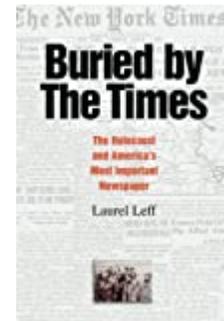




Laurel Leff. *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xii + 426 pp. \$42.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-81287-0; \$25.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-60782-7.



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The *New York Times* and the Holocaust

One of my students once told a story about the small Romanian town where his Jewish grandparents lived at the beginning of World War II. A man arrived proclaiming that all the Jews of the town were in grave danger. The town's residents thought the man was crazy and ignored his descriptions of what the Nazis had in store for Jews. As my student wrote: "If my grandparents and their neighbors refused to accept the man's claim, is it possible that the *New York Times's* editors framed Holocaust stories in a manner that reflected their own disbelief?"

Inspired in part by the knowledge that five of her ancestors from Slovakia died in the Holocaust, author Laurel Leff has undertaken a detailed study of how the *New York Times* did, or more often did not, report news of the Holocaust. Indeed, in her introduction, she charges the *Times* with complicity-by-omission in one of history's greatest crimes and argues that the paper's publisher was effectively a moral coward because he did not report the story by today's journalistic standards.

Leff, who teaches journalism at Northeastern University, is not a professionally trained historian, but uses the skills she developed as an investigative reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Miami Herald* and her understanding of how newsrooms work to good advantage. Her research took her to seventeen archives and thirty-nine collections of papers. Indeed, many readers would find it hard to take issue with a book that has been so thoroughly researched and so carefully written. And Leff is surely right that, in retrospect, the American print media coverage of the Holocaust was not equal to the magnitude of what happened. But in the end she adheres to a journalist's idea of an eternal truth when a historian would see a much more complicated scene in which more than one truth is at issue and context is important.

After an introduction that summarizes the major elements of her argument, the book is divided into two parts covering 1933-41 and 1942-45, reflecting the entrance of the United States into World War II, but, more important, the implementation of the so-called Final Solution. The first chapter of the first part, "Not a Jewish Problem":

The Publisher's Perspective on the Nazis' Rise & the Refugee Crisis, finds publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger's perspective inconsistent. He acknowledged Judaism as his faith but did not see his ethnic identity as Jewish, which Leff attributes to Sulzberger having married into the family of Rabbi Isaac Wise, who favored Jewish integration into American society. Leff notes that the *Times* did not allow letters to the editor about the rise of Nazism and that its editorials did not focus on Jewish issues in Germany. Indeed, while Leff admits that there was news about deportations in the paper, "all this news was reported inside the paper, often in stories that consisted of just a few paragraphs" (p. 46). In fact, stories of that length were not all that unusual, particularly when they were not directly observed by the paper's own reporters.

Leff's second chapter surfaces some of the challenges facing reporters in the *Times*'s German bureaus, concentrating on the paper's bureau in Berlin. She charges Sulzberger with having been warned of the dire situation faced by Jews in Nazi Germany, but not strengthening the bureau to report the story. But, as she concedes, reporters in Berlin had been challenged from the time Adolf Hitler seized power; in addition, the German government grew stingy with information, and Nazi pressures increased against the *Times* operation. As correspondent Frederick Birchall observed in connection with World Wide Photo, owned by the *Times*, "if we are to continue to do business in Germany it must be in accordance with the Nazi rules.... I do not think personally that it is worth while under these conditions" (pp. 54-55). Leff also argues that bureau chief Guido Enderis had "excessive German sympathies," a point of view shared by his editors (p. 55). In 1940, bureau reporter Otto Tolischus was expelled, leaving Germany's military expansion in Europe in 1940-41 to be reported in the *Times* by two younger staffers and Enderis. The result was only three bylined stories. The paper had decided to establish London as the controlling point of European coverage—in hindsight a smart decision—and to draw from wire service coverage of the continent. The paper used this wire service material extensively, but, as Leff complains, did not give it front-page play.

