Monograph Review: *Why We Watched: Europe, America, and the Holocaust*

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Introduction to Thesis

Now that it is the twenty-first century and the Second World War is decades in the past, people are starting to openly question why it was that the Holocaust was able to be so devastating in such a small amount of time. *Why We Watched: Europe, America and the Holocaust* by Theodore S. Hamerow, attempts to address some of the questions that still linger from the last century. Hamerow believes that there is an answer to help explain why the world today seems to have the position that the Holocaust was so devastating, yet during the time that the unimaginable horrors of the Holocaust were occurring, other nations of the world seemed less concerned about what was happening in the Third Reich. Hamerow forms the thesis that the mass brutalities that are now perceived as “unspeakable atrocities” were accepted as almost understandable and predictable while they were occurring due to the widespread belief in the 1930s and 1940s that each country’s society had to deal with the “Jewish question”. The “Jewish question” is the question of figuring out how to deal with the Jewish people who society claimed could not adhere to their norms. Later, the “Jewish Question” becomes a question of what to do with the displaced refugees from the Third Reich.¹ Hamerow looks towards the attitudes and events of the 1930s and 1940s as shown through various historical events, newspapers, magazines, public polls and famous literature of the time to support his thesis. He organizes his book into parts that are not necessarily chronological but still are effective and informative in relaying his ideas.

### Summery

In the introduction of his book, Hamerow outlines the way in which he will present his thesis. He first identifies his reasons for writing the monograph, giving background of why the

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Holocaust, even though it occurred during a time of many horrible events in the world, has become a significant element in the culture of the United States in remembrance and mourning. The Holocaust has emerged as a part of a “memory industry,” one in which the victims of the Holocaust’s anguish is viewed by other minorities almost as a “valuable possession”.\(^2\) Hamerow identifies that the genocidal program against minorities of the Third Reich as just one outcome of National Socialism. He uses evidence found through newspaper articles of the time to conclude that the American public was not made aware that specific minorities were being targeted, and that the extermination of European Jews were treated by the U.S. government and press as unconfirmed rumors until the middle of World War One. Even after the war the number of victims was underestimated by the general public, and since newspapers still neglected to include why the people who suffered casualties during the war, American society continued to believe that during the war the same amount of Jews died as the Poles, Russians, Czechs, Serbs, Greeks, Belgians, French and Dutch that died. Hamerow addresses information that the historian Peter Novick gives as why it was not until after the Cold War in the 1960s that the American public became increasingly aware of and turned their attention to the Second World War’s horrors of Jewish extermination. During the Cold War the Germans were American allies the government did not want the public to realize how atrocious their allies were just years before. He then draws the conclusion that the Holocaust was the victim of the Cold War.

In Part One of his monograph, Hamerow identifies the stance of the different leading powers on the “Jewish Question”. First he delves into a historical background of anti-Semitism through the ages to build up to the time period that the First World War took place. During the eighteenth century the common perspective by non-Jews was that if Jewish people changed bad aspects of their stereotypical character types (such as greed), that they could become useful

\(^2\) Hamerow, *Why We Watched*, XII.
citizens to the country. In 1791 the “gates of acceptance” were opened by the French and then followed by all but the Russians. The opportunity for Jews to have new jobs in society emerged during this time, but was short lived when the majority of non-Jews in the society found that the success of the Jews in their jobs out proportioned their number. It was apparent that it would take more than laws to have people’s prejudices toward Jews decrease.

Hamerow notes that emancipation of Jews was still able to somewhat continue in the nineteenth century through growing acceptance, but makes sure to note that no adjustments to the law occurred during this time. The cultural acceptance allowed for Jews to beginning to form more ties to different parts of society such as religion, economic factors and the class system and as they did so the mass majority, namely Christians, became less comfortable. Slowly Jews started losing their identity as a religion and starting to be viewed as a race. Around this time a new form of anti-Semitism came about. This “new” anti-Semitism was more morally and culturally based than the past type of anti-Semitism that was largely rooted in religious faith. It abandoned the theological justification of hostility toward Jews and cited the Jewish religion as accepting greed, materialism and clannishness as guiding principles. Hamerow gives examples of spokesmen for this new anti-Semitism. These spokesmen reflected what new thoughts were emerging in the world. One such spokesman from Germany was Eugen Dührig, a philosopher and economist who believed that the Jewish character qualities were not a result of a regions belief but of historical experience but from heredity. He explained in his writings that these characteristics were rooted in their genetic composition which reflected their “unchangeable racial character.”

