

**Book Review: *A World Without Jews* by Alon Confino**  
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Alon Confino's *A World Without Jews* is an insightful exploration of the origins and amplification of the Holocaust, and how the Nazis were able to solidify a concept of a German state without Jews prior to the execution of the Final Solution. Unlike other analyses of Nazism, the Holocaust and the *Kristallnacht*, Confino places a heavy emphasis on the burning of the Bible, and more broadly, the role of religion and how it commingled with scientific racism that helped justify anti-Jewish sentiments in Germany since 1933. By analyzing these concepts, Confino's primary argument rests on the idea that by compartmentalization — which was carried out locally as it was systemically — the Nazis, and complicit Germans, were, therefore, able to imagine a world devoid of Jewish influence and existence as early as 1933. Thus, in the same vein, Confino also challenges the wide consensus of functionalist theory in Holocaust literature that the Nazis had not foreseen Auschwitz, and that the Final Solution was merely a by-product of the war. Ultimately, this nuanced perspective of the interplay between race and religion — previously, and sometimes deliberately overlooked by scholars as Confino contends — that makes *A World Without Jews* a compelling viewpoint with which to examine the Holocaust.

Confino divides his analysis into three sections, which begins with the examination of the burning of books in May 1933. In the first half of the book focusing on the years 1933 to 1938, Confino discusses anti-Jewish sentiment as “a popular initiative from below,” at the grassroots level, only to be followed as official state policy later on.<sup>1</sup> In this section, Confino demonstrates how in order to solidify German identity, it first needed to rid itself of “un-Germans’ who

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<sup>1</sup> Confino, 47.

contaminated the social environment,” with the primary target being the Jews.<sup>2</sup> However, in this section, Confino begins with a broader scope of enemies that the Nazis wanted to cleanse Germany of, which includes Bolshevism, liberalism, Marxist, communist and Jewish influences, to name a few. He demonstrates this by exemplifying the book burnings which took place months prior to May 10, and heavily targeted socialist and communist literature and political writings.<sup>3</sup> However, as Confino highlighted, the May 10 book burning occasion “represented a wider agenda about remaking German identity because it was initiated by students and academics, whose professions are based on the reading and writing of books, and because it took place as a public ritual in citadels of learning.”<sup>4</sup> By burning un-German literature, the Nazis were able to construct a clean slate, marking the beginning of national redemption and a new identity which “redefined concepts of nationhood, Germanness and history.”<sup>5</sup> This episode was not only important in the construction of renewed German identity, but also in highlighting the fact that while the regime supported and perpetrated the cleansing of un-German elements, the complicit participants to the book burnings were, as Confino puts it, “not coerced from above, but [rather] acted enthusiastically from below.”<sup>6</sup>

Having established the concept of the complicit attitude of the civilian population, Confino consequently discusses the locality of the anti-Jewish sentiments that followed hereon. As Hitler consolidated power in 1934, what followed was a series of discriminatory measures against the Jews. In discussing the Nuremberg Race Laws of 1935, as well as the concept of *Heimat*, or homeland, Confino demonstrates the gradual process in which the Nazis tried to

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<sup>2</sup> Confino, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Confino, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Confino, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Confino, 44.

<sup>6</sup> Confino, 44.

solidify their definition of the German identity against the backdrop of increasing compartmentalization and anti-Semitism. The idea of the *Heimat* as a symbol of local identity was recognized and taken advantage of by the Third Reich, for it constituted the most familiar way of belonging within the German tradition. However, as the author pointed out, the concept of *Heimat* relies more on the affection of affiliation than concrete, verifiable facts. Regardless, this exact familiarity with German customs and carnivalesque pageantry — such as the May 10 book burning — was exploited by the Nazis, as further exemplified by the public violence and humiliation carried out against the Jews. According to Confino, the publicity of these acts was crucial in order “to make an impact [and] to steer people to act.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps most striking was the practice of neighbourly violence where long-time Jewish residents were humiliated and victimized precisely by those whom they had lived with for years. Here, once again, Confino emphasizes the importance of individual action and agency in the face of regime pressure, while also underlining the public significance of such acts, which was to tap into the emotions of the civilians, thus building an “emotional community.”<sup>8</sup> By carrying out individual, intentional acts of violence against the Jews, the perpetrator increases their belonging and thus solidifies their German identity. In speaking about local displays of Jewish mockery, ridicule and public violence, Confino contends that “although public stances were shaped by pressures emanating from the regime, there was [still] considerable space for individual choice and action,” therefore emphasizing the importance of individuality in the events leading up to the Holocaust. This magnification of the willingness of civilian participation is one of the strengths in Confino’s work, for it humanizes the Holocaust and moves away from the bureaucratic-focused lens that the literature had often attributed to the Jewish genocide in Nazi Germany. Furthermore, as much

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<sup>7</sup> Confino, 79.

