

Book Review: Laurel Leff. Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper

Janine Minkler

Abstract.

Why did the New York Times persistently bury news of the Holocaust? asks Laurel Leff in her dramatic historical account of "America's most important newspaper." Leff, associate professor at Northeastern University and former journalist for the Wall Street Journal and Miami Herald, examines the complex combination of forces that led the Times to relegate news of the Holocaust to secondary status. She also sustains an uncompromising critique of this period in New York Times history. "No American newspaper was better positioned to highlight the Holocaust than the Times, and no American newspaper so influenced public discourse by its failure to do so. The first reason makes the Times' failure more puzzling, the second more devastating," charges Leff (9).

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Book Review

Laurel Leff. *Buried by the Times: The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. 426, cloth. \$29.00 US.

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Why did the *New York Times* persistently bury news of the Holocaust? asks Laurel Leff in her dramatic historical account of “America’s most important newspaper.” Leff, associate professor at Northeastern University and former journalist for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Miami Herald*, examines the complex combination of forces that led the *Times* to relegate news of the Holocaust to secondary status. She also sustains an uncompromising critique of this period in *New York Times* history. “No American newspaper was better positioned to highlight the Holocaust than the *Times*, and no American newspaper so influenced public discourse by its failure to do so. The first reason makes the *Times*’ failure more puzzling, the second more devastating,” charges Leff (9).

Buried by the Times opens with a cry for help couched between the normal news of the day. Leff sets the scene: “On page four, amid 13 other stories, appeared a five-paragraph item with a London dateline” (1). The first two paragraphs described a House of Commons refugee decision; then appeared an appeal issued by the Jewish National Committee in Poland: “May this, perhaps our last voice from the abyss, reach the ears of the world” (1). Leff emphasizes the ironic placement of this appeal and concludes,

The *Times* never treated the news of the Holocaust as important—or at least as important as, say, informing motorists to visit the Office of Price Administration if they did not have their automobile registration number and state written on their gasoline ration coupons. A story about that possible bureaucratic snafu appeared on the front page on March 2, 1944, the same day that the “last voice from the abyss” was relegated to page four. (16)

In her examination of *Times* coverage (1939–1945) of Jewish persecution and massacres, Leff systematically demonstrates how news stories about Jews were consigned to the end of other news stories and concealed within paragraphs. Moreover, news about Jews most often appeared inside the paper rather than on the front page. *Times* articles often avoided identifying Jews as Jews, instead identifying them as “refugees,” “prisoners,” “the living dead,” “political prisoners,” “civilians,” “skeletons,” and “slaves.” When they were identified as Jews, their stories were typically discussed along with those of other persecuted minorities. Leff writes that “the *Times* never acknowledged that the mass murder of Jews, *because they were Jews*, was something its readers needed to know” (16; original emphasis). Leff also examines the role that news editors played in making placement decisions, the relationship between the government and the mass media in “making the news,” and how journalists’ idiosyncrasies and relationships with one another affected coverage. A more thorough treatment of the *Times* during the Holocaust does not exist,

although a number of scholars have documented how the American press failed to recognize and report on the Holocaust.¹

Leff goes to great lengths to demonstrate how the news, published by a paper known for its objectivity, was nevertheless influenced by the viewpoint of its owner, Arthur Hays Sulzberger. She paints a portrait of a man obsessed by an anti-Zionist position, anxious not to appear to give Jews special treatment, and concerned that too much focus on Jews would fuel American anti-Semitism. Although he belonged to four synagogues and personally helped several family members escape Nazi persecution, Sulzberger viewed his personal life as entirely separate from his public paper and, according to Leff, continually diminished the plight of the European Jews. To Leff, Sulzberger and his paper are partly responsible for obscuring the truth of the Holocaust from the American public: "Although there is no direct evidence to prove it, it is likely that other newspapers did not highlight the Holocaust at least partly because the *New York Times* did not" (12).

Leff's meticulous analysis yields a stunning portrait of a paper consumed by the events of World War II yet strikingly oblivious to the seriousness of the Jewish crisis. "It was not a failure of information, but what historian Henry L. Feingold calls 'a failure of mind' that kept the story off the front pages," she writes (119). Indeed, Leff has an eye for irony, and she illuminates the many incongruities inherent in a Jewish-owned newspaper that covered the Holocaust more than any other paper in the country while at the same time failing to comprehend the reality of the "Final Solution" or to draw attention to it.

