
The Nazis burned thousands of copies of the Hebrew Bible on November 9 and 10, 1938, in hundreds of communities across the Reich. Why? The substantial contribution of Alon Confino to the scholarship on the Holocaust rests on this key question, which previous historiography has ignored. According to the interpretation presented in *A World Without Jews*, this “intentional act” was “part of a larger story Germans told themselves during the Third Reich about who they were, where they came from, how they had arrived there, and where they were headed” (p.5). In order for this new national story to be built, the Jews had to be erased from the existing world.

As Confino explains, by burning the Bible, the Nazis aimed to create a new German and anti-Jewish identity, an aim which in turn reveals that an exclusively racial explanation of their beliefs would be reductionist. Germans’ choice of this “imaginary enemy” ought rather to be explained with reference to emotions and imagination, the book argues. In other words, Alon Confino seeks to provide an account of “what the Nazis thought was happening,” rather than what actually happened (p.6), and in doing so, he continues the cultural historical work he started in his previous book, *Foundational Pasts.*

Despite his book’s main focus on the Nazi imagination, Confino also offers a detailed summary of the historical events that took place from January 30, 1933, when Hitler was named chancellor, to Germany’s defeat in the Second World War in May 1945, making his book accessible even to those without specialist knowledge of the Holocaust. However, Confino’s approach to the existing historiography is questionable, in particular his quick, ungenerous dismissal of Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (p.18). While he takes into account Saul Friedländer’s idea of a Nazi “redemptive anti-Semitism” (p.20), he neglects Arno Mayer’s understanding of Nazi anti-Semitism as a “crusade” inseparable from a broader world view, which included an anti-Enlightenment stance expressed in the form of anti-Marxism as well as racial colonialism—the

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quest for Lebensraum. Ultimately, while critiquing the focus on racism, Confino seems to reduce the Nazi imagination to its anti-Semitic dimension.

Confino’s investigation into the Nazi creation of an anti-Jewish imagination centers on public rituals and was carried out through extensive research of a variety of sources: “diaries, letters, eyewitness testimonies, speeches, posters, images, films, travelogues, newspaper accounts, and records of government, military, Nazi Party, and religious organizations” as well as “photographs from the period” (p.16). Discussing these public actions allows him to “follow the way Germans imagined a world without Jews,” the “leading metaphor that drives” his story (p.9).

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which (chapters one through three) analyzes the period 1933–1938 and the relationship between Jews and modernity. In the eyes of the Nazis and other Germans, “the Jew represented different and often contradictory things” (p.30), but these ideas had a “common denominator”: “the Jews were the creators of an evil modernity that soiled present-day Germany” (p.31). The first chapter of the book shows how, in opposition to this “Jewish modernity,” the Nazis promoted their own modernity, embedded in “a racial society of pure Aryans based on the idea of a strong leader and a nation poised for European hegemony, an alternative ideology to liberalism in the West and communism in the East” (pp.31-32). The purpose of book burning was to underline the meaning of this new German identity. It was, on the one hand, an act of “national redemption” (p.52) and, on the other, “an act of irreverence, and the total erasure of the opponents” (p.53).

The second chapter analyzes how the Nazi notion of race became a metaphor for the origins of the new national identity. The obsession with origins was rooted in the idea of Heimat, or homeland, which by 1933 “was perceived as an essence of Germanness” and was then appropriated by the Nazis (p.67). Ultimately, Confino argues that the Nazi plan to conquer and restructure Europe was not “based on hard, scientific evidence, but on moral beliefs” (p.69). His study maintains that for the Nazis, “storytelling was more important than science”: they built such an effective fictional story about the Jews that they did not require hard facts to substantiate it. They were not interested in proving that they had found the truth, but rather in using racial science “as a modern seal of approval to predetermined anti-Jewish views” (p.71). The Nazi new world was

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to be built on the ruins of an old authority, represented by the Jews, who had to be publicly humiliated. Such public acts of humiliation aroused emotions that ranged from raw hatred, mockery, fear, and envy to shame and deep unease. In Confino’s words, “Germans acted publicly against the Jews to strengthen the self and build an emotional community that defied this inner sense of transgression” (p.80). The brutal violence against the Jews happened on the local level and freed the Germans’ imagination, making it possible for them “to envision, however vaguely, new social possibilities, new ways of life, linking an imagined world without Jews with everyday occurrences on the ground” (p.81). The point of these acts of public violence was “not to make everybody agree” but to involve everybody (p.85). The alleged viciousness of the Jews became a “truth that demanded no evidence” (p.86).

