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Wolfgang Benz. *The Holocaust: A German Historian Examines the Genocide*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xi + 176 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11215-4; \$83.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11214-7.

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A German Historian and the Nazi Genocide of the Jews

Wolfgang Benz, a German historian based at the prestigious Technical University of Berlin, has generally maintained a good reputation in his specialised field of the history of German Jews during the Nazi Third Reich. However, one has to wonder what he thought he was about with this present volume, originally published in Germany in 1995 as *Der Holocaust* (C H Beck'sche Verlagsbuchandlung, Munchen).

The by now highly "scientific" subject of the Nazi persecution and extermination of the Jews is dealt with generally here in just 156 pages of text completely lacking in footnotes of any kind; the short bibliography compiled for the English edition by one Miriamne Fields is a joke (i.e. a disgrace); on pp. 24-25 the date "1993" is given twice instead of (obviously) 1933; while on pp. 133, 135, 136, and 139, we are told that "Rudolf Hess," i.e. the Fuhrer's Deputy, was actually the Commandant of Auschwitz instead of Rudolf "Hoss." This multiple mistake is made all the more inexcusable by the inclusion of the name "Rudolf Hoess" in the bibliography. Besides which, with a subject where it is often imperative to be sure at what hour of the day something happened or a decision was taken, let alone on which day of which year, it is ridiculous to have to read "in April 1933" and "in September 1935" on p. 25.

In addition, we have the undoubtedly eminent Arthur Hertzberg—whose work on French Jews during the Enlightenment is regarded as a classic by this reviewer—

foolishly sticking his neck out by declaring in his Foreword (p. ix), "Not a single line of this book can be contested or argued out of existence." Professor Hertzberg should have known better than to pin that albatross to his shoulders for any historical subject, let alone the strongly debated one of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. In any case, the fact that Columbia University Press engaged Hertzberg and not any of the well-known North American "Holocaust" scholars to write the Foreword to this book ought to ring warning bells in many circles.

What, then, is it that Professor Hertzberg and Columbia University Press are recommending, and to whom?

The criticisms made so far of this American publication might well have appeared finicky if, by comparison, the reader had been treated to a totally profound analysis of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. Unfortunately, that is far from being the case. Instead, in twelve chapters, the reader is treated to a generalised and non-chronological examination which begins with the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942, followed by discussion of the persecution of German Jews from 1933 to 1941, the establishment of the Nazi-created ghettos for Jews in eastern Europe, the "genesis" of the Final Solution, Einsatzgruppen operations in Russia, the deportation of German Jews to the east, Theresienstadt, the persecution of the Sinti and Roma, and finally "Industrialised Mass Murder in the Extermination Camps, 1942-1944."

Not only does the general pattern of the text fail to follow a strictly chronological pattern, but worse is that each of the individual chapters tends to jump all over the place, date-wise. Some detailed points of history are included in each of the chapters, which might be barely useful for certain generalised purposes by some, but they tend to appear more as a means of filling out the narrative rather than contributing to erudite analysis of the most controversial aspects of the historical minefield which is the Nazi genocide of the Jews. Such necessary analysis is noticeable by its absence.

Moreover, many of Benz's generalisations are couched in such ambiguous language that unless the reader is already familiar with the facts or documentation they will be unable to make head or tails of what the author is on about. This is because he omits key points of detail, as well as of analysis, in connection with particular events. Some events are not even explained—for example, the Munich Agreement (without a date) on p. 27. Given the book's presumed target audience—a general and ostensibly uninformed one at the very least—something as basic as the full information for that key historical event should have been given. Why not, also, actually mention the name “Evian” in relation to the international conference of July 1938 on Jewish migration from Germany (p. 35)?

