
Book Reviews

Some Reflections on The Controversial Mr. Finklestein

by Mark Burdman

The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering

by Norman G. Finklestein

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150 pages, hardbound, \$23

In the year 2000, American Jewish historian Norman Finklestein's *The Holocaust Industry* drew considerable controversy, in the United States, Great Britain, Israel, and Europe, after its English-language publication. Now, in February 2001, a new wave of controversy is erupting in Germany, following the release of a 50,000-run, German-language edition by Piper Verlag, and the estimated sale, as of the Feb. 10-11 weekend, of 40,000 copies.

The book has drawn many reviews in the German media, almost all negative. Finklestein has been denounced, on the Second German television station (ZDF) and elsewhere, as a "conspiracy theorist," and has frequently been accused of abetting "right-wing extremists" and "Holocaust deniers." A documentary sympathetic to the book's central thesis, made by London-based German filmmaker Tina Mendelsohn, was cancelled by the Südwest Rundfunk television station, at the last moment before it was to have been shown. But it was in fact shown later, on the evening of Feb. 10, on Südwest Rundfunk, and was followed by an animated panel discussion, with strong views expressed for and against Finklestein's thesis; Mendelsohn was one of the panelists.

Finklestein appeared at a panel discussion, at Berlin's Urania Theater, on Feb. 7, with an extremely rowdy and hyped-up emotional response from many of the 1,000 attendees.

'Crass Exploitation of Jewish Martyrdom'

What is the "Finklestein fuss" all about?

In *The Holocaust Industry*, Finklestein takes on, very polemically, two interrelated issues.

One, is his handling of why it is that the Nazi Holocaust against the Jews has, only in the past three decades, and especially in the 1990s, become such a gigantic issue for American Jews, to the point that it has become the centerpiece of "being Jewish," almost a religion-in-itself. This is in contrast to 1945 through the late 1960s, when the Holocaust was not only *not* a big issue for American Jews, but was often avoided as a subject, by leading figures in the American Jewish community. Finklestein attributes this shift, somewhat superficially, to the new power relationship between the United States and Israel, after Israel's devastating success in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

What has produced most of the controversy, is the issue from which the book draws its title. Finklestein's bitter accusation is that leading Jewish organizations and U.S. law firms have massively profited, financially and politically, from what he describes as "crass exploitation of Jewish martyrdom," in particular, during the post-1995 battles with Swiss banks and German private industry for compensation, in the former case, for alleged bank accounts of Jewish victims of the Nazis, and in the latter case, over the issue of slave labor. He charges that the efforts of this "Holocaust industry to extort money from Europe in the name of 'needy Holocaust victims,' has shrunk the moral stature of their martyrdom to that of a Monte Carlo casino."

What adds to the controversy, is that Finklestein cannot be summarily dismissed as a "Holocaust revisionist," who denies that the Holocaust took place. Quite the contrary. He is the son of (now-deceased) Holocaust-survivor parents. Clearly, this has been the defining feature in his life, and has, to a significant extent, agonized and traumatized him. In the Mendelsohn documentary, he stressed that his father was never willing to speak about his experiences in a concentration camp, because it was too painful to talk about. One driving emotion in the book, as he frequently makes clear, is that his mother received a bare pittance in reparations for her sufferings, while, in contrast, vast sums of money are being reaped by corrupt and cynical institutions and law firms, which presume to be the advocates of "Holocaust survivors" in the cases with Switzerland and Germany.

ADL and Bronfman on Trial

On this second, highly controversial matter, Finklestein is essentially right. Even if many of the specific facts and figures he cites have been questioned, such as his charge that the number of presently living Holocaust survivors has been grossly inflated in order to build up the monetary figures of "compensation," and even if, as we shall see, his understanding of the deeper political context for the ongoing "extortion racket" and "shakedown" is much too narrow, he offers some devastating descriptions of the terror, economic blackmail, and fraud used to gain large sums of money.

He is certainly on target, in identifying the U.S. Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of B'nai B'rith, as central to this

operation, and in labelling ADL National Director Abe Foxman a “Holocaust-monger.” He also blasts former ADL National Director Kenneth Bialkin, as someone who has been making vast fortunes, in the “Holocaust victims’ litigation.” There is no doubt, as publications of the LaRouche movement have documented over the past two decades, that the ADL has been up to its neck for years, in exploiting nominally Jewish issues for its own benefit. Posing as defenders of Jews against anti-Semitism, the ADL leadership often seems to be nothing more than a bunch of thugs and gangsters.