Leff's media analysis ultimately highlights what W. Lance Bennett has called "the news puzzle." Paradoxically, the news provides an "instant historical record" but offers "a superficial distorted image of society."² Leff masterfully demonstrates how the *Times* isolated information about Jews, placed that information in insignificant spots, and "did almost nothing to help the reader understand its importance" (15). She examines more than 2,000 individual issues of the *Times* published during World War II and draws from seventeen archives and thirty-nine collections.

Unfortunately, Leff interviewed only two *New York Times* employees and a handful of Sulzberger's family members, former refugees whom he helped bring to the United States during the war. Leff's lack of contact with *Times* staff renders her strong indictment of the paper's coverage problematic, for she does not merely document the coverage and leave it to the reader to draw conclusions but consistently presents her own critique: "The *Times* had an obligation to do more than be swept along with the tide. The journalist's job was to determine what the public needed to know" (16). Leff borders on disdain when describing Sulzberger's anti-Zionist position, and she characterizes him as blindly driven by his ideologies: "By 1946, even the most staunch anti-Zionists seemed to be changing their views" (325). Thus, Leff suggests that, since most changed their views about the development of a Jewish state, Sulzberger's moral compass was somehow off. By the middle of the book a portrait emerges of a powerful and influential man so insulated and driven by his ideologies that he had lost any sense of justice or humanity.

Had members of the *Times* or Sulzberger's family offered more direct insights into the decision-making process, and had Leff then found these explanations deficient, her critique would have been stronger. However, her persistent condemnation falls flat because she does not give voice to anyone in a position to defend

the choices of the *Times* editors, its journalists, or Sulzberger. One is driven to ask if there could have been other reasons, aside from those that Leff deduces, for Sulzberger's and his newspaper's inadequate coverage of the Holocaust. Perhaps not, but the defense remains silent.

Leff's meticulous documentation of *Times* coverage is what really makes *Buried by the Times* an important contribution to genocide studies. Recent studies on media and the Holocaust examine representation of the Holocaust in journalism;³ others continue a tradition of examining war journalism during the Holocaust,⁴ but few have conducted this kind of detailed content analysis of news coverage during the Holocaust. *Buried by the Times* ultimately raises the question, What do our most important news sources miss and neglect when they publish what *Washington Post* editor Phil Graham called the "first rough draft of history"⁵?

Notes

1. Abraham Brumberg, "We Knew: America's Newspapers Report the Holocaust," in *Why Didn't the Press Shout? American and International Journalism during the Holocaust*, ed. Robert Moses Shapiro, 41–50 (Hoboken, NJ: Yeshiva University Press, 2003); Arlene Cardozo, "American Magazine Coverage of the Nazi Death-Camp Era," *Journalism Quarterly* 60 (1983): 717–19; Evelyn Kennerly, "Mass Media and Mass Murder: American Coverage of the Holocaust," *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 2(1986/1987): 61–70; Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust, 1933–1945* (New York: Touchstone, 1993); David Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941–1945* (New York: New Press, 1998).
2. W. Lance Bennett, *News: The Politics of Illusion* (New York: Longman, 1988), xi.
3. Andreas Huyssen, "Present, Past: Media, Politics, and Amnesia," *Public Culture* 12 (2000): 21–38; Oren Baruch Stier, "Holocaust, American Style." *Prooftexts* 22 (2002): 354–91; Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
4. Benjamin Blech, *Eyewitness to Jewish History* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2004); Don Heddesheimer, "'Nothing Has Been Invented': The War Journalism of Boris Polevoy," *Journal for Historical Review* 21 (2002), http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v21/v21n1p23_heddesheimer.html (accessed 17 October 2006); Barbie Zelizer, "From the Image of Record to the Image of Memory: Holocaust Photography, Then and Now," in *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography*, ed. Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt, 98–121 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
5. In April 1963, Phil Graham delivered a speech to *Newsweek's* overseas correspondents in London in which he described the news as the "first rough draft of history." This statement continues to be widely quoted.