From Germany, Leff turns her attention in chapter 3 to coverage of France and the morally challenged Vichy government. Here Leff indicts Sulzberger for condoning stories in the *Times* that rationalized anti-Semitic laws and excused conditions in French concentration camps. After the 1940 invasion, the paper moved its bureau from Paris to Vichy, although a Swede, George Axelsson, continued to report from the City of Light. Leff argues

that the correspondents' reports of anti-Semitic legislation lacked "analysis of the Germans' true intentions" (p. 82). The paper, she reports, did not criticize French collaboration while other unspecified papers did. It published eight front-page stories about French resistance, but none about increasing persecution of Jews.

In chapter 4, Leff examines the creation of ghettos in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states. Coverage resembled that by the paper in Germany and France. The publisher's nephew, Cyrus Sulzberger, a roving correspondent, largely ignored reports of mass murder in lands conquered from the Soviet Union by the Nazis, as they were very secretive about the killings. Soviet censorship was particularly restrictive, however, as Cy Sulzberger pointed out in his memoirs.

Poland, Leff writes, was a special case. "Poland, during the first two years of war, proved more difficult for journalists to cover than any other part of the continent," she admits. "With a few exceptions, Poland was closed to Western correspondents" (p. 118). Maciej Zabierowski, in his study of the coverage of Poland in five U.S. newspapers, prior to U.S. entry into the war, reports that information about Poland was surprisingly detailed and well informed. Several reporters visited Jewish ghettos and took pictures.[1] The Polish government-in-exile in London provided much valuable information about the Jewish situation in its country, but was more interested in what was happening to Poles. An article about the appalling conditions in the Warsaw ghetto, which drew on the testimony of a member of the Warsaw Jewish Council, finally appeared in September 1941, perhaps in response to a letter from former President Herbert Hoover to publisher Sulzberger. The article, which noted that 240 people were dying a day, appeared on page 31. An update six months later, which reported 10,000 people a month were dying, saw print on page 28.

Further, Leff is particularly critical of the *Times*'s decision not to use the Jewish Telegraph Agency (JTA), which she calls "the one source that most consistently and accurately reported" the stories on the massacres in the Soviet territories (p. 127). Thus, in November 1941, the JTA reported the Babi Yar massacre outside Kiev, which had occurred in September, while the *Times* had nothing on it until a Radio Moscow announcement more than a month later (January 7, 1942). She cites a number of stories reported by other papers that the *Times* did not carry, although she does not indicate that she systematically surveyed other papers. But most newspapers of the time, and particularly the *Times*, gave preference to

stories by their own reporters who covered stories with their own eyes.

The first chapter of the second part of the book describes pressure in 1942 to publicize the first news of the Nazi extermination campaign. At that time, U.S. journalists could no longer report from occupied Europe because the United States had entered the war. The earliest information was limited; so were the reports in the *Times*. The information was horrifying, but because of the sketchiness of the reports and the impossibility of obtaining corroboration, the paper did not give them prominence. Not until the World Jewish Congress was able to persuade the United Nations to issue a declaration condemning the extermination campaign did the *Times* put the story on its front page, although Leff observes that it was not the lead story. While the *New York Post*, the *Nation*, and the *New Republic* advocated action, a *Times* editorial noted "the world's helplessness to stop the horror while the war is going on" (p. 160).

The second chapter of part 2 examines the role of news editors and their decisions about where various articles were placed in the paper. Leff focuses on the night editors, giving special attention to Neil MacNeil, the assistant night managing editor. The paper could only use about one-eighth of the news available to it, and only 4 percent of the news would appear on the front page. The men who made the decisions, including MacNeil, Raymond McCaw, and Theodore Bernstein, apparently never wrote about why they made the decisions they did. The closest the author comes to ascertaining their thinking is the suspicion of MacNeil's son that the publisher set down a policy that stories about the extermination should be downplayed.

Sulzberger's disagreements with the Zionist movement, which took place against the backdrop of the systematic annihilation of Jews, constitute the third chapter of the second part. Leff describes the growing isolation of Sulzberger and the American Council for Judaism from much of Jewish society in the United States as news of the increasing killing of Jews in Europe reached the United States. She also is unwilling to accept Sulzberger's refusal to consider the idea of a Jewish people or a Jewish homeland.