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4 Ibid., 14-30.
5 Ibid., 26-27.
partially at fault for the oppression that has happened to them. The majority of non-Jewish Germans believed that if Jewish people started to act and conform to be like their Christian counterparts and only differed from them in the way of worship than they would cease to be treated differently. This majority was waiting for Jewish people to compensate and give up something if they were to be emancipated. Hamerow explains how no matter how Jewish people were willing conform that it was no use because it would never be good enough, emancipation would still remain out of reach. He introduces the “unraveling of the ‘Jewish Question’” as tracing over time. The power that Jewish people were able to acquire in the past centuries led to fears that the Jews had a goal to completely take control over the state and society. This idea, although irrational comes up again and again throughout the 1930s and 1940s.6

Until World War I there had been an optimistic future in sight for Jews to gain further and more concrete emancipation. The end of the First World War had brought with it the idea that democracy should be prevalent. Yet since 1920 democracy had shown to only bring economic insecurity, social conflict and political problems that were due mainly to capitalism. Jews started to support communism because it was not as anti-Semitic. Hamerow believes that this move gave anti-Semities more evidence that Jews wanted to dominate the world. The final factor that made anti-Semites feel as though a solution to the “Jewish Question” had to be found soon was with the financial crisis in 1929. The crisis along with the Great Depression that would soon follow was also found as evidence that Jewish people were set to take over because apparently their wealth was speculated to have occurred due to the exploitation of Christian misfortune. All these beliefs and criticisms of why they were facing hardships makes it apparent just how vulnerable many people were to believing any answers that were available at this time.

6 Hamerow, Why We Watched, 34-63.
All this background that is given is to prepare the reader for when Hamerow begins with his analysis of the time between the effects of the First World War had been felt and before the Second World War began. He talks about the growing tensions and changes in power that were occurring in East and Central Europe. Many Jews were disappointed because after World War I many nations had spoken of equality for all, and many Jews believed that their emancipation that had started long before would finally be completed. Once it was obvious that no such emancipation was in sight, people started being more drawn to others of their own ethnicity than in their own country. Increasing hostility took place in succession states of Poland, Romania and Hungary as they felt the diplomacy of the Third Reich becoming concentrated toward Jews. Hamerow points out how there was evident foreshadowing in early legislation of the Third Reich as to the type of system may come in the future. Hamerow believes that this was apparent to non-Jews and Jews alike, but does not offer much evidence to support this claim to show that it was so evident to the people. Anti-Semitic legislation started to become enacted in succession states and in the Third Reich. Yet, succession states did not want to appear intolerant, so they supported emigration and claimed that Jews had entered illegally and thus the state should deport them out of respect for the people who live in the country as citizens. In 1939 the “Jewish Question” became a factor of foreign policy and it was decided that international cooperation in solving this question would be “self-defeating.” Yet the feeling remained that landlocked countries in Europe must be helped by great powers in Western Europe and the New World. Here Hamerow leads into his analyses on the place and part that the great powers had during the 1930s and 1940s in dealing with the “Jewish Question”.

