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Laurel Leff
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Introduction

"*Last Voice from the Abyss*"

MARCH 2, 1944 was a typical news day – that is, if any day could be considered typical in the midst of a world war. The pivotal battles of Britain, El Alamein, and Stalingrad were in the past, the Normandy invasion was 3 months in the future. On the *New York Times*' front page, the Allies were holding off a German drive near Anzio in Italy, while the Red Army was making steady progress retaking parts of the Soviet Union seized at the war's outset. On the inside pages of the newspaper, the War Manpower Commission was establishing veteran information and service centers in New York State. West Point was continuing its unbeaten streak in basketball, clobbering Maryland 85 to 22. The stock market was regaining ground it had lost in the previous session. "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" was starting a run at the Capitol Theater. Hungarian hot slaw with leeks and cabbage was the featured recipe.

On page four, amid 13 other stories, appeared a five-paragraph item with a London dateline. The first two paragraphs described the House of Commons' decision to appropriate 50,000 pounds to help fund the Inter-Governmental Committee on Refugees. Then came these paragraphs:

> During the discussion, S. S. Silverman, Labor member, read a report from the Jewish National Committee operating somewhere in Poland, saying:
>
> 'Last month we still reckoned the number of Jews in the whole territory of Poland as from 250,000 to 300,000. In a few weeks no more than 50,000 of us will remain. In our last moment before death, the remnants of Polish Jewry appeal for help to the whole world. May this, perhaps our last voice from the abyss, reach the ears of the whole world.'

Without skipping a beat, the story continued: "The Commons also approved an installment of 3,863 pounds to help the International Red Cross open an office in Shanghai. . . ".

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The journalists at the *New York Times* did not respond to that anguished cry[i] – not the London correspondent who filed it, or the cable editor who read it, or the copy reader who edited it, or the night news editor who determined its placement, or the managing editor who signed off on it, or the publisher who had ultimate responsibility for the newspaper in which it appeared. One-quarter of a million people were about to die, 3 million were already dead. Yet, no one at the *New York Times* said, "This is not routine. This is a catastrophe. Perhaps we can not stop it, but we can lay bare the horror. We can move this story from page four to page one. We can give it a headline that befits the tragedy. We can write a forceful editorial today and tomorrow and the next day. We can recall the calamity in Sunday's week in review. We can help our readers understand the pain, the panic, the powerlessness of a people about to be exterminated."

But no one at the *Times* did, not on that day or any of the 2,076 days of the European war. As a result, the "last voice from the abyss" never reached "the ears of the whole world." It was smothered by the hundreds of other words in the page four story, the thousands of words in the March 2 edition, and the millions of words published in all the *Times* editions throughout the war.

For March 2, 1944 was typical in more ways than one. From the start of the war in Europe on September 1, 1939 to its end nearly 6 years later, the *New York Times* and other mass media treated the persecution and ultimately the annihilation of the Jews of Europe as a secondary story. They reported it. In fact, from September 1939 through May 1945, the *Times* published 1,186 stories about what was happening to the Jews of Europe, or an average of 17 stories per month.[1] But the story never received the continuous attention or prominent play that a story about the unprecedented attempt to wipe out an entire people deserved. The story of the Holocaust[ii] – meaning articles that focused on the discrimination, deportation, and destruction of the Jews – made the *Times* front page just

[i] The Jewish National Committee's full report, which reached the West, was more than a general cry of pain. The committee wanted the U.S. government to loan or donate dollars to the Polish government in London, which had agreed to spend 5 million pounds to help Jews in Poland live as gentiles or organize their escape to Hungary. Goldmann to Pehle, 3/23/44, WRB Collection, Box 50, FDRL.

[ii] Journalists at the time did not use the term "Holocaust," although, as is seen, the word did begin to creep into the language, without a capital, during the war. The word is used here and in the conclusion as shorthand, but not in other chapters that describe journalists' contemporaneous understanding.

