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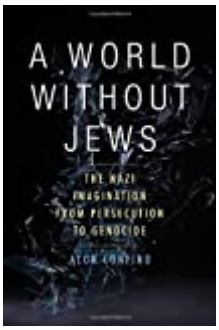

Alon Confino. *A World without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. 304 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-18854-7.

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Published on H-Judaic (January, 2015)

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A Shift in Perspective: From Causality to Meaning Making in Understanding the Holocaust

A World without Jews is to my mind one of the most important books on the Holocaust to be published in recent years and it constitutes both a methodological and a historical breakthrough. In the following paragraphs, I will examine some of its innovations and some of the important issues it raises.

Confino, a prominent cultural historian of modern Germany, is principally known for his analysis of the multifaceted metaphor of the *Heimat* and its prominence in modern German national consciousness. In addition, the importance of his analysis of the relations between history and memory in modern European history and culture is widely recognized. In *A World without Jews*, Confino employs the notions he previously developed regarding these two subjects, applying them in order to better understand the Nazi persecution and execution of the Jews.

Confino is obviously not the first historian to apply cultural historical tools in order to understand the Holocaust. Dan Michman, Claudia Kunz, Dan Stone, and others have all done so in the past. However, it seems that Confino succeeds in articulating the cultural shift most sharply and demonstrating its radical implications. As a cultural historian, his major concern is not to depict what actually happened but rather what the major protagonist of this historical drama, namely the Germans (but at certain points also the Jews), thought was happening. He is interested in what he calls the set of images, stories, dreams, and fantasies that constructed the world as it was understood by the Germans during the Nazi era and that constituted their vision of how they wanted the world to be.

Confino's fundamental argument in this book is that the Nazis were not only imperialists in territorial terms but also in temporal terms. They sought to construct a new messianic world completely disconnected from its cultural and theological origins, the symbols of which, for them, were the Jews and, no less importantly, Judaism. To put it very simplistically: in order to establish their revolutionary civilization and create a new sense of historical time, the Nazis had to exterminate the Jews

as representing and embodying the deep and moral connection to the past. This is of course not the only context in which one should understand the "final solution" but it is a crucial one for understanding it. The book is divided into three sections, each of which concentrates upon a different kind of "unbearable origin" that Jews and Judaism symbolized for the Nazis: the Jews as origins of modernity; as origins of the moral past; and as origins of history. The first section focuses on the various ways in which the Nazis identified the Jews as the bearers of the major ideological and cultural trends of the post-French Revolution eraânamely communism, liberalism, democracy, psychoanalysis, etc. The second section, which was to me the most interesting, concerns the Nazis' violent attempt to uproot the Jewish origins of European Christian civilization which, in a sense, constituted an anti-Augustinian revolution. In the third part of the book, Confino demonstrates how the extermination of the Jews was experienced by all contemporariesâGerman and Jews alikeâas an extreme act of transgression which laid the foundations for a new European civilization.

In order to establish this new world, the Nazis first needed to imagine it. They had to establish a cultural world in which the fantasy of "a world without Jews" made sense and was popularized. This assertion is crucial to understanding Confino's book and its innovation: the author seeks to explain how, using explicit and implicit, intentional and unintentional, conscious and unconscious means, the Nazis established a symbolic world which was shared by many, if not most, Germans and which was constructed from words, rituals, images, fantasies, and other media in which the Jews would not and should not exist. This was not mere ideology, and certainly not "racial ideology," in the narrow sense of these terms. It was also not about racial science. Rather, this was a wider phenomenon, of which ideology and science are only constituent partsânamely culture. Culture created the building blocks for what was perceived by all German citizens, even those who opposed the genocidal project, as the accepted imagination, like the air one breathes. This new Nazi discourse and world of images made it possible to imagine a "world without Jews" on various public and private levels, to the extent that this was almost normalized and rationalized. It made contemporaries feel that a world without Jews was practically an obvious or at least legitimate aspiration, and this image was gradually created long before the Nazis themselves considered physically exterminating the Jews.