In the next chapter, she examines the impact of the U.S. government propaganda apparatus on the *Times*'s coverage. Leff acknowledges that no government document appears to have stated that coverage of the Jewish tragedy in Europe should be limited. But, she writes, "the government influenced the coverage by directing

the flow of information, issuing statements about certain subjects, keeping quiet about others, playing up parts of the war, and downplaying others" (p. 237). The crucial goal was to win the war as soon as possible. In addition, the Office of War Information generally feared that particular attention to stories about Jews would diminish popular support for the war. Leff points to Arthur Krock, the Washington bureau chief, as particularly opposed to coverage of the Jewish tragedy, because he was afraid that his access to high society would be limited if his Jewish roots became known through an emphasis on Holocaust stories. Only when Hans Morgenthau, the secretary of the treasury and Sulzberger's friend, was convinced to advocate a more active U.S. policy did the *Times* give the story greater attention.

The ninth chapter of the book examines the *Times* reporting of the efforts of the U.S. War Refugee Board, founded in late January 1944, to save as many Jews as possible. Leff finds detailed reports on Auschwitz in the paper, but notes that the stories were rarely published on the front page, and they tended to include Jews as just one of various national and ethnic groups being murdered, which was indeed the reality.

The final chapter of the second section analyzes coverage of the liberation of the concentration camps. Again, Leff finds continuing failure to emphasize the preponderance of Jewish deaths in the camps or to put the news on the front page. According to her count, only two stories about the liberations appeared on the front page of the *Times*, compared to eleven in the rival *Herald Tribune*. She acknowledges the press of other news, including the deaths of Franklin Roosevelt, Hitler, and Benito Mussolini, though; she also recognizes that U.S. correspondents were rarely present for the Soviet liberation of the biggest camps in the East, and that few Jews remained in western camps most visited by journalists, especially Buchenwald and Dachau. These journalists were most often war correspondents, who were not familiar with how the Holocaust story had been developing and confined themselves to what they saw with their own eyes and not to what had happened before they got there.

In the conclusion, Leff questions how professional journalists could not take the information they received, evaluate its accuracy and significance, and take action. But she fails to understand that how journalists defined themselves then was different from the way they came to define themselves several decades later. And in fact, it could be argued that the paper not only depended on the authoritative sources of the time, but also found it

difficult to obtain documentary evidence.

The book includes appendices identifying key individuals and key institutions, a list of the front-page stories on Jewish issues, a genealogy of the Sulzberger family, a map of *Times* correspondents, and fourteen pages of photographs. And while these are helpful, Leff occasionally inaccurately identifies places in Europe. (For instance, she refers to Czechoslovakia's occupation by Germany in March 1939, when in fact the country's "Sudetenland" had been annexed into Germany the previous September.) Among other errors, the index provides no entry for Slovakia, instead including all references to activity there under Czechoslovakia. Nor does Ukraine get a mention in the index, with any references to what Leff calls "the Ukraine" only listed under Soviet Union.

More important, most historians know that the Holocaust was not always in the mainstream of U.S. memory. More than half of the American population was virulently anti-Semitic in the 1930s and 1940s. And even American Jews paid it and its survivors little attention in the 1940s and 1950s. Furthermore, the world at large

did not understand the Nazi persecution of the Jews as we do now. American society did not welcome most African Americans, Catholics, blacks, or Jews in the 1940s. Neither did its newspapers. So it should not be surprising that the *Times* did not either, particularly at a time when the paper was more cautious and conservative than it became under the influence of the Vietnam War and the cultural revolution of the 1960s. In short, the book would have been more convincing if the author had focused on understanding rather than prosecuting. During wartime, when public focus is on patriotism and military action; when limited access makes it difficult to procure the actual observation crucial to fulfilling professional norms; and when anti-Semitism was sadly still a powerful force in American society, the *New York Times* coverage of the Holocaust is not surprising.

Note

[1]. Maciej Zabierowski, "NaprawdÄ umieramy z gÅodu": Prasa AmerykaÅska o gettach w latach 1939-1941 [We are actually starving: The American press on Jewish ghettos in occupied Poland in 1939-1941], *Studia Historyczne* 50, no. 2 (2007): 193-214.

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