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More information

26 times, and only in six of those stories were Jews identified on the front as the primary victims. Never did page one stories appear back to back, nor did one follow another over a span of a few days. Not once did the story lead the paper, meaning appear in the right-hand column reserved for the day's most important news – not even when the concentration camps were liberated at the end of the war. When the Holocaust made the *Times* front page, the stories obscured the fact that most of the victims were Jews, referring to them instead as refugees or persecuted minorities. In addition, the *Times* only intermittently and timidly editorialized about the extermination of the Jews, and the paper rarely highlighted it in either the News of the Week in Review or the magazine section.

The *New York Times* did not downplay the Holocaust because it lacked the information to play it up. It is true that news of the destruction of the Jews did not flow unfettered to the West. Once the war started, journalists could not report at all in much of occupied Europe, and the Germans made a concerted effort to conceal at least the final stages of their campaign against the Jews. Even before the war, foreign correspondents faced hostile governments, particularly in Germany and Russia, brutal working conditions and transmission methods that were expensive and erratic. Yet enough information reached Allied and exile governments, and Jewish and other relief organizations,[2] that the punctilious wartime reader of the *New York Times* would have had a good idea of what was happening to Europe's Jews as it was happening. The *Times* described the propagation of anti-Semitic laws in German allied countries; death from disease and starvation of hundreds of thousands in ghettos and labor camps in Eastern and Western Europe; and mass executions in the Soviet Union and mass gassings in Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Maidanek. The *Times* also indicated that these were not isolated incidents, but part of Germany's attempt to find a solution to Europe's "Jewish problem," which from 1942 on was the Final Solution, a systematic campaign to kill all the Jews in Europe.

Nor did the *New York Times* downplay the Holocaust primarily because it doubted the veracity of the information it received. In trying to explain why the *New York Times* put a story about the murder of 1 million people on page seven, Walter Laqueur in *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's 'Final Solution*,' encapsulates this view.

> If it was true that a million people had been killed this clearly should have been front page news; it did not, after all, happen every day. If it was not true, the story should

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More information

not have been published at all. Since they [*Times* editors] were not certain they opted for a compromise; to publish, but not in a conspicuous place. Thus it was implied the paper had reservations about the report: quite likely the stories contained some truth, but probably it was exaggerated.[3]

But the *Times* stories, including the one Laqueur cited, do not read as if the editors did not believe them. For the most part, they were detailed accounts of specific recent events attributed to "reliable sources," or from authoritative sources such as the German and other Axis governments, Allied and exile governments, Jewish organizations, and, occasionally, eyewitnesses and first-hand observations. In a handful of instances, the stories stated explicitly that the information could not be confirmed, which suggests that in the 1,000-plus other stories it could be. Furthermore, in other contexts, the *Times* put stories it acknowledged contained information that could not be confirmed on the front page.[4] In addition, *Times* editorials, few as they may have been, stated directly that millions of Jews were being murdered in a systematic campaign. If the *Times* editors did not trust the reports, it is unlikely they would have written about them as established fact on the editorial page.

Most tellingly, the *Times* continued to put stories about the Holocaust inside the paper even after doubts about their authenticity evaporated. Most scholars agree that the truth of the Holocaust was established when the 11 Allied governments confirmed the Final Solution in December 1942.[5] But there is no discernible change in the *Times* coverage after that. Considering all the wartime stories about Jews, the paper printed six such front-page stories in 1940, seven in 1941, nine in 1942, and seven again in 1943. Only in 1944 did the number climb to 12 front-page stories. Nor did the total number of stories printed jump once the extermination campaign was verified. The *Times* printed 240 stories about what was happening to the Jews in 1940, 207 in 1941, 139 in 1942, 186 in 1943, and 197 in 1944. 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 page.[6]

This book seeks to explain how that could have happened, how a newspaper like the *New York Times* could have been presented with the facts of genocide, and yet have missed – or dismissed – their significance. In doing so, it serves as a case study of how difficult it is for a group the press has identified as "the other," as being outside it and its audience's sphere of

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More information

concern, to receive adequate media attention no matter the extent of the catastrophe. The book thus has resonance for contemporary journalists grappling with other tragedies far from American shores, whether AIDS in Africa or human rights abuses in China.