In this sense, Confino's claim is akin to one of Hanna Arendt's most interesting arguments. In her 1951 *Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt insisted on the extreme novelty of the totalitarian phenomenon.[1] However, she also observed that all phases of Nazi persecution of the Jews exhibited one consistent, iron line of logic which was pursued to its uttermost extremeâthe logic of the modern nation-state seeking to get rid of its "others." First the Nazis isolated and de-emancipated the Jews; they then attempted to force them to emigrate, after which they expelled and in the end annihilated them. All these phases belong to one historical whole. Confino does not focus on the logic of the modern nation-state (although, as we will see below, he does not alienate himself from this context), nor on the problem of minorities in the modern nation-state. Rather, he concentrates on Nazi Germany and the Jews. Nonetheless, he shares with Arendt the same historical perception. He argues that the "Final Solution," which began at some point in the second half of 1941, was not a rupture in history but rather more of a continuation. First, he contends, it was a continuation of the previous years of the Nazi regime (1933â41). During those years, and especially following Kristallnacht, the Nazis had facilitated a commonly shared symbolic world devoid of Jews and Judaism. How to achieve thisâby means of emigration, expulsion, or annihilationâwas a secondary question. For Confino, the cultural imagination is the most significant factor, and such an image of a world without Jews was laid out already well before the actual annihilation. Second, the Nazis themselves did not really break with the past. On the contrary, radical as they were, they constructed the image of a world without Jews by integrating, in a new way, two major (and not completely unconnected) previous worlds of imagesâtraditional Christian anti-Semitic imagery and that of the exclusive *vÃ¶lkisch Heimat*, to which only true Germans belonged. In this sense, the Nazis articulated themselves as owners of the German and European past.

However, Confino's emphasis on continuity should not be understood as a claim that the Final Solution was inevitable or that the process leading to it was deterministic. The Final Solution was, like all other historical events, contingent. It was neither deterministic nor a random occurrence: a logical outcome of Nazi culture. In this sense, the author argues repeatedly that the context of the war and its radicalization offers a necessary yet insufficient explanation of the Nazi annihilation of the Jews. This does not explain what element of Nazism was stimulated and radicalized by the war. A fuller answer is to be found not only in the historical context but also in

the phenomenon itself. Hence Confino explains the Final Solution as an outcome (again, not deterministic) of Nazi culture, an integral part of this culture, from its earliest days in 1933, which enabled the Nazis to imagine a world without Jews and Judaism.

In this sense, Confino's historical account differs significantly from both traditional schools of Holocaust historiographyâthe intentionalist and the functionalist schools. Indeed, this book is not functionalist in natureâit does not deal with decrees, measures, and bureaucratsânor is it intentionalist, even though it focuses on Nazi anti-Semitism. The basic inclination of intentionalist historians, including very different scholars from Saul FriedlÃ¤nder (to whom Confino's book admittedly owes much, p. 20) to Daniel Goldhagen, is to view anti-Semitism as a cause that in various ways led to the Holocaust. Confino, however, as a cultural historian is less interested in causality and more in the cultural processes of creating meaning. Influenced by the scholarship of "memory studies," he therefore asserts that "It is not that the past (of anti-Semitism) *produced* the [Nazi] present (of the execution), not that the ancient hatred led to the Holocaust, but that the Nazis interpreted anew the past of Jewish, German, and Christian relations to fit their vision of creating a new world" (p. 11). This is a major shift in Holocaust studies, which assumes that in order to understand the extermination of the Jews we must first and foremost understand how the Nazis made sense of the world, and not necessarily search for long- or short-term chains of historical causality. "I have explored how the Nazis looked at the past, not how the past produced the Nazis," Confino states (p. 23). In this sense, the Nazis were no different from any other culture. Every individual and every collective tells stories about the past in order to make sense of the present and to produce the desired future.

In light of this ground-breaking claim, the book discusses issues that have not previously been the subject of sufficient scholarly attention. An example of this is the burning of the Jewish Bible during Kristallnacht, which serves as the focal point of the fourth chapter. Confino found numerous cases of such incidents and other desecrations of holy and ritual Jewish artifacts. In Hindenburg, Silesia, for example, according to Jewish reports, an SS man commented: "We are after all stronger than your Jehovah" (p. 115). This popular phenomenon, he claims, has never received the scholarly attention it deserves. If the Nazis were committed only to racial ideology, Confino asks, why were they so eager to destroy religious symbols and why has this been overlooked in almost all historical accounts of Kristallnacht? According to the author's subtle interpretation, these transgressive acts are an indication of the Nazi's revolutionary desire to "change not only the centuries-old history of Germans and Jews but the role of Jews in Christian civilization" (p. 126). Historians have been so preoccupied with Nazi racial discourse that they have failed to notice that "the Germans burned the Bible as part of the Nazi imagination and not at all as an aberration" (p. 132).