Through this extensive persecution, the Germans could see the Jews “everywhere” and could imagine them as “already gone”: in the third chapter, Confino analyzes the Jews’ omnipresence and anticipated erasure. Burning books excised the Jews from national culture. But the Nazis also demolished synagogues because they “evoked a sense of tradition and history, and by demolishing them, the Nazis insisted that the connection between German and Jewish pasts had to be severed in order to free up German national history” (p.109).

It becomes clear, therefore, what the Nazis wanted to achieve by burning the Bible: to destroy the tradition that the Jews symbolized. Confino devotes the second part of his book (chapters four and five) to the origins of the “moral past” represented by the Jews and the period 1938–41. The fourth chapter shows how Nazism was “about building a racial civilization by extinguishing the authority of the Jews over a moral, ancient past embedded in the Bible” (p.120). Paradoxically, the Nazis destroyed the Bible because it was important to them: “in Kristallnacht the Nazis created at the same time a German national and Christian community that was independent of Jewish roots” (p.121).

After discussing anti-Jewish laws and a number of “phantasmagoric ideas about how to extinguish Jews from German life” (p.144), chapter five reaches the critical date of Monday, January 30, 1939, when “Germany’s most important interpreter of the Jewish Question,” Hitler, finally made public his proposal for “bringing the Jewish problem to its solution” (p.151). Hitler knew that this was the right moment to talk publicly about the “annihilation” of the Jews to the German audience: by this time, Confino argues, “annihilation’ had already become a shared social practice and part of the cultural imagination” (p.152), and Hitler was therefore describing to his audience “an existing reality.” When
the “flood,” the war, came, it was made clear, through the immediate genocidal policies against Polish Jews, that there would be no place for the Jews in the Nazi empire, where they “had no right to live as human beings” (p.168). Paradoxically, the same “sense of time—that is, of history and memory—permeated the perception of both Jews and Germans”: the Jewish people were “a thing of the past, of memory and commemoration,” and the Nazis had appropriated their role of bearers of morality and replaced their narrative of historical origins with a new Nazi civilization (p.176).

The last part of the book (chapter six and the epilogue), “The Jew as the Origins of History,” starts with the Final Solution in 1941 and ends with Germany’s defeat in 1945. The Final Solution was certainly a “radical rupture,” but “not as radical as is commonly portrayed” (p.190): in Confino’s view, “the radical element of the Final Solution was not the basic decision to create a world without Jews but the decision to create it immediately” (p.191). In the sixth chapter, Confino “turned to listen to Nazis, other Germans, Jews, and Europeans,” all of whom supposedly “imagined the extermination of the Jews as an act of creation, in the sense of genesis, in which the Jewish world would be destroyed to make space for the Nazi one” (p.192). The genesis of a new Nazi time relied on the destruction of Jewish time. The ultimate annihilation of the Jews happened in “a place with no time, past, and history”: the extermination camps (p.204).

Confino’s study ends with a surprising and rather controversial analogy between the Jews and the Nazis: “Jews and Nazis shared a belief in the power of Jewish history and memory” (p.207). They both supposedly believed in the power of books and stories, with the crucial difference that whereas “the Nazis wanted to destroy the Jewish Bible, history, and memory,” the “Jews clung to them” (p.237). The conclusion Confino reaches runs contrary to much received wisdom: “The Nazis perpetrated the Holocaust in the name of culture,” and not against it, and the Germans burned the Bible “not in spite of being a nation of high culture,” but precisely because they were such a nation. The “new morality of the master race,” the Aryan one, relied on the annihilation of the Jews, because they represented the “old morality witnessed in the Book of Books” (p.242).

This book is an original cultural history of Nazism, with a clear focus on the origins of the Holocaust—an approach for which Confino has indeed argued before. Such a cultural history brings new insights to the understanding of the Nazis’ motivations and their incredibly effective identity-creation process, which went much further than their racial ideology and the general brutality of
the Second World War. However, the book’s excessive focus on the Germans’ emotions and imagination as the only key to understanding the Holocaust makes this approach unilateral and monocausal. The “Germans” themselves appear to be a vague presence in Confino’s rendition of the events, because he presents us with only the Jewish point of view and provides only Jewish voices and reactions. What about the German audience that (according to his account) was so influenced by the burning of the Bible? One wonders whether there is a way of directly documenting that wider audience’s opinion.

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