The book asks: What was it about prevailing press standards and the policies and personalities at the *Times* that led the nation's most important newspaper to discount one of the century's most important news stories? Both avenues of inquiry are essential. The *Times* did not stand alone either in reporting the destruction of European Jewry or in understating its significance, as Deborah Lipstadt reveals in her important book, *Beyond Belief: The American Press and the Coming of the Holocaust 1933–1945*. "By the later stages of the war virtually every major American daily had acknowledged that many people, Jews in particular, were being murdered," Lipstadt concludes (p. 275). "They lamented what was happening, condemned the perpetrators, and then returned to their practice of burying the information." Similar patterns can be found in radio broadcasts,[7] magazines, and the Protestant and liberal Catholic press.[8] The Jewish press' treatment of the Holocaust was more extensive and prominent.[9]

The *Times* was unique, however, in the comprehensiveness of its coverage and the extent of its influence among American opinion makers. Because of its longtime commitment to international affairs, its willingness to sacrifice advertising rather than articles in the face of a newsprint crunch, and its substantial Jewish readership, the *Times* was able to obtain and publish more news about what was happening to the Jews than other mainstream newspapers. The way the *Times* published that news also had a disproportionate impact on both policy makers and fellow journalists who considered it the newspaper of record. That the *Times* was owned by Jews of German ancestry, who would seemingly be more sensitive to the plight of their European brethren, further magnified the *Times*' critical role in shaping contemporaneous coverage of the Holocaust. The *Times*' judgment that the murder of millions of Jews was a relatively unimportant story reverberated among other journalists trying to assess the news, among Jewish groups trying to arouse public opinion, and among government leaders trying to decide on an American response.

In making that judgment, the *Times*, along with the rest of the mainstream American press, was influenced by overarching journalistic standards and cultural assumptions. Several have been offered to explain the

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almost universal treatment of the extermination of the Jews as an inside story.[10]

- The overwhelming demands of covering a world war dwarfed all other considerations, consuming news organizations' resources and journalists' mental energies. The war also produced global carnage on an unimaginable scale, making it harder to recognize the suffering of one minority group. Diffuse Jewish organizations with a divided message and exile governments with their own agendas could not hope to grab the attention of a preoccupied press.
- World War I's fake atrocity stories bred skepticism about death factories and mass gassings, especially among hard-bitten editors who had been young journalists during the war two decades earlier. Both sides' use of atrocities for propaganda purposes during the just-completed Spanish Civil War reinforced those doubts.[11] Plus, journalists were willing to indulge their doubts because the alternative meant accepting information "too terrible to be believed."
- Afraid that too much attention would alienate Americans loath to fight a war to save the Jews, the U.S. government was quiet on the subject. Because the press corps defined news largely as what the government said or did, the fact that the U.S. government said and did little about European Jews meant their plight was, by definition, not important news. In addition, there was no consensus on what the government could do to help Jews trapped behind enemy lines – save winning the war.

All these reasons help explain why the press downplayed news of the Holocaust. But there were countervailing currents: information that challenged prevailing assumptions, values that suggested different assessments, and voices that urged an alternative outcome. Although the war was the dominant news, it need not have been, and was not, the only front-page news. The *New York Times* printed between 12 and 15 front-page stories every day. Fewer than half of these typically concerned the war. Attention to war news therefore does not fully explain the simultaneous downplaying of the Holocaust. Nor does the extent of the global carnage. Although the war resulted in millions of deaths, including the loss of millions of civilians, it became evident halfway through that the murder of Jews was not just "collateral damage." As many *inside* news stories indicated, the Jews alone were singled out for complete eradication in a systematic and purposeful program. The *Times*' first story on the Nazi extermination campaign, which described it as "the greatest mass slaughter in history,"

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More information

appeared on page five, tacked onto the bottom of a column of stories.[12] Yet, the deaths of other civilians, often fewer than 100, regularly appeared on the front page.[13] Some Jewish leaders recognized this discrepancy and urged the press to pay more attention to the plight of the Jews.