As I mentioned above, Confino admits that he was influenced by Saul FriedlÃ¤nder's work. In a way, his book is a nuanced and deep elaboration on FriedlÃ¤nder's concept of "redemptive anti-Semitism." Yet Confino also radically differs from FriedlÃ¤nder. In contrast to FriedlÃ¤nder, who views the Holocaust as an event almost outside of human history,[2] Confino's "cultural/ideological turn" takes quite a different approach. He explained this in his previous book *Foundational Pasts,* a work which sets the theoretical, historiographical, and methodological foundations for his account of the Holocaust: "The conceptual move to consider Nazi ideology seriously was therefore a shift in historical consciousnessâfrom viewing Nazism as alien to European history and to 'real' ideologies such as liberalism and communism to viewing it as having a body of ideas that had been integral to European history."[3] Nazism and Nazi ideology were not an accident in European history; rather they should be viewed as an integral part of it. They are constructed from common European cultural and intellectual building blocks. In this sense, Confino's historical perception fits with that of many other Holocaust historiansâsuch as Mark Mazower, Dirk Moses, Donald Bloxham, Eric Weitz, Mark Roseman, and othersâwho integrate the Holocaust as a historical event into broader historical contexts such as European colonialism, imperialism and, most importantly, European ethnic and *vÃ¶lkisch* nationalism. Confino does not write such broad integral history in this book but instead focuses on what he believes to be the most crucial aspect in understanding the Holocaust. However, already in the first pages of the book he contextualizes his argument within broader historical contexts: "[t]he Holocaust cannot be understood without consideration of the history of European colonialism" (p. 11).[4] Thus the author lays the foundations for exploring other events of political mass atrocities using the same methodological lines of cultural history, as in his current project regarding 1948. Indeed, this project sheds light on the book under discussion here.

In a recent article, Confino examines the 1948 ex-

pulsion and flight of some 750,000 Palestinians from Palestine during the Israeli war of independence and the young state's actions to prevent them from returning to their homes.[5] In particular, this article focuses on the village of Tantura, the residents of which were expelled by Israeli soldiers on the May 22, 1948, asking how this could have happened. Here we can detect the same twofold methodological approach that the author employs in his book. On the one hand, Confino asserts that one cannot understand the events of 1948 outside the context of the "forced migration" characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuriesâthat is, events that were intended to create homogeneous nation-states through mass expulsions, using violent means, which on numerous occasions deteriorated into genocide.

Yet on the other hand, in order to understand how these events unfolded, one must also turn to the methodologies of cultural history. Confino suggests that these events cannot be explained by an alleged Zionist master plan to expel all the Arabs from Palestine. Rather, the historian must turn to "memories, feelings, and sensibilities that made Jews and Arabs behave as they did." In following this route of cultural history, he investigates the Zionist collective world of fantasies and images that enabled the Nakba: "Jews had different ideas about the Arab populaÂtion, which often existed in tension: a Palestine without Arabs was part of Zionistsâ dreams, together with other dreams that included peaceful relaÂtions and collaboration with Arabs, including in a confederational political framework." But as the war unfolded, "the opportunity to create a homogeneous Jewish nation-state trampled all considerations, including collective understanding of what constituted Jewish morality."[6]

Juxtaposing these two works by Confino demonstrates how useful cultural history can be in understanding modern political violence on a mass scale. It assumes that for such events to happen there must exist some kind of fantasyâconstructed from images, feelings, and beliefsâwhich cannot be reduced to "ideology." Yet this also assumes that in certain senses Nazism and the genocides committed by the Nazis, including the Shoah, should be situated at the extreme edge of a spectrum of exclusionary modern nation-states that facilitate the fantasy of a homogeneous society without the "other," be this Jew, Arab, Armenian, Romanian, Gypsy, Greek, or any other minority. Undoubtedly, huge differences exist between the various historical cases. The Nazi fantasy of a German *Volksgemeinschaft* bereft of all its "contaminators," first and foremost the Jews, was certainly one of the most extreme, if not the most extreme, case of such political fantasies. However, Confino's cultural history indicates that Nazism and the Holocaust nonetheless belong to this continuum of violently homogenized exclusionary ethnic states, which dream of spreading over vast geographical expanses. He also teaches us that understanding these fantasies is an essential part of understanding these transgressive events.

And one last but certainly not least note on style: Confino, who is a very sophisticated and theoretically informed historian, writes in a clear and flowing style, making complex historical and historiographical issues accessible and fascinating for every reader.

Notes

[1]. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 290

[2]. See for example, Saul FriedlÃ¤nder, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 113.

[3]. Alon Confino, *Foundational Pasts: The Holocaust as Historical Understanding* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 121.

[4]. He further elaborated on this in *Foundational Pasts,* 29â32, 80â81.

[5]. Alon Confino, "Miracles and Snow in Palestine and Israel: Tantura, a History of 1948," *Israel Studies* 17, no. 2 (2012): 25â61.

[6]. Ibid, 38.