

The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower, by Stephen H. Norwood. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 350 pp., \$29.99 hardbound.

Blinkered Judgment

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Moral confidence has been one of academe's most conspicuous traits. To be sure, it took a header in the 1960s, when the post-war liberal internationalism of America's higher education establishment found itself decisively outflanked by the leftist utopianism of a fresh generation of student and faculty activists. But recovery proceeded apace—and the new social change agendas were rapidly assimilated into a sharply revised conception of educational mission. As a result, the great majority of our universities and colleges today are unambiguously aligned with the country's "progressive" political and cultural forces, and against most of

the received moral, economic, and patriotic traditions that once formed the bedrock of American life.

It is from such a radicalized high ground that America's educators now launch their moral thunderbolts on behalf of diversity, multiculturalism, globalism, social justice, sustainability, and sensitivity toward recognized victim groups. This rhetoric, unsurprisingly, is aimed mainly at their students—assumed to arrive on campus bearing a burden of prejudice heaped upon their shoulders by the ambient culture—and is delivered in an ingenious variety of ways through both the curriculum and the extra-curriculum. But as altered as the content of these new kinds of suasion may be, their legitimating premise remains quite venerable: Educators by dint of special wisdom and philosophical clarity need to minister to, and correct, the moral shortcomings of their charges.

Problem is that academic opinion has itself been vulnerable to marked and accelerated swings, as the sudden demise—much less through argument than confrontation—of the postwar liberal consensus demonstrates. If the attitudes of administrators and faculty are so readily swayed, why should they be particularly trusted or allowed to push campus opinion so far from

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the mainstream? Can creatures of fashion credibly pretend to be moral oracles?

Readers seeking to disabuse themselves of any illusions on this score might well consult Stephen H. Norwood's *The Third Reich in the Ivory Tower*, an account of pre-war American academe's rather complacent, and sometimes approving, attitude toward Nazi Germany. A historian at the University of Oklahoma, Norwood never rises much above historical reportage and his writing is rather flat. Nonetheless, the book documents an embarrassing record of moral obtuseness, and occasionally worse, among America's university leadership, involving individuals of the caliber of James Conant of Harvard, Nicholas Murray Butler of Columbia, and Robert Maynard Hutchins of the University of Chicago.

Norwood writes, of course, with the benefit of a hindsight that these academic titans lacked. In his opening chapter, he does go out of his way to make clear how much was actually known to Americans as early as 1933 and 1934 about the anti-Jewish outrages taking place in Germany. Still, it's easy to underestimate the obduracy with which opinion can cling to ingrained preconceptions, especially about a country that had so long been a world leader in

those cultural, scientific, and educational realms that university types like Conant, Butler, and Hutchins naturally held dear. Likewise, the barbarities to come, though more than hinted at by Hitler and his henchmen, extended well beyond the imaginings of these very civilized gentlemen. (Although the shocking clemency with which Conant, as U.S. high commissioner and, later, ambassador to postwar Germany, treated several notorious war criminals—laid out in Norwood's postscript—can find no such excuse.)

Norwood's indictment contains bills of particulars aimed not only at senior administrators, but at students and faculty as well. Presidents and deans persistently welcomed, and often wined and dined, Nazi dignitaries visiting their campuses, condemned and sometimes punished protests against them, refused to sign widely supported public statements decrying Nazi persecutions, sent delegations to politicized celebrations at German universities, and eagerly organized student exchanges with Nazi (and Italian Fascist) student and youth groups. In September 1934, the famed progressive legal scholar and Harvard Law School dean, Roscoe Pound, went so far as to accept an honorary degree from the University of Berlin, personally

bestowed on him by Hans Luther, Nazi Germany's ambassador to the United States.

While there was student opposition to these friendly gestures and to Nazism overall, for the most part, undergraduates, when they cared at all, were generally willing to give Hitler's regime the benefit of the doubt. On most of the tonier campuses the student press generally equivocated, conceding Nazi "excesses" but finding merit in some of Hitler's policies and urging shows of good will. (*The Columbia Spectator*, speaking for a student population with an unusually large proportion of Jews, was the major exception, much to President Butler's irritation.) When the German cruiser *Karlsruhe* made port in Boston in 1934, its compliment of cadets became the toast of Wellesley, and partied into the night with members of its student body. On occasion, anti-Nazi student protestors were actually attacked by other students.

A number of distinguished professors gave intellectual comfort to the Nazi regime at no apparent professional cost. The eminent diplomatic historian William L. Langer, though not a Nazi sympathizer, was nonetheless a vigorous defender of Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland, and for a long while touted a moral equivalence view of

Germany's relations with the former Allies. Others went much further. Renowned Harvard English professor Francis P. Magoun, a former World War I fighter ace, was, according to Norwood, openly and ardently pro-Nazi.

