

A Review of Alon Confino's A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide

by Sophie Robitaille, HTST 427

When the Second World War ended, the discussions around anti-Semitism and the treatment of Jews persisted, arguably more than ever. The persecution of Jews throughout the war was something so horrific and incomprehensible that many individuals today will never grasp the magnitude and effect it had on Jews and the world. A vast amount of scholarly writing on the events of the Holocaust and the impacts have been written since the war ended, though most seem to focus solely on the extermination/genocide of Jews, instead of examining and analyzing how the events fundamentally changed Jewish memory and the people as a whole. Alon Confino's novel, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide*, does a commendable job in tackling the intricate and highly emotional topics within the Second World War, as well as its impact on Jewish people as a whole. The idea of the novel is to follow the imagined way in which Germans viewed a world without Jews, however, Confino's central argument is that the Holocaust was not solely racially motivated (though it was definitely an important factor), but that the Jews represented time and a people that prevented Nazism from becoming dominant and bringing the Nazi imagination to life.

Confino's argument shows that Nazis did not invent anything new, but that they capitalized off pre-existing anti-Semitic views established throughout Europe, and did so by using fictional positions on race to completely remove the fundamental role Jews played in the foundations of Europe.¹ There was a main goal of eradicating the Jewish population in Europe, not just in Germany, by erasing them physically and culturally. In the novel Confino greatly stresses the fact that the Nazi ideology regarding

¹ Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014, 26.

Jews was entirely fictional, imagined, and to do something like that, one would need sufficient evidence, and Confino provides just that. He covers a lot of content in the book, though he largely focuses on the significance of memory and imagination concerning time, due to the prominence of Jews in Europe's history, legitimacy, and their origins to support his claims, that a world without Jews was the only way that the Nazis would rise to power.

Memory plays a vital role in creating a world without Jews, and to Confino's argument. The European memory of Jews was and has been long-standing, with their history going as far back as the origins of the Bible.² For the Nazis to arise as a dominant power they needed to eliminate the power that had been held by the Jews because for "an enemy [to be] worth total annihilation [they] must possess tremendous power, real or imagined."³ The thing that the Jews had that the Nazis did not was the memory of their past and history, and with that came legitimacy, because without legitimacy one does not have power and the cycle will continue. The Nazis worked hard to change the collective memory of Jews, and because human memory is not something that is necessarily reliable, to change their history and eradicate them entirely would not prove difficult. As Confino uses primary sources to prove and justify his stance, he shows that in "obliterating the memory [of a] local Jewish community," the Nazis were able to create their own foundation on the ideas that Jews were immoral beings, not humans. There is an idea, that comes from reading this novel, of compartmentalization, and it becomes apparent in the erasure of memory. With being able to control the public's minds (as the Nazis were able to) to separate memory and fact, from what they wanted their followers to believe, an idea of an imagined community.

The imagination of a world without Jews was a driving factor for the Germans to carry out the slaughter against them. An imagined community of like human beings, with complementary beliefs,

² Confino, *Without Jews*, 26.

³ Confino, *Without Jews*, 26.

politics, and ways of life is what Confino makes readers understand to be a driving force for what the Nazis did.⁴ He uses expressions similar to Primo Levi, in that the events of the Holocaust were not unimaginable; they had “links to context, past, and present,” and thus the Nazi ideology was able to imagine what a world would be like if Jews and Judaism were terminated.⁵ Yet, everything went beyond politics, ideologies, and economic factors, it went further to the imagined community, the nationalistic view of a united people, and Hitler and his government worked to make their followers and the German people feel it.⁶ They had to link that imagined world with “everyday occurrences on the ground,” implementing the ideas of race and racial extermination into the minds of the people through already present anti-Jewish violence.⁷ Once again, with the German politicians ability to compartmentalize, they were able to separate Germans and Europeans based on what they knew about Jews and what the powerful people wanted them to know. So not only was there the desire and need to remove the Jews on a physical level, there was the need to remove them on a cultural level, as without origins there were no people. Therefore, a connection between cultural and physical genocide was important to the Germans for living a life without Jews.

Cultural power of the Jews is heavily connected and interlinked with their origins, their stories as “stories give life, and stories kill as well.”⁸ The cultural origins of the Jews in the story provided a foundation for the people and culture that would hold more power than the Nazis ever would simply because they (the Nazis) did not have legitimacy or roots. Origins were believed, as Confino argues, to be the centre of evil of Jews in the eyes of the Nazi regime.⁹ They felt threatened by Jewish origins as

⁴ Confino, *Without Jews*, 22.

⁵ Confino, *Without Jews*, 22.

⁶ Confino, *Without Jews*, 66, 86.

⁷ Confino, *Without Jews*, 90-1.

⁸ Confino, *Without Jews*, 246.

⁹ Confino, *Without Jews*, 23.

they “held a key to German identity and empire.”¹⁰ Thus without removing Jews both physically and culturally, the Nazi’s could not establish themselves fully in German society as a dominant power, and so came the Holocaust. Origins, ironically, are at the root and causation of Nazi struggles with power, and their desire/need to eradicate Jews from the world.

Anti-Semitism, and more specifically the Holocaust and Nazi ideologies, made Jews out to be evil. As a people, they were to be erased from memory both culturally and physically, though they were simultaneously to be blamed for everything wrong in Germany and the world. An imagined community amongst Germans was fundamental to the rise of Nazi power, and so too was the erasure of Jewish history, legitimacy and origins. Nazis provided people with an outlook on the world that established the Jewish people and their origins as being evil, while simultaneously giving them a solution to their ‘problem’.¹¹ Alon Confino ultimately argues that a world without Jews was highly imagined, that time, history, legitimacy, and origins, were things that the Jews had and that the Nazis sought; without it the Nazis would never rise to power to bring their own imagination to life.

¹⁰ Confino, *Without Jews*, 27.

¹¹ Confino, *Without Jews*, 246, 248.

Bibliography

Confino, Alon. *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.