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7 Hamerow, *Why We Watched*, 53.
8 Ibid., 33-63.
The result of the influx of immigrants to the countries in Western Europe lead to anti-Semitic thought across the community. In France there was somewhat of a difference in form of anti-Semitism between the plebian and low class citizens, but Hamerow stresses that anti-Semitism was apparent in both. Jews that had arrived generations before the Great Depression and had since gained social status in the upper class, feared immigrating Jews would threaten their status and embarrass them. They disliked that the Jews immigrating to France, mainly from Eastern Europe, alienated themselves by not attempting to become part of the French community. Lower class French people feared newcomers taking their jobs, and that there would be even more competitiveness in the job market than they were already faced with. Economic and ideological arguments against Jews often played off one another and soon France expressed its need of help from other countries such as Great Britain and the United States to help with immigration problem of Jews coming to France.\footnote{Hamerow, \textit{Why We Watched}, 64-89.} Although economic hardships were worse in Great Britain than they were in France, anti-Semitism still remained less prevalent in Great Britain than it was in France. The change in Great Britain’s perspective turned from one that viewed the small amount of Jews that lived in Great Britain with “amused tolerance” to that tolerance shrinking with the growing number of immigrants (which consisted mostly of Jews) that eventually just were seen as “more mouths to feed and bodies to house.”\footnote{Ibid., 92.}

The New World of the United States and Canada, as well as Latin America, took advantage of their distance from Europe and were able to impose more intense restrictions on immigration. In nineteenth century the United States had seen a steady influx in immigrants but that all came to a sudden halt with the First World War. During 1921-1924 quotas to restrict the number of immigrants allowed into the country were created. Hamerow presents that American
opinion on subjects of anti-Semitism are hard to decipher, due to the fact that many Americans were reserved in expressing their full opinions on such controversial subject matter. He looks to different types of publications and magazines as well as to surveys and polls, to try to draw conclusions on American opinion. Yet even Hamerow admits that even these forms of evidence, especially polls, were largely subjective. It is clear that anti-Semitism was an issue in America, but not as big of an issue as it was in Europe.\textsuperscript{11}

In Canada the response by the English and the French Canadians to the question of immigration ("Jewish Question") was largely the same as the United States. They were sympathetic toward the victims of the Holocaust but also the strictest country in enforcing quotas and shutting their doors to refugees during reign of the Third Reich.\textsuperscript{12} Latin America was more lenient in accepting refugees especially because it had so much unoccupied space. Latin America is also explained by Hamerow to not have been as ethnically prejudice as other areas of the world at that time. There was not as large of an incline by refugees to go to Latin America as there was for them to go to the United States or Canada. Usually refugees looked to Latin America as a place to only stay in the mean time until they could get somewhere better. Hamerow mentions that many of the Jewish refugees that settled in Mexico and Cuba did so as a means to be as close to America as they could incase the quota restrictions became lifted.\textsuperscript{13}

In Part Two, Hamerow describes the debate America was having around the "Jewish Question" in detail. He begins with explaining many Jews did not want to confront the fact that they were not wanted in their homeland during the rise in National Socialism and thus were reluctant to leave if they left at all. With the evidence of rates of Jews entering the United States between 1933-1937 was lower than during the 1920s, he depicts how there was an illusion until

\textsuperscript{11} Hamerow, \textit{Why We Watched}, 120-148.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 149-164.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 164-170.
1937 that the National Socialism was just a phase that would pass. As Germany took over neighboring areas new ruthlessness grew in the National Socialist party. Relations between German and France and England grew tense. There was a rising fear in France and England of war and what allowing an influx of refugees into their countries would do. If they allowed more Jewish refugees in their country, anti-Semitism might grow, which could leave to the resolve to stop the being Third Reich would be weakened, which is the opposite of what they wanted.

War eventually did come, however, and with it came the question of America entering the war. As this discussion ensued, the American public became increasingly involved in the debate over what policy the country should take in regard to the “Jewish Question” of refugees. Most Americans agreed that anti-Semitism of the Third Reich was extremely brutal but it was not enough to change any policies that were currently in place. There were many alternative ideas to accepting more refugees raised, one such idea being that the United States should try to convince Europe to be more humane. The debate could not come a conclusion before America had to decide whether to choose collective security and help its ally Great Britain in the war or try to keep with a policy of isolationism. The United States eventually did come defer from its policy of isolationism after it became increasingly obvious that the international order was at stake as Hitler’s plans were only expanding. Even when America entered the war, debates with what to do with refugees continued, ever growing in intensity and complication.