On pp. 6-7 Benz states in connection with the Wannsee Conference that “at least half of those taking part in the discussions had a very clear idea of how the mass murders were being carried out or how they were yet to be executed.” The phrase, “yet to be executed” obviously refers to the gassing operations that would become the norm as of 1942. Yet at the time of the Wannsee Conference, it is far from certain how many people in the senior levels of the SS hierarchy, let alone State Secretaries in “ordinary” German Ministries, were completely *au fait* with the plans of SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler and others that gassing would indeed be the means employed on a massive scale to dispose of European Jewry. In fact, the anodyne *Tarnspruch* of the protocol drawn up after the Wannsee Conference is probably an accurate rendition of the fact that whilst its chairman, Reinhard Heydrich, never actually allowed the word “killing” to escape his lips, neither would details of the intended means of killing the Jews by gas either have been mentioned at that meeting.

Benz is further grievously at fault in not explaining to any ill-informed purchaser of this volume the real significance of Reichsmarschall Hermann Goring's “autho-

risation” to Reinhard Heydrich on the Jewish question of 31 July 1941 (p. 9). Nor is it true, as Benz claims on p. 10, that “the murderers were highly satisfied with the method” of exterminating Jews by means of gas vans. On the contrary, those Germans on the eastern front whose responsibility it was to empty the gas vans of cadavers were thoroughly sickened by what they had to do.

The author is also off-target in his sweeping statement on p. 12, that the Wannsee Conference “demonstrated clearly the unswerving determination of the Nazi regime to murder methodically, cold-bloodedly, calculatedly, and with the full support of the bureaucracy, every Jew it could lay its hands on.” Shortly before Wannsee, Hitler himself had issued strict orders for food and medical supplies to be provided to gangs of Jewish workers on the eastern front in Latvia, while less than a week after that conference Himmler made it clear that he wanted 100,000 Jews and 50,000 Jewesses transferred to concentration camps for labour purposes. Indeed, throughout 1942 and 1943, Himmler was at the centre of fierce rows within the Nazi leadership, not least with Joseph Goebbels, the Propaganda Minister, over his, the Reichsführer's, attempts to build up his own industrial base in the German economy by using Jewish labour in the concentration camp system. Obviously, such Jewish labour would not be targeted for extermination.

Even when Benz turns his hand to what might otherwise be termed “philosophical reflections,” he trips himself up. One of the most appallingly tautological statements to be found in this book appears on p. 132, when Benz writes that “Auschwitz lay beyond the powers of the human imagination.” Apart from reminding one of the equally redundant point made in years past by Alice and Roy Eckhardt, about how “the Holocaust” was supposedly “uniquely unique,” Benz's comment about Auschwitz begs the obvious riposte: if that was indeed the case, how on earth could it have been conceived in the first place, if not by ordinary human beings and their fertile imagination?

Finally, and questionably, we have to read on p. 152 how “the Holocaust” was “a unique crime in the history of mankind.” This is not the place (or space) in which to contest that statement—“invalid” in this reviewer's mind, whereas others might prefer to use the more equable term, “debatable.” Nevertheless, it makes one wonder what world news Benz has made himself familiar with in recent decades (not to say the first three months of 1999). In addition, Benz shows himself to be completely captured by one particular school of thought when he

states that “in the course of the Holocaust the genocide of the Sinti and Roma was carried out” (p. 129). This is symptomatic of what this reviewer regards as the quite dreadful recent re-writing of history to project virtually everything pertaining to the inter-mixed history of Nazis and Jews from 1933 as “the Holocaust,” and then to “hide” every other Nazi racial persecutory and exterminatory policies “behind” that term. Ultimately, of course, what that means is that the fate of millions of other Nazi victims is simply subsumed under the fate of Jews under the Nazis—and morally and historically, that is not at all right.

Specialists of the period covered by Wolfgang Benz will rightly avoid this book like the plague. More worrying is if university and college students have this book

recommended to them by relatively uninformed instructors, or somehow get their own hands on it. It will have no real educational or historical value to them at all. Whilst there are any number of authoritative specialised studies on the market, if it is shorter analyses that students and members of the public (as well as some instructors) require, they should turn instead to the reliable works of Michael A Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (Penguin Books, 1989), and Hermann Graml, *Anti-semitism in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

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