<sup>8</sup> Confino, 79.

as he focused on the human actions that made such magnitude of hatred and humiliation possible, so too did he highlight examples of when other Germans showed empathy and courage in defence of their Jewish friends and neighbours, often at the cost of themselves and their own dignity. By not leaving this part out, the author therefore presents a balanced perspective of events. However, even in light of this acknowledgement, the argument of what the individual should have done can come across as simply lacking historical empathy. By placing the individual perpetrators in the onus of the blame, it tends to negate the existential pressures that must have been pressing and were perhaps utilized and abused by the Third Reich, to further the compartmentalization between Germans and the Jewish people. After all, Confino himself gave examples of how those who attempted to defend their Jewish friends instead earned the ire of the perpetrators. In truth, while this analysis of the individual-centred approach offers insight into how individual actions made the Holocaust possible, it can also become a double-edged sword. Regardless, however, Confino still managed to highlight the dangers that such a magnitude of hatred can do.

Perhaps one of Confino's greatest contributions is the amount of significance that he gives to the burning of the Bible, which he discusses in depth in the latter half of the book, shifting the temporal focus to 1938's *Kristallnacht*. By this point, the Germans had turned their ire towards the religious elements of Jewish identity by the destruction of Torah scrolls and the burning of synagogues, and most of all, the Hebrew Bible. This occurrence translated throughout the Third Reich, including the newly annexed Austria, and was even participated in by children. According to Confino, the scholarship on *Kristallnacht* has largely ignored the burning of the Bible, which merely defined the episode as a result of regime policy structures.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary,

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<sup>9</sup> Confino, 119.

Confino contends that “this act cannot be reduced to an issue of policy decision-making,” as it lacks an explanation of why the perpetrators had burned the Torah. Instead, for Confino, he asserts that the burning of the Bible was a fundamental aspect for the Nazis to destroy Judaism as a whole as it threatens the survival of the Third Reich.<sup>10</sup> To them, the Jews “epitomized both the rootlessness of modern times *and* the ultimate historical origins embedded in the Bible.”<sup>11</sup> To burn the Holy Book, therefore, was “a way [for the Nazis] to visualize Judaism, to make tangible the enemy that was being destroyed.”<sup>12</sup> By interpreting this episode of *Kristallnacht*, the author makes a compelling and foreboding connection to what would eventually transpire. For Confino, the destruction of the most sacred, tangible object of Judaism was the penultimate warning of what was to come, which was the Final Solution.

Overall, Confino’s analysis of the Holocaust offers a compelling perspective centred on the humanness of a global event that often heavily relies on the bureaucratic-centered perpetuation of anti-Semitism. Although the functionalist approach is not entirely incorrect, as the author himself recognized, it does indeed leave out a critical juncture that made events such as the Holocaust possible, which was the power of collective, human action. As Confino had mentioned in his introduction and consistently referenced throughout the text, history is created through human actions, not solely structures.<sup>13</sup> However, applying a human-centred approach at the forefront also comes with the risk of negating the functionalist influences — namely geopolitical tensions and other circumstances — that could have influenced the turn of the Nazi approach to the Jewish question. Furthermore, and most significantly as it pertains to historiography, the argumentation that the Nazis had foreseen Auschwitz makes this logic

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<sup>10</sup> Confino, 120.

<sup>11</sup> Confino, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Confino, 121.

<sup>13</sup> Confino, 119.

susceptible to the bias and pitfalls of teleological thinking. And yet amidst this possibility, Confino managed to demonstrate that by comingling religion, scientific racism, and exploiting the familiarity of German customs that tapped into the emotional identities of the civilian population, the Third Reich had therefore succeeded in compartmentalizing and vilifying a certain group, making the absence of their existence conceivable, even prior to the onset of the tangible realities of war.

Bibliography

Confino, Alon. *A World Without Jews : The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide.*

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.