As time went on and the situation in Europe grew more serious, the United State Congress would still not budge on changing the quota of allowed immigrants. The government feared that if they over sympathized toward the European Jews would lead to the public

14 Hamerow, *Why We Watched*, 185-209.
15 Ibid., 261-285.
16 Ibid., 210-235.
17 Ibid., *Why We Watched*, 236-260.
believing it had entered the war for the sake of the Jews. This could lead to a rise in anti-Semitism as well as a drop in support of the war. Although these results were only speculations, they were both results that the United States did not want. So it continued to help in the war without doing more than it already had been as far as letting a certain amount of Jews into America.

Part Three of Hamerow’s monograph explains why a genocide was eventually adopted by the Third Reich. There had been threats made by the Third Reich against Jews and a growing amount of laws limiting their rights before the Holocaust occurred, but Hamerow cites that there was no real evidence that could have been a red flag for genocide. The genocide of the Holocaust came to those who found out about it as a shock.¹⁸

During the war, the American government wanted to reach a military victory as soon as they could, so that the people in internment and concentration camps could be free. Hamerow brings up an interesting point in that America not being able to justify sacrificing the lives of their own soldiers and countrymen to prevent a genocide occurring in another country. The government knew that the racism and theology surrounding it was already too engrained within the Third Reich and that the only possibility for the victimization to stop was by ending the war as soon as they could to end the Third Reich forever.¹⁹

After World War Two ended the goals of the Third Reich were soon forgotten, but how far they managed to get in their plan to eliminate Jews was shown through grave statistics given. Seventy-two percent of the prewar Jewish population of Europe had perished as consequences of the Holocaust. Here, Hamerow brings up that the process of destruction that occurred is “still not fully understood and is a subject of sometimes bitter debate, because it raises questions of guilt

¹⁹ Ibid., 351-388.
and innocence, complicity and responsibility.” He goes on to discuss the different amount of Jews killed in each country and why the proportions of that were the way they were. Hamerow begins to use a lot of diary entries of political figures, which is a creative way to see what they were really thinking in comparison to how they presented their views to the public. Hamerow wraps up the last section of his book by relating to the time when the American public became more aware of the horrible realities of the Holocaust.

Analysis of Strengths and Weaknesses

Hamerow did not do was to let too much of his own opinions and feelings toward the subject of the Holocaust come through too obviously in his writing, which kept his writing formal. Although it is interesting to know how the author feels towards a particular subject, their opinion should be found in the way they tell the facts: in what they choose include, in what order they present their facts analysis and in what way they organize them. In his book *The Abandonment of the Jews*, author David S. Wyman included a preface that was touching but could have gone without saying, much less dedicating his preface to. This preface sets the tone of the book to no longer be an analytical piece but a piece that is almost read out of guilt. Since *Why We Watched* does not include a preface, the topic is introduced through the introduction and the read is able to immediately start soaking in the facts of the events that occurred and their consequences.

In his monograph, Hamerow makes sure to always note if a certain example he uses is a particularly extreme case. This is helpful to the reader because a sufficient example is used to support Hamerow’s ideas, but gives it within a spectrum so that there are no generalizations that

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20 Hamerow, *Why We Watched*, 326.
21 Ibid., 322-350.
all the cases were as extreme. For example, in the first part of his book Hamerow explains the opinion of the anti-Semitic French intellectual Louis-Ferdinand Celine. Celine wrote menacingly about how he believed Jews have taken over France by evil plotting. After explaining Celine’s writings and the significance of them, Hamerow makes sure to include in the paragraph immediately following this explanation: “Few of the anti-Semitic French intellectuals of the prewar years were quite that vehement or obsessed or eloquent”. Although it may be assumed by reader who has more background on French opinion on Jews pre-war that not all intellectuals thought as Cecil did, including a passage that then explains compares the most anti-Semitic writers in relation to the other, less “vehement” intellectuals was a positive aspect.

