

It Wasn't the Academy's Finest Hour

*The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower: Complicity and
Conflict on American Campuses*

Stephen H. Norwood

NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009

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Stephen Norwood's book, *The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower*, offers very careful documentation of how college and university educators, especially presidents and deans, paid scant attention to the atrocities of the Third Reich, particularly those committed against Jews and women. Norwood draws upon a range of sources, including media reports and institutional archives, as well as secondary sources. While much of his discussion addresses elite colleges and universities, he examines a range of institutions, singling out Catholic colleges and universities in one chapter, for example, providing convincing evidence that academics' lack of concern about the Third Reich was widespread.

He offers a stark contrast between many highly publicized and well-attended events in the United States from the early 1930s up to 1938—the year of the *Kristallnacht* when Hitler directed a horrific attack on all German Jews, an attack that highlighted the nearly immeasurable cruelty of the Nazis, as well as the likelihood that matters would only grow worse—and the performance of educators at elite institutions—often lauded for their high-minded views on such matters as civilization and academic freedom—who all too often ignored clear signals about the Nazis and either prohibited debate about the Third Reich or punished protesters. In fact, presidents and deans often invited Nazis to their campuses for cere-

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monies or speeches, ignoring protests by students and professors.

Equally disconcerting was the willingness of institutions such as Harvard University and the University of Chicago to not only appoint but also honor Nazis and Nazi sympathizers after World War II. Norwood ends the book with a passage from Saul Bellow's book, *Ravelstein*, in which the main character is modeled after Mircea Eliade, who taught at the University of Chicago. Eliade was a Romanian diplomat who supported the brutality of the Iron Guard, notorious for literally butchering Jews as they hung, still alive, from meat hooks. In what might well be an unforgivable irony, Eliade co-taught with the famous theologian Paul Tillich, who in one of his sermons identified Germany as a place where the world's most demonic forces had emerged. While the passage from *Ravelstein* is deeply emotional and convincing, it was odd to reach the end of the book with Bellow's words rather than Norwood's summary.

Curiously, Norwood apparently assumes that the public protests against the Third Reich defined how colleges and universities ought to have responded to the Nazis, noting that presidents and administrators "did not convene protest meetings." In general, with only occasional exceptions such as infrequent statements against segregation in the South and the Viet Nam war, institutions of higher education have generally preferred a mantle of institutional neutrality. (The mantle also cloaks persistent discrimination against groups in admissions or in hiring while seemingly offering an equal-to-all stance.) There is no question that there was public knowledge in the United States in the 1930s about Nazi atrocities against Jews, widely reported in the media and relayed by campus protestors during the visits of Nazi officials. How college and university administrators might otherwise respond to such atrocities—other than generally refusing to attend anniversary celebrations at German universities in the 1930s—remains uninvestigated. Norwood would have contributed a great deal to the literature on the history of higher education if he'd attempted to navigate the complex reasoning that might lead colleges and universities to take stands opposing human brutality against fellow humans.

Much of this possible interpretation could derive from the literature on the history of higher education. For example, Norwood does not draw upon Fritz Ringer's insightful work, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, which details the complicity of the German professoriate in the Third Reich although he discusses that problem repeatedly. Nor does he attend to a fundamental book, Laurence Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University*, in which Veysey offers a disheartening portrayal of college and university presidents unwilling to take positions based on ideals and far too willing to place institutional reputation above academic freedom. Furthermore, many historians of higher education as well scholars of the contemporary aspects of the field, have discussed the challenges and opportunities too often missed in the failure to take a principled stand—an examination of works about divestiture in companies operating in South Africa in the 1980s

and 1990s would have been a good starting point. He also could have drawn on Harold Wechsler's work, *The Qualified Student* to highlight how Nicholas Murray Butler hoped to build Columbia University (one of Norwood's examples) into a world-class institution of leadership framed in a male Anglo-Saxon perspective. Finally, the scholarly literature on academic freedom and institutional neutrality is both deep and broad, and would have provided Norwood with a foundation for insightful questions, and perhaps answers.

Perhaps the oddest lack of explanation in the book is Norwood's recurring claim that these colleges and universities influence public opinion, and by taking a public stand, they would have had an impact on how the public and the polity viewed the Third Reich. In part because of the differing views of academics on political issues, in part because the public tends to view academics as mere intellectuals, and in part because only at certain times has the polity been particularly interested in academic advice, I cannot help but strongly disagree with that claim. If anything, it seems to me that academics only wish for such influence.

I wrote my first book review for a journal in 1996, and I observed then that there was a tendency for scholars outside the field of higher education to ignore the literature of the field, just as higher education scholars tended to ignore relevant works in the disciplines. Despite the carefully researched work and often deeply distressing information in this book, it would have deeply benefitted from discussion of scholarly works about higher education that remind us we work and live in a messy world. 