Finklestein is also right, in attacking the role of the World Jewish Congress and its chairman, Edgar Bronfman, who is also a senior figure in the ADL. It sent chills down this reviewer’s spine, to watch Israel Singer, the real estate magnate who is both WJC secretary-general and chairman of the team negotiating slave-labor compensation with German interests, on television, being interviewed by Mendelsohn. His speech and smirking facial expression were like that of a Mafia boss, glorifying in his ability to blackmail and threaten the relevant German concerns. Especially blood-curdling, was his boasting about how he “cynically” (his word) would bring Holocaust survivors into negotiations on reparations payments, to disorient and arm-twist the German interlocutors.

Singer also glibly characterized the publicity given Finklestein’s book in Germany, as, in his view, a typical effort by the German media to whitewash the Nazi period. Such comments, and Singer’s general disposition overall, have to be seen as all too understandable, from a man who is the chief henchman for liquor magnate Bronfman. This is the same Bronfman who fanatically opposed German reunification in 1989, and who was a long-standing partner of the former East German Communist government and intelligence services, to the point that he received, on Oct. 17, 1988, the “Gold Star of People’s Friendship,” from East German leader Erich Honecker personally. Bronfman’s efforts against German unity were instrumental in the campaign of then-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher et al. in Britain, to portray united Germany as a “Fourth Reich” threat to the world.

Singer’s snipe at Germany is the giveaway, that the ADL and WJC have been important pawns in the hands of those Anglo-American elites who have been determined to prevent a united Germany from becoming the locomotive for an industrial-technological renaissance throughout Eurasia, along the lines of what Lyndon LaRouche proposed in his “European Triangle” program in November 1989. It is certainly no accident that the “shakedown” Finklestein describes, took off in the 1990s, after Germany became unified, and especially in the latter 1990s, as the accelerated global financial crisis brought the relevant Anglo-American elites to a state of desperation, against their continental European “competitors.”

It is unfortunate, that Finklestein does not discuss the underlying “geopolitical” and “geo-economic” dynamics, that propel the “Holocaust industry” into new heights of pressure, blackmail, and extortion.

The Hannah Arendt Trap

As useful as his blasts against the ADL and Bronfman’s WJC may be, Finklestein’s overall approach must be handled with care. His arguments can be simplistic and dangerous.

The most egregious case is to be found in the concluding chapter, where he sums up his ideas. There, he correctly notes that the Nazis took the inspiration for their sterilization laws, in significant part, from laws that had been adopted in more than a majority of American states, earlier in the 20th Century. And he notes, correctly, that “Blacks in the American South suffered the same legal disabilities, and were the object of much greater spontaneous and sanctioned popular violence than the Jews in prewar Germany.”

But in his zeal to equate bad American policies with Nazi policies, he goes off the deep end, and writes, in a footnote: “The vaunted Western tradition is deeply implicated in Nazism as well. To justify the extermination of the handicapped—the precursor of the Final Solution—Nazi doctors deployed the concept ‘life unworthy of life’ (*lebensunwertes Leben*). In *Gorgias*, Plato wrote: ‘I can’t see that life is worth living, if a person’s body is in a terrible state.’ In *The Republic*, Plato sanctioned the murder of defective children.”

This is dangerous nonsense. As written, it amounts to holding Plato—whose supposed “quotes” are taken totally out of any context—responsible for Nazism. Any halfway competent account of Adolf Hitler and the Nazis, as well as the testimony from Hitler’s own statements and from his *Mein Kampf*, show that the Nazis were violent enemies of the basic tenets of “the vaunted Western tradition.” Leading Nazis were followers of Friedrich Nietzsche, the bitter enemy of Plato’s teacher Socrates, and of Jesus Christ. Nazism was a pagan pseudo-religious cult, the enemy of which, was Christianity. The Jews were hated for more than just biological or racial reasons, but because they were blamed for having created Christianity. Had Hitler not been defeated, there is no doubt that he would have initiated the mass extermination of Christians, after the “Final Solution” for the Jews.

It is the last sentence in the cited footnote, that shows what Finklestein’s axiomatic problem is. There, he favorably quotes Hannah Arendt, who, judging from several strategically placed positive references to her in the book, is some kind of intellectual inspiration for Finklestein. Arendt was a chief figure in the so-called “Frankfurt School,” which built its influence largely upon the Goebbels-style “Big Lie” that Nazism was the end-result of those impulses in Western Judeo-Christian civilization, that sought to discover the truth. Ironically, Arendt walked in the footsteps of the same Nietzsche whom leading Nazis worshiped. As LaRouche has often pointed out, the main thing that prevented her from being a Nazi sympathizer—as was her former lover Martin Heidegger—was that she happened to be Jewish.

Finklestein’s great admiration for Arendt, and for her epigone, linguist Noam Chomsky, is consistent with a certain knee-jerk support for popular “left-radical” causes. In the end,

his political insights are quite shallow, in respect to understanding whence the troubles of the “Holocaust industry” originate. He is incessantly focussing on “Jewish organizations,” without identifying how these are used, or instrumentalized, for strategic ends that are defined by the foreign policy establishment in Washington, New York, and London.

