia, had higher numbers of Jewish students given its location. They too had their share of top academic administrators and faculty who exhibited various levels of sympathy for Hitler and his "New Germany." There were exceptions at a few of these schools, perhaps most notably Marion Edwards Park, the president of Bryn Mawr College. She lent her support to anti-German protests and did not oppose the hiring of several Jewish refugee academics. But besides the reluctance of faculty and administrators at the women's colleges to criticize Nazi persecution of Jews in Germany, there was also a surprising silence regarding Nazi efforts to remove women from German universities.

German-language departments throughout

academia, as well as administration, faculty, and students at Catholic colleges and universities, were more likely to sympathize with the fascist regimes in Germany and in Italy. The former were often the major facilitators of relations between Nazi diplomats and other visiting officials from Germany, and the administrations and faculties at American colleges and universities. And Catholic institutions of higher education, much like the Catholic Church hierarchy in the United States and the Vatican in Rome, viewed much of Nazi policy in a positive way. Indifferent to many of Hitler's anti-Jewish policies and moves against women in universities and the workplace, U.S. Catholic institutions seemed driven by fears of Communism and the Soviet Union, and a determination to support Francisco Franco and the nationalist revolution in Spain against the democratically elected and Soviet-backed government in Madrid.

The author also briefly alludes to American revisionist historians of the interwar period as part of the general quiescence within the academy toward Hitler's government in Germany. Two Smith College historians in particular, Harry Elmer Barnes and Sidney Bradshaw Fay, are singled out as contributing to this general failure of American academia to join in the public outcry against the policies of Hitler's government. Their position that Germany alone should not have been held responsible for the outbreak of war in 1914, and that the other Great Powers were equally guilty, is central to Norwood's assertion that they were part of this larger problem of acquiescence to Nazi brutality against its own citizens. But his reasonable and comprehensive case against American academe is somewhat compromised here, particularly with regard to Fay, when he suggests that Fay's conclusions on the origins of the First World War were somehow indicative of some degree of sympathy for Hitler's regime. That Fay and others did not correctly assess the real danger posed by Hitler and his regime is true enough, for them and for most other observers here and abroad during the 1930s. But their basic arguments on the origins of war in 1914 have generally been accepted by most historians over the past decades, and do not necessarily spring from pro-Nazi sympathies, at least as far as Sidney Fay was concerned. To argue that the other European powers shared the blame for the outbreak of war in 1914 is not to argue that Germany was innocent; nor does it necessarily reflect pro-Nazi sympathies.

In his concluding chapter, Norwood considers the impact of the Kristallnacht pogrom in Germany of November 9, 1938 on many of the same institutions and individuals that he discusses in previous chapters. Notwith-

standing the willingness of some, including President Conant of Harvard, to suddenly join in the protests against Nazi brutality in Germany, this apparent change on the part of academic administrators usually followed the lead of organized student protests rather than initiating them. Moreover, the new official criticism on the part of these institutions was not accompanied, for example, by other necessary actions, such as demands for the government to reduce or eliminate immigration barriers for Jewish refugees from Germany. Professor Peter Gay of Yale University, at the time a young Jew in Berlin who witnessed the pogrom before escaping Germany with his family in 1939, recalled that the protests from abroad "all sounded very good to us," but that "none of this verbal onslaught led to the action we needed: a place to go."<sup>[1]</sup>

Stephen Norwood has given us a superb and much-

needed study of American academic institutions and their quiescence in the face of growing Nazi brutality and atrocities during the 1930s. It is an important addition primarily to American historiography, but as well to the historiography of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. It is particularly revealing of the classism and racism that prevailed among America's elites, including academia, during those tragic years. But what might be most shocking about this book to those who study Nazi Germany and the Holocaust is that its portrayal of a complicit or at best indifferent academic establishment, sadly, is not terribly shocking.

#### NOTES

[1] Peter Gay, *My German Question: Growing Up in Nazi Berlin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 140.

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