Books

In Denial

Buried by The Times:The Holocaust and America's Most Important Newspaper, by Laurel Leff. (Cambridge University Press, 2005. 442 pages, $29)

By
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A great newspaper like *The New York Times* would run a story by the Associated Press only if it couldn't get the story itself. And if it did run the wire story, it's highly unlikely that editors would put the story on page one. That piece of newspaper real estate is usually reserved to showcase the paper's own reporters on the major stories of the day.

During World War II, *The New York Times* ran dozens of AP stories on the inside pages about the destruction of European Jewry. Did editors keep the stories off of page one because they thought the anti-Jewish laws, deportations, and mass murder of Jews were not big news — or because they couldn't verify the story itself? Were *The Times*' own correspondents unable to get into the region or was the Jewish-owned newspaper distancing itself from the unfolding tragedy? There is no real way to know the answer without getting into the minds of the editors who made these decisions in the early 1940s as the Nazi murder machine was rolling across Europe. But Laurel Leff, in her excellent book, *Buried by The Times*, builds a strong and convincing case that *The Times* was deliberately downplaying a major story because it didn't want to appear to be championing a Jewish cause. Like her observation about the use of wire stories, much of Leff 's speculation cannot be verified. But there is much evidence to suggest that the editors were motivated by more than just the news. Leff documents this in great detail both in terms of what *The Times* published and in terms of the opinions of its publisher at the time, Arthur Hays Sulzberger.

There can be little doubt that Sulzberger's views about Judaism trickled down to the editors making the decisions about what to put in the newspaper every day. Sulzberger was a clear proponent of the notion that, as he put it in a memo to top editors, "all Jews are not brothers." "Judaism is neither a race nor a nation," he said. "Judaism is a religion." As someone who spent 20 years at *The New York Times*, I felt increasingly uncomfortable reading Leff's book. Hers is a serious and convincing indictment of a newspaper I respect and love — and have spent many years defending in the face of charges of anti-Israel bias.

Of course *The Times* of the 1940s had changed radically by the time I became a reporter there in 1975. Arthur Ochs Sulzberger, known as Punch, had succeeded his father as publisher in 1963. Punch is much more comfortable with his Judaism. (He is also a big supporter of Columbia and among his largest bequests has been to the Columbia Hillel.) When I got to *The Times*, A.M. Rosenthal, later a fiercely pro-Israel columnist, was the top editor of the paper, and the paper's editorial policy, while far from perfect in the eyes of supporters of Israel, was clearly in favor of the Jewish state. This was not the case in the 1940s. On January 22, 1942, as Jews were being rounded up for extermination all over Europe, The Times ran an editorial against the establishment of a Jewish state. On the practical side, a Jewish state might "provoke an Arab uprising," the editorial warned. But, more important, the editorial suggested, a Jewish state would lead to "much misunderstanding" among "people of other faiths" that American Jews have dual loyalties.

The elder Sulzberger professed no such conflict. America, he often stated, came first. For Sulzberger to concede otherwise, Leff argues, would have meant acknowledging that his identity as an American was not as secure as he resolutely asserted. She adds: "Sulzberger maintained that the only hope for European Jews was if their plight could be linked to that of other groups because, as he said repeatedly, a minority could not save itself."

That could well be why, as Leff notes, when *The Times* was eventually presented with incontrovertible evidence that the stories about genocide were true, it tended to lump Jews together with others who suffered.The paper ran numerous editorials condemning persecutions in Poland, confiscations in France, mass slaughters in Russia and Germany without mentioning Jews."Only six stories [on the front page] during the war both described the Jews' plight and acknowledged that the Jews were the primary victims," Leff writes.

What difference does it make now? Leff, a journalism professor at Northeastern University, argues that this is one case where you can blame the messenger. The Times' coverage mattered so much, she writes, "because other bystanders, particularly the American government, American Jewish groups, and the rest of the American press, took cues from the paper. Among major American newspapers, it was unique in the information it received, how it disseminated the news, and to whom."

Leff 's book naturally covers the war years, but it is worth adding a footnote that she fails to include. In 1996 on the 100th anniversary of the Ochs-Sulzberger reign, the paper mounted a major exhibition on its history at the New York Public Library. In a display case that included original articles from the war years, *The Times* publicly acknowledged that it seriously underplayed the suffering of the Jews during the Holocaust.

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