Although World War I and other atrocity stories led some World War II journalists to doubt news of mass slaughter, others, particularly those reporting from the field, relinquished their skepticism. In fact, many journalists *at the time* were acutely conscious of how the events they were reporting differed from those in the previous war. "Since World War I[,] stories of child victims of German brutality have been received with a certain skepticism," wrote *Times*' Moscow correspondent Ralph Parker in 1942 in just one of many such statements. "What [your correspondent saw at a Moscow hospital] and what the children told him convinced him that there had been no exaggeration by the Russians about German behavior on their territory."[14] Rather than be duped by misplaced skepticism, journalists offered straightforward acknowledgment of the doubts implanted by the earlier war's propaganda and used such acknowledgment to reinforce the truth of current outrages. Similarly, journalists often admitted that the news they were reporting was "too terrible to be believed," yet insisted it should be believed nonetheless. Direct refutations of the possibility of deception or exaggeration, however, did not move these stories to the front page.

Whereas the government influenced press coverage of the Holocaust, U.S. policy did not dictate it. The government did not censor news of the Holocaust, and in only a few cases literally suppressed it. The press had the information and was free to exercise its own judgment about its importance. Even during wartime, the press occasionally challenged the government's priorities, and some journalists challenged the government's policies toward the Jews. Nor was the government a monolith of neglect. Although some administration officials believed that too much attention to the Jews would alienate Americans, others did not and effectively used public pressure. Similarly, although some government officials insisted that winning the war was the only way to save the Jews, others argued that winning the war would prove futile if, at war's end, there were no Jews left to save. That few options existed for saving many Jews, and none for saving most Jews, unquestionably affected the public debate, making it harder to mobilize thousands of citizens or move an intransigent bureaucracy. Yet the lack of clear-cut solutions probably played less of a role in decisions about

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Excerpt
More information

whether a story should appear on the front page. As Deborah Lipstadt points out in *Beyond Belief* (p. 239): "[T]he press does not decide how it will treat a story on the basis of whether attention to a topic will effect a change in policy. The press pays attention to those stories it considers significant."

So, at the time, not merely in retrospect, a swirl of information about the Holocaust flowed to journalists, who assessed it in a variety of ways. The surface currents pushed journalists to conclude that the persecution of the Jews was neither "distinct" nor "particularly salient," as Peter Novick puts it in *The Holocaust in American Life* (p. 29). As he observes, the murder of European Jewry "was just one among the countless dimensions of a conflict that was consuming the lives of tens of millions around the globe." But there were also undercurrents that suggested the mass murder of Jews was distinct in its scope, aim, and methods, and salient as a supreme violation of bedrock assumptions about Western civilization. Those undercurrents reached the American press, and, from time to time, rose to the surface, sending ripples through the dominant way of understanding events, and even threatening to reverse the waves. Yet, the tide was too strong; the unique suffering of the Jews never fully broke through to public consciousness during the war or for years afterward.

The acknowledgment that one interpretive framework – perceiving the mass murder of Jews as a minor part of a worldwide conflagration – dominated Americans' contemporaneous knowledge of the Holocaust should be the start of the inquiry, not its end. A clash of information, values, and understandings occurred within American news organizations – as it did within the Roosevelt Administration and within the Jewish community. (The latter two struggles have been extensively chronicled with diverging conclusions.) How and why did one perspective come to prevail over others within the press? What information exactly was available to journalists? Who provided it, when, and in what form? What pressure did the government and Jewish groups apply to influence the presentation of this information? What internal factors affected news judgments about its reliability and significance? How did all these factors interact to produce a framework that did not recognize the distinctiveness or importance of the Holocaust?

One of the best ways to seek answers to these questions is by looking at how events played out within one institution. The reason for a singular focus is simple: that is how the news is made. Global economic, political,

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and social forces shape news production. Deep-seated professional and cultural traditions play a part. But so do the idiosyncrasies of an individual newsroom. A publisher's particular sensitivity, a managing editor's preference for evenings at home, a nighttime editor's religious orientation, and a reporter's gambling habit can be as important in determining the contents of tomorrow's paper as the need to attain a particular profit margin or maintain the appearance of objectivity. Only by unearthing those predilections – not to mention who hates whom and who wants whose job – is it possible to understand how news is manufactured.

In that sense, a close look at the *Times* serves to reveal both the general journalistic culture and the particular circumstances at the *Times* that led the Holocaust to be considered a secondary story. The *Times* merits special scrutiny in this case for reasons that go beyond methodology. 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.

The *Times* unquestionably was at the pinnacle of 1940s American journalism. "What Harvard is to U.S. education, what the House of Morgan has been to U.S. finance, *The New York Times* is to U.S. journalism," *Time* magazine declared on April 12, 1943. Nothing distinguished the *Times* more than its "far-flung staff of foreign correspondents, certainly the best in the U.S., perhaps in the world." The *Times* made more of a commitment to foreign news than any other American newspaper. At the outbreak of World War II, the *Times* had more than 30 correspondents in Europe, including ones stationed in such out-of-the-way capitals as Bratislava, Sofia, and Istanbul.[15] In contrast, the *Washington Post* had one reporter doubling at the White House and the State Department.[16] The *New York Herald Tribune* had a similar interest in international news, but fewer reporters in the field and far less space dedicated to its coverage.[17] In 1941, the *Times* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for "the public educational value of its foreign news report." The "precedent-setting" prize was made for "a supreme journalistic achievement."[18]

Unlike its competitors, the *Times* also maintained its commitment to provide complete news despite a wartime newsprint crunch. It printed more war news than any other paper, averaging 125,000 words an issue and turning away advertisements in the process – a fact that the *Times* repeatedly trumpeted on its front page.[19] "In America no other journal

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More information

approaches it in the volume of news and coverage of the world," a book of press criticism concluded in 1944.[20] The *Times*' reach probably accounts for Lipstadt's conclusion that its coverage was "relatively good" compared with other daily newspapers, particularly in its comprehensiveness.[21] David Wyman also concludes in *The Abandonment of the Jews* (p. 62) that "the *Times* provided by far the most complete American press coverage of Holocaust events."

In addition, the *Times* could not claim, as other papers might have, that its readers were not interested in the fate of foreign Jews while their sons were dying in foreign lands. Half the Jews in America lived in the New York metropolitan area in the 1940s and a growing number of them read the *Times*.[22] Many of them were first- and second-generation Jews from Eastern Europe whose brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, were being marched into gas chambers. One American woman, who had learned in early 1944 that her husband was in Bergen-Belsen, began scouring the *Times* for stories about the treatment of Jews in Germany and the occupied countries, cutting out any *Times* articles she found. When she died nearly six decades later, her family discovered the clippings stored in several shoeboxes in her attic.[23] Samuel Halperin describes the position of American Jewry at the end of the war. "An appreciable number of American Jews, possibly a majority, had lost close relatives in the holocaust. Few American Jewish families had not suffered a loss of a friend or, at least, the personal knowledge of one of the murdered victims. The American Jewish community, with its strong Old World ties, suddenly was wrenched loose of its loved ones."[24]

If the *Times* was better positioned – via its resources and readership – to highlight the Holocaust than any other newspaper, its coverage was also most likely to influence the national discourse. In 1944, the *Saturday Evening Post* described the *Times* as as close to a national newspaper as the United States had. One-quarter of its 440,000 weekday readers and half its 805,000 Sunday readers came from outside the New York area.[25] The New York Times syndicate also sent *Times* articles to 525 newspapers, including such important papers as the *Detroit Free Press*, *Chicago Tribune*, the *Denver Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*.[26] More important than how many people read *Times* articles was who read them. "[T]he *New York Times* is probably America's most influential news organ because it is read by the nation's most influential people as their primary source of information," J. J. Goldberg explains.[27] The *Times*'

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