

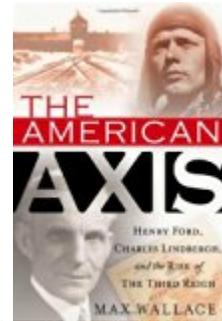
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Max Wallace. *The American Axis: Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and the Rise of the Third Reich*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003. ix + 465 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-29022-1.

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Published on H-German (May, 2004)



On a recent flight to St. Louis (no less), while still reading the book under review, I was asked if I would recommend it. My neighbor, a self-professed history-buff, could not help notice the striking cover—Charles Lindbergh and Henry Ford next to Auschwitz-Birkenau and a swastika—and the title that linked this “American Axis” to the rise of the Third Reich. What follows is my ambivalent endorsement.

The book was not written for an academic audience to whom it will yield few new insights—in spite of the somewhat sensationalist advertisement of new disclosures and revelations on the two protagonists. The author, Max Wallace, is an investigative journalist and this accounts for both the strength and the weakness of his story. His style is dramatic and captivating, and I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book. The narrative is organized exclusively around the two central figures with a gallery of secondary characters ranging from alleged Nazi spies and military attachés to slave labor victims in “supporting roles.” The story of Ford’s and Lindbergh’s anti-Semitism and racism, and their deliberate as well as unwitting efforts to assist the Nazis is an important one and should be told to a wider audience. But the account is lacking in interpretative focus and occasionally in historical perspective.

The book weaves together the genesis of Ford’s and Lindbergh’s racial notions, their professional dealings with Germany and their private admiration for the Third Reich. Wallace uses the existing literature on his two fallen heroes as well as Lindbergh’s private papers and the Ford Company archives. Yet his account is not a biographical one. Overall Lindbergh emerges as more of a complex, real-life character from these pages; Wallace’s

portrait of Anne Morrow Lindbergh is nuanced and at times even moving (p. 247ff.). By contrast Ford’s personality remains vague and Wallace’s explanation of how and why he acquired his anti-Semitic views is not entirely convincing. In 1920 Ford began serializing articles on the “Jewish Question” based on the *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* in his newspaper the *Dearborn Independent*, outlining a worldwide sinister Jewish conspiracy as detailed in the forgery. Subsequently he published the collection as a pamphlet, *The International Jew*, and effectively distributed it through the Ford Company’s national and international network of dealerships. Wallace reviews and rejects as deficient alternative explanations of how Ford—that “hitherto shy, gentle ... and in some respects quite enlightened” man (p. 16)—had come to adopt these malicious lies. The author instead introduces as the real culprit Ernest Gustav Liebold, a Detroit-born German-American, who became both the *Dearborn Independent*’s general manager and Henry Ford’s trusted personal secretary. A 1918 “most secret” military intelligence document reported that Liebold is “considered to be a German spy” (p. 25), although the investigation remained inconclusive. Over the next three hundred pages Liebold remains a shadowy figure. Wallace insinuates that Liebold is both responsible for Ford’s anti-Semitism and for his company’s attempts to prevent and undermine the American war effort in both World War I and World War II.

But Liebold is also shadowy in that Wallace neither develops his character and motivations (or the makeup of his anti-Semitism) nor the specific nature of his ties to Germany from 1918 through 1941. He has contacts with Franz von Papen (pp. 131, 225), Kurt Ludecke (the Nazis’ “chief fund raiser” in the 1920s, p. 49ff) and per-

haps Heinrich Albert, one of the members of the board of directors of German Ford Werke since the 1930s. By page 318 Liebold has evolved into “probably a Nazi spy” but the evidence remains shaky and confusing, and consists of a few official Nazi (p. 146) or older German contacts, the significance of which Wallace cannot fully illuminate. This never explicitly-made line of argumentation then would read as follows: during World War I an unconfirmed German spy set Henry Ford up to develop anti-Semitic views which, by the time of World War II, would lead the Ford Company to undermine the American military efforts against Nazi Germany. My problem is less with the validity of this interpretation than with the lack of specific and convincing evidence that it was Liebold who was behind all of this activity; too often the argument is based on conjecture (131ff., 144, 318f.). Rather than focusing on how Ford came to be an anti-Semite (as if anti-Semitism were a contagious disease one could only catch through close personal contact), it is the story of the public and political consequences of Ford’s anti-Semitism that is really the more interesting one.