Adenauer and Ben Gurion

Because of the combined “leftist” bias and narrow fixation on “Jewish organizations,” Finklestein tends to put the entire “reparations” story into one basket, overlooking, mistakenly, in my view, the early-1950s personal efforts of then-West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, with the assistance of the late World Jewish Congress head Nahum Goldmann, to positively resolve this thorny issue. Both Adenauer and Ben Gurion faced significant domestic opposition to concluding such a “German reparations” arrangement. Adenauer was facing the horrible postwar economic situation in Germany, and personally refused to compromise with any “German collective guilt” notion, insisting — as was indeed formulated in the final agreement — that the Nazi crimes were committed “in the name of the German people.” Ben Gurion was being attacked viciously, by the Menachem Begin-led Israeli “right wing,” for dealing with “German criminals.”

But both brought a sense of mission to the talks, and felt driven by the need to compromise, in a spirit broadly consistent with the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia that brought an end to Europe’s Thirty Years War. Both understood, that the horrors of the past had to be superseded, by a positive notion of future cooperation, or else a sore would be endlessly kept open, and new horrors would arise. Even if the arrangement was far from perfect in many respects, it showed a method of thinking and negotiation far different from the crude and cynical operations of Singer, Bronfman, et al. today. Goldmann’s involvement is particularly relevant, as it underscores how different the WJC was under his leadership, in contrast to the Bronfman-Singer mafia of today.

By the same token, it is disappointing, that Finklestein does not counterpose a positive notion of Jewish identity, to that of the “Holocaust-mongers.” As certain Jewish critics, including in Israel, have pointed out, the particular form of Holocaust-mongering of recent times, makes it seem that modern-day Judaism owes its existence to Hitler, rather than God. (For this and other questions, the interested reader might want to look at the book by University of Chicago Prof. Peter Novick, published in 1999 in the United States as *The Holocaust in American Life* and in Britain in 2000 as *The Holocaust as Collective Memory*. It has also just been released in German. Finklestein’s book is an expanded version of a review he wrote of Novick’s book. Although suffering from over-academic discourses, Novick does take on the issue of how the Holocaust, as discussed in the United States since about 1970, has been used to remove the *universalizing* thrust of

Judaism, as would be associated with the German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, and has instead inculcated a belief in *Jewish separateness* and *Jewish victimization*.

What Happened in the Late 1960s?

It is above all regrettable, that Finklestein has such a superficial view of the changing dynamics after 1967. I would put the problem in the following way.

This reviewer was born in Brooklyn, New York, into a Jewish family, soon after World War II, and, while not nearly as directly affected by the Holocaust as Finklestein has been, grew up hearing horrible stories about Jewish relatives who had been murdered by the Nazis in regions of the then-Soviet Union, and meeting Holocaust-survivor cousins, who emigrated to the United States after having witnessed their own parents being hauled off to the death camps, and who were, to one degree or another, traumatized. All the more for this reason, I have always been nauseated by the cheap exploitation shenanigans about the Holocaust, in recent decades.

What is especially enraging, is that the specific way in which the Holocaust has been portrayed, in the vast majority of cases of which I am aware, has falsified history, to the extent of, one, depicting the Nazi crimes as against “Jews only,” and, therefore, as “unique,” and second, coming up with all sorts of bizarre and misleading explanations, for how and why Hitler came to power, and the nature of Hitler’s rule, culminating in the atrocious book by Harvard University Prof. Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*. (Against which Finklestein, by the way, has co-authored an effectively brutal refutation. In *The Holocaust Industry*, he reports that both ADL National Chairman Foxman and WJC Executive Director Elan Steinberg tried to prevent that refutation from being published.)

It is no accident, in my mind, that this misuse of the Holocaust has been shaped to shield from public attention the reality, that the descendants of the same Anglo-American-centered financier and political elites who helped to put Hitler into power, have been setting in motion a *far worse genocide, threatening billions of humans*. Not accidentally, the move in this genocidal direction, was initiated in 1966-67. This is the time when the relevant elites began to “re-configure” the United States around what is known as the “Southern Strategy,” to bring about a deindustrialization of the United States and other nations, together with a growing mood of racism and cultural pessimism. The post-1966 shifts in the United States, were reflected in a new foreign policy, emphasizing Malthusianism, “population control,” and the like.

It is one of the interesting curiosities of history, that a key advocate of radical Malthusianism, from 1966 on, was then-freshman U.S. Rep. Sir George H.W. Bush, father of the current President. Sir George’s own father, Prescott, was one of those who provided crucial funding to help bring the Nazis to power in January 1933, after Hitler et al. had suffered serious electoral defeats in November 1932.