Norwood devotes an entire chapter to German departments, which frequently were chock full of immigrants who saw in Hitler their fatherland's savior. While dedicated to the study of language and literature, some of these departments developed an atmosphere not unlike much of ethnic studies today, superheated with racial and nationalistic cheerleading, and serving as active centers of propagandistic agitation. The situation at Rutgers was notably bad; its departmental chairman, Friederich J. Hauptmann, headed an almost solid phalanx of Nazi supporters and subsequently departed for a post in the Reich during the war. (The one member of the department who was anti-Nazi was denied reappointment in a headline-making case.) Also off to serve Hitler went Professor Max Otto Koischwitz of Hunter College's German department, who had the additional notoriety of recruiting his student (and later mistress) Mildred E. Gillars, a.k.a. "Axis Sally" to the Nazi cause.

Only *Kristallnacht*, the systematic pogrom carried out against Germany's

Jews in November 1938, less than a year before the outbreak of the European war, spurred any real shift in campus attitudes. But not even that achieved full moral lustration. University leaders remained chary about finding and funding places for refugee scholars and students, particularly if it involved recognizing the special plight of those who were Jewish, out of some sense, one suspects, of socially tainting their institutions.

All of this reflects the vastly different social milieu within which American academe operated pre-World War II. While the country's leading universities were well on their way to becoming modern centers of cutting-edge research, they nonetheless preserved much of the culture of the genteel (and gentile) Anglo-American ascendancy. This had many fine features, including an emphasis on decorum uncomfortable with activism of any sort, a belief in the international comity of ostensibly well-bred gentleman, and a residual certitude, somewhat shaken by the Great War, in the underlying durability of civilization. Each of these qualities militated against extreme reactions of any sort as lapses in taste and loss of perspective. The best case

in extenuation of the failure of so many academic worthies to see and hear genuine evil rests on these qualities.

But, of course, there was something else: anti-Semitism, then quite alive and, in its politer forms, quite respectable in almost every quarter of American higher education. This was the heyday of the "anti-minority quota," based on the fear that elite American campuses, swamped by intellectually proficient but uncouth and alien outsiders, would lose their cultural integrity and Christian character. Norwood provides any number of casual comments from the letters of Conant and Butler that betray their unflattering stereotypes about Jews as well as a desire to keep social distance. The failure to react with appropriate indignation, and action, to Nazi policies was surely connected to these deeply seeded prejudices.

Norwood occasionally lacks in his judgments the empathy one might expect from a professional historian. Thus, after criticizing the backing shown by Catholic universities for Mussolini, he goes on similarly to decry their support for Franco and Spain's Nationalists. Yet the atrocities committed by many Loyalist

partisans against churches, priests, and nuns renders it scarcely possible to expect that they would have done otherwise.

Such lapses apart, Norwood's case is well made. The moral sensibilities of academe's best and brightest remained dismally blinkered through the first half-decade of Nazi rule, and in some cases well beyond. What should have struck them as a unique gathering horror simply failed to register—though many others in the worlds of politics, religion, and journalism saw it early and transparently.

Compared to men such as Conant, Butler, and Hutchins, the current leadership of America's universities are, generally, diminutive figures. They rarely bestride larger landscapes, looming small just about everywhere outside the bounds of their own bureaucratized campuses. Faculties are also far more insulated from the real world of great dangers and deeds than yesteryear. How many air aces teach Ivy League English now?

Today's university administrators and faculty are, of course, not moral cretins either. They acknowledge the horrors of the twentieth century, in the case of Nazism readily, and of

communism discernibly, though with greater awkwardness and reluctance. On the other hand, they are willing to take money from Saudi princes and invite the likes of Amadinejad to speak on their campuses. For all their ritualized denunciations of iniquities based on race, gender, and class, they are surely heading for their own rendezvous with some future chronicler of moral myopia.

The academic giants of the past, whatever their shortcomings, never aspired to a normative authority so sweeping as to encompass the wholesale remake of America. They felt free to police the morals of their students and assess the troubles of the world, but from a perspective that was basically conventional. Their sins were thereby those of creatures within and of their society, instead of outside and above it. The radical judgmentalism that has currently taken academe in its grip, sparing many individual failings, but impugning America at large, is a new and unsettling phenomenon. Stephen Norwood's sad tales out of academe's not-so-distant past provide a strong caution against acceding to its legitimacy.