No less frustrating is the reversal of the above-outlined argument in chapter 2, “The Fuehrer’s Inspiration.” Much is made of Ford’s portrait in Hitler’s office in 1931 (p. 2) and Baldur von Schirach’s defense at the Nuremberg trial: “If [Ford] said the Jews were to blame, naturally we believed him” (p. 42). Surely, the Nazis did not have to rely on Ford as a teacher of anti-Semitism? Here, too, the claim of Ford’s influence on the Nazis is not contextualized.[1] Wallace instead offers the opinion by another historian emphasizing “the role that Russian émigrés played in laying the ideological groundwork for the Holocaust” (p. 63).[2] Wallace uses this point to explain the significance of the White Russian Boris Brasol who is the most direct link between Ford (via Liebold, of course) and the Nazis and also the conduit for a possible financial donation to the NSDAP. The driving force behind Wallace’s account is the existence of links between people who move like chess figures across board. The author establishes far-flung connections between his two protagonists and Germany, but much of the context is missing. Occasionally, the reason for the lack of historical perspective is Wallace’s unfamiliarity with important secondary literature on his subject. The reference for his account of American controversy over boycotting the Berlin Olympics in 1936 is a 2001 article on China in the *National Review Online* (p. 415f.). But the main problem of Wallace’s book is not a failure to adhere to academic standards of referencing or source criticism. At issue is a broader concern that historians

and journalists share: we tell a story in order to advance an argument, to give meaning to an otherwise confusing and chaotic assemblage of facts and events. It is in this endeavor that Wallace’s meandering account falls somewhat short. Instead we learn intermittently some juicy tidbits that do not pertain to the author’s immediate subject matter: for example, Kurt Vonnegut once wrote an admiring piece in a student paper on the isolationist “lonely eagle” (p. 275) and George W. Bush’s maternal great-grandfather “has been described by a U.S. Justice Department investigator as ‘one of Hitler’s most powerful financial supporters in the United States’” (p. 349).

Later chapters explore the relationship between the Ford Company (Dearborn) and its German subsidiary Ford Werke during World War II. It is a story of “business as usual”: the German profits were “placed in an escrow account for distribution to the American parent company after the war” (p. 329). These profits, Wallace rightly highlights, were in part based on forced labor.[3] Wallace is also correct in challenging the notion—offered as the conclusion of a recent investigation that Dearborn had conducted into the problem of wartime profits from its European, Nazi-dominated subsidiaries—that Ford “had to use labor provided by the German government” (p. 335). The German controlled Ford plants in Europe had, even before the outbreak of the war and with the consent of Dearborn, turned into “an arsenal of Nazism” (pp. 228f., 340).

The story of Lindbergh’s misguided views and actions is also advanced through a narrative of secondary figures. Lindbergh—in spite of a father who is portrayed as more racist than ordinary white Americans at the time (p. 83)—acquired his racial views through his close association and friendship with the French scientist Alexis Carrel. The aviator’s obsessions with racial purity were subsequently further bent in a direction of admiration for the Nazi project by the American military attaché to Germany, Truman Smith (pp. 104-111, 381). And it is the latter who invited Lindbergh and his wife “in the name of Göring” to visit the Third Reich at the time of the Olympic Games (p. 112ff.) Not surprisingly, Lindbergh was deeply impressed not only by “the organized vitality of Germany” but more importantly by a state that sought to realize his own ideals: “science and technology harnessed for the preservation of a superior race” (p. 118). As a result of the exclusive focus on the aviator, the dramatic and complex story of the Czechoslovak crisis is told with Lindbergh and his exaggerated reports on the German air force playing the decisive role in tilting British policy towards appeasement (pp. 165, 167-

171). Wallace's chapter ignores the military, political and diplomatic reality of the British situation in 1938.[4]

Lindbergh, probably even more so than Ford, emerges at times in this book as an unsuspecting dupe of more sinister forces working in the background (p. 208). I am not convinced that this conspiratorial approach to history serves Wallace's endeavor to establish personal responsibility for politically damaging actions. The point to make about the problematic role of the two flawed heroes concerns the impact of their anti-Semitic, racist, pro-Nazi public activities, speeches or publications over the course of more than a decade on American public opinion. The Roosevelt administration, in the meantime, tried to rally the same public around a program of aid to Britain and subsequently in a heavily ideological mobilization characterized Nazism as an assault on civilization. Ford and Lindbergh in turn found this civilization not threatened by the Germans but by the Russians. The fact that both received a Nazi medal, which was evidently well-deserved, and that they refused to return them is telling. Particularly in the last chapter, Wallace tries hard to give the impression of a fair and balanced portrait of the "lonely eagle," defending him against Harold Ickes's public as well as Roosevelt's private accusations of being a "Nazi." This highlights one of the book's more problematic aspects: the incongruity between the title and jacket design suggesting a crucial role of this "American Axis" in the rise of the Third Reich and the nuanced conclusion that the author "discovered no smoking gun proving that Lindbergh was motivated by anything but sincere—albeit misguided—motives for this prewar isolationist activities or that he was disloyal to America" (p. 378). Between title and conclusion lies the substance of the book: characterized by the absence of an explicitly stated argument, a detailed, yet narrowly focused narrative suggests that their racist convictions led Ford and Lindbergh to take a benevolent and admiring view of the Third Reich, and partly knowingly, partly unwittingly served Nazi interests.

From the dust jacket we learn that Wallace is a "Holocaust researcher" but he exhibits little scholarly background on the Third Reich itself. (To refer to Adolf Hitler as "another German philosopher" [p. 43] in the same sentence with Hegel is not helpful to his overall point.) He cites some relevant secondary literature on specific aspects of World War II, for example Nazi Fifth Column activities in the United States, anti-Semitism in the U.S. army, and forced labor in the German Ford Werke, but he does not use it to establish the urgently needed interpretive context for the events detailed in this book.

Most sorely missing is a proper analysis of American anti-Semitism as a prerequisite for understanding how Americans confronted the Third Reich. Wallace, even though citing studies by Leonard Dinnerstein and Myron Scholnick, neither defines the nature of American anti-Semitism nor does he seem to understand the effect it had on the American public perception of and official responses to the Third Reich—a story told by Deborah Lipstadt, Richard Breitman, David Wyman and others. Its relevance lay in the role which even the mildest forms of social prejudice and, in particular, the Roosevelt administration's concern over these prejudices played in devising responses to Nazi Germany. Within the context of Wallace's narrower focus, it would have been helpful at least to clarify the difference between Ford's hatred fantasizing about a Jewish political-economic conspiracy and Lindbergh's obsession with racial purity. But for Wallace anti-Semitism is a monolithic, timeless, unchanging phenomenon.

Max Wallace has written a passionate, though sprawling, narrative that serves an important educational purpose: rather than continuing to admire these two deeply flawed individuals we should appreciate both the political impact of their racial beliefs and the nature of their misguided attraction to Nazi Germany. But his book is not yet a conclusive assessment of the historical role these two public figures played in German-American relations in the 1930s and 40s.

#### Notes

[1]. For an important primary source on Hitler's pre-1933 views of the United States, its automotive industry and his admiration for an immigration policy that produced "racially first-rate Americans" see Gerhard L. Weinberg, *Hitler's Second Book: The Unpublished Sequel to Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler* (New York: Enigma Books, 2003), pp. 107, 109, 111-118. For the development of "Fordism" during the Third Reich cf. Philipp Gassert, *Amerika im Dritten Reich: Ideologie, Propaganda und Volksmeinung, 1933-1945* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1997).

[2]. The dissertation proposal on which this assertion is based, incidentally, turns into a dissertation only a few footnotes later, p. 408, n. 101, 106.

[3]. The essence of Wallace's argument with more historical context can also be found in Bernd Greiner, *Die Morgenthau Legende. Zur Geschichte eines umstrittenen Plans* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995), pp. 112f., 115f.; and Reinhold Billstein, Karola Fings, Antia Kugler

and Nicholas Levis, *Working for the Enemy: Ford, General Motors and Forced Labor in Germany during the Second World War* (New York: Berghahn, 2000).

[4]. Gerhard L. Weinberg, *The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Starting World War II, 1937-1939* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994), pp. 313-464.

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**Citation:** Michaela Hoenicke Moore. Review of Wallace, Max, *The American Axis: Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, and the Rise of the Third Reich*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

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