

Simon Wiesenthal: Nazi-hunter dead at 96—part 2

“Only a regime which admits to historical truth can learn from the past”

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The following is the second part of a two-part obituary of famed Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, who died September 20, at age 96, at his home in Vienna, Austria. The first part was posted on November 14.

There was a reason for the lack of official support for Wiesenthal's hunt for Nazi war criminals during the period of the advent of the Cold War. His mission directly cut across the policies of the dominant powers. Not only were the Americans and British uninterested in punishing Nazis, they were winding up the limited de-Nazification and reintegrating the German government into their Cold War alliance. Additionally, for their part, the Israelis were preoccupied with consolidating their land-grab in Palestine and were not prepared to provide assistance to Wiesenthal.

To place Wiesenthal's work in context, it is necessary to examine these geopolitical shifts in policy in the postwar period.

After the Cold War began in earnest, the US moved to rearm Germany; and it became clear that sweeping the Nazi past into the dustbin of history was the price the German elites were extracting for their cooperation. For example, an editorial in the *Saturday Evening Post* warned “Nuremberg Verdicts Cool Ardor of Germany for Defending West” