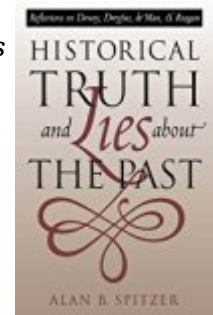


Alan B. Spitzer. *Historical Truth and Lies about the Past: Reflections on Dewey, Dreyfus de Man and Reagan.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996. 162 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-2289-0.



Reviewed by William D. Irvine

Published on H-France (January, 1998)

This is a book about historical arguments. More precisely it is an examination of three case studies of controversies about the past (often the recent past) and the specious arguments which resulted from them. The first case is that of the Dreyfus Affair where anti-Dreyfusards persisted, in the face of all of available evidence, in their contention that Dreyfus was guilty. The second involves the celebrated Moscow purge trials of 1936-38 when a number of prominent old Bolsheviks were convicted, on the basis of their own confessions, of conspiring with Stalin's nemesis, Leon Trotsky, against the Soviet regime. Whenever the substance of the confessions could be tested empirically--that is to say whenever the actions confessed to transpired outside of the Soviet Union-- the implausibility of the confessions became abundantly apparent. Nonetheless, Communists and western fellow-travellers persisted in their belief in the guilt of the accused. The third case involves the discovery in the 1980s of the wartime collaborationist writings of the distinguished literary theorist Paul de Man. Although his devotees among what may be loosely described as the "deconstructionists" did not exactly

deny that de Man wrote some very disturbing articles in the German controlled press of Occupied Belgium, they laboured mightily to minimize the significance of what appeared at first blush to be a defence of the new German order and an overt attack on European Jews. Spitzer includes a fourth case study, that of Ronald Reagan's "Bitburg Address" where the U.S. president appeared to subscribe to the proposition that the combat dead among the SS were as much victims of Hitler as, say, Ann Frank. The last case is not strictly comparable to the first three if only because even the most ardent defenders of "The Great Communicator" made no serious attempt to defend the his *Readers' Digest* view of history. Its presence in the book is for polemical purposes to be discussed below.

Certainly each of Spitzer's chapters makes stimulating reading in its own right; the essays on Dreyfus, the Moscow trials, and de Man will be indispensable reading for historians of those subjects. But the individual chapters are linked together by a larger argumentative design. All of the cases, Spitzer argues, have a number of things in

common. In all three cases intellectuals of one stripe or another appeared to have denied what the evidence clearly showed to have been true. In all three cases they rejected what might be called the scientific method in favour of appeals to authority. Anti-Dreyfusards appealed to the moral authority of the army; Communists, to the moral authority of Stalin. In the case of the defenders of de Man the authority was that of a small caste of deconstructionist theorists who alone knew how truly to "read" documents that the uninitiated might misunderstand. More important, in all three cases an essentially pragmatic conception of the truth was at work. For a Maurice Barres or a Charles Maurras, for example, the actual guilt or innocence of Dreyfus was at best a secondary consideration. It was important that he be treated as guilty lest his defenders--Freemasons, Jews, socialists--be allowed to continue their work of subverting the army, the church, the social order, and *la vraie France*. For Communists, Trotsky had to be guilty as charged lest the entire course of the revolution since the death of Vladimir Ilich Lenin be de-legitimated. Many fellow travellers, some of them in their time courageous defenders of Dreyfus, adopted at best a radical agnosticism about the Moscow trials, lest the Popular Front and the common struggle against fascism be jeopardized. Literary theorists rallied to the posthumous defence of de Man lest deconstructionism itself be assailed. To be sure, the stakes were less high for the deconstructionists than for the anti-Dreyfusards or the Communists since even taken at face value de Man's wartime aberrations did not logically reflect on the merits of a literary theory to which he subscribed two decades later. Still, there was no denying the obvious glee with which such dogged critics of the academic establishment as Roger Kimball greeted the revelations about de Man; nor the acid one-liners of people like Jeffrey Mehlman who mischievously wrote off "the whole of deconstruction as a vast amnesty project for the politics of collaboration during World War II" (p. 64).

By and large, then, the people under discussion seem to have rejected conventional evidentiary standards. But not entirely. The author is at some pains to stress that, even if only for polemical purposes, they did invoke what passed for hard evidence whenever possible. Barres, his true indifference to the evidence notwithstanding, was prepared to make much of the presumed competence of the military judges and to the scientific merits of graphologists like Alphonse Bertillon whose testimony contributed to the conviction of Dreyfus. Communists plaintively circulated truncated photographs of a Bristol Cafe in a desperate bid to convince the faithful that this was what E. S. Holtzman, a victim of Stalin's purges, really meant when he said he had met Trotsky in the Bristol Hotel in Copenhagen three years after it had burned to the ground. The deconstructionists actually published the complete war-time writings of de Man in a very un-deconstructionist effort to "set the record straight", and, as the author wryly notes, Jacques Derrida, in his efforts to defend de Man, stooped to an uncharacteristic degree of linguistic clarity. Why these periodic concessions to common sense empiricism? Spitzer makes the logical point that if one's standards of truth (although for some reason he prefers the multi-syllabic synonym "veridicality") are totally incommensurate--i.e., both parties are literally speaking mutually incomprehensible languages--then no debate is possible. Rather more practically, in all cases the advocates feared lacking credibility if they failed to pay lip service to the standards which most of their audience accepted.

This last point is critical for Spitzer since the real target of these essays is certain recent historical and literary theorists. In particular he has in mind Hayden White, the great "subverter from within of the epistemological self-confidence of the historical profession" (p. 3). Just what White had in mind in his very demanding 1973 classic *Metahistory* has always been a matter of debate, but most have taken from it the idea that there are a number of "mutually exclusive though

equally legitimate... narratives" of the same set of historical events. Following others, Spitzer asks: does this mean that White would concede equal epistemological legitimacy to a "narrative" of the past which denies the Holocaust as to one which does not? Since the answer is apparently no, Spitzer asks the follow-up question: what about the anti-Dreyfusard "narrative" or the Stalinist "narrative? If we chose to believe, as Spitzer suspects White would, that G. L. Piatakov did not, contrary to his confession, fly to Oslo in December 1935 to meet and conspire against the Soviet Union with Trotsky, it is manifestly not because that version of events has somehow a flawed "tropological strategy", an inferior mode of "emplotment" or a deficient "strategy of explanation" or any other of White's favourite devices. We chose, instead, to believe that Piatakov's story was false simply because of the demonstrable empirical evidence that no foreign planes flew into Oslo airport in December 1935 or at any time between September 1935 and May 1936. Would it not, therefore, be better to abandon White's relativistic theories for a recognition that the norms of valid inference are a better guide to establishing, in John Dewey's words, "upon what grounds are some judgements about the course of past events more entitled to credence than certain other ones" (p. 28). Spitzer's point would appear to be that radical relativism is all very well when one is playing literary or epistemological games, but not helpful when the chips are down. He notes with some irony that the very people who set out to "set the record straight" about de Man were on record in their theoretical writings as denying that there was such a thing as a historical record to be set straight. Of course Spitzer also believes that all the rhetoric about setting the record straight was largely a shell game. Once having conceded that de Man's wartime writings were *prima facie* disturbing, his defenders began a tortuous exercise in "reading" their hero in such a way as to discover subversive strategies in what to the non-initiated looked like straight forward

anti-semitism. Spitzer has a delightful parody of the Derrida's method--or at any rate it is delightful to anyone who, like this reviewer, could never quite take him seriously.

In his concluding section Spitzer raises the awkward question of how, if one can somehow find in the de Man's wartime outpourings a doctrine of resistance to the Nazi Germans, could anyone dispute Reagan's morally obtuse--not to say obscene-- equation of the victim and the perpetrators. This is a disturbing question but one from which the Reaganite right may take no comfort. The Roger Kimballs and the William Bennetts dined out on the stories of the moral relativism in the contemporary academy [Bennett was head of the National Endowment for the Humanities and a Reagan appointee]. Spitzer, one must assume, shares at least some of their concerns. But he also notes, taking a distant cue from Robert Hughes's *The Culture of Complaint* (New York, 1993), that such moralizing is a bit much, coming as it does from people who systematically defended a regime which set new records for public lying. Spitzer has written a stimulating and provocative book, one that ought to be read by all historians and all politically engaged academics.

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Citation: William D. Irvine. Review of Spitzer, Alan B. *Historical Truth and Lies about the Past: Reflections on Dewey, Dreyfus de Man and Reagan*. H-France, H-Net Reviews. January, 1998.

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