Hamerow was very resourceful in the type of evidence he supports his thesis with. He uses a variety of newspapers, magazines, surveys and polls, and diary entries to strengthen his analyses. It would be interesting if he had also used commercials, ads and more media based examples such as movies or television shows of the time that reflected popular opinion. Although he usually gives sufficient evidence to support his claims, examples of mass media could be beneficial in drawing the interest of the reader. Cultural opinions as seen through the media could have been used as a segway into his thesis, as the author John K. Roth of Ethics During and After the Holocaust: In the Shadow of Birkenau does. Roth uses two well known sources and then relating them to his topic. This draws the reader in and gives them a more in depth understanding because they due to using examples they are familiar with to draw from for reference.

23 Hamerow, Why We Watched, 81-82.
24 Ibid., 82.
25 Roth, John K., Ethics During and After the Holocaust: In the Shadow of Birkenau (Chippenham, Great Britain: Antony Rowe, 2005), 1-13.
Along with his many strengths, upon comparison to other sources it becomes clear that Hamerow also has quite a few weaknesses in his writing. A common criticism of his monograph is that there are not enough direct references to other studies or books published by historians. There were only two direct references to other analyses of the subject of the Holocaust. Within the first two pages in their chapter in Empire, Colony Genocide: Conquest, Occupation, and Subaltern Resistance in World History, David Furber and Wendy Lower cite numerous references to other historical analyses of their subject. Although Hamerow uses many texts and printed/published documents from the time he is researching and writing about, the lack of reference to other authors leaves the reader feeling somewhat uneasy.

Hamerow could have been more clear in his writing is if he used block quotes. While other authors also include short quotes within the paragraphs in their texts, Hamerow does something particularly irritating in his text in that when he has a quote he cannot leave it uninterrupted. He often unnecessarily intervenes a word or two between the quote such as in Part One:

Such wealth was clearly of a “special character.” It was essentially “parasitic and usurious.” It was the fruit not of “the labor of countless generations” but of “speculation and fraud” by Jewish business, which “have enriched their founders while ruining their stockholders.”

This type of writing style takes away from the strength of the quote and its potential because it distracts the reader.

Relation to Course

As with learn about history, the Holocaust is often put under particular scrutiny by textbooks. Even if other horrible historical events are listed and summarized within the chapter,

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27 Hamerow, Why We Watched, 26.
seldom are they given as much emphasis as Hitler’s rise to power and the implementation of Socialism in Germany. This was also apparent in the textbook *Worlds Together Worlds Apart: A History of the World Third Edition*. In the chapter on mass politics, there is a small section dedicated to the different rising idealisms post-World War I. While most countries summery of politics consisted of a few paragraphs, such as the section of Stalin’s Dictatorship and Japan’s changing militaristic approach, the section of German Nazism had the most space dedicated to it.  

Many historians are still baffled by the way that Hitler managed to obtain power and the circumstances that allowed for such an event to take place after World War I but not often enough is it taught why he stayed in power and was able to go through with such menacing plans. It is understandable that countries try not to emphasize to their citizens that they may have been partially at fault for a war or a genocide, but there are certain consequences that must be reconciled for being a bystander.

*History of the Modern World* teaches a broad overview of the eighteenth to twentieth century, accompanied by specific readings to act as glimpses into individual thoughts and feelings from different perspectives while events in these centuries were occurring. The textbook *Worlds Together Worlds Apart: A History of the World Third Edition* has a chapter dedicated to mass politics after the First World War and the companion reader includes part of Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and about one of the concentration camps during the Holocaust in Germany where the prisoners were treated “less badly than others elsewhere” called Bergen-Belsen. The course attempts to teach many aspects of the Holocaust in relation to the European Jews who were

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29 Ibid., 723-730.
31 Ibid., 312-319.
persecuted, but the one aspect that is not apparent is that of the bystander countries and the Third Reich’s ripple effect on the world, especially overseas. This monograph offers the missing perspective, the information Hamerow provides is this missing piece to the puzzle that is the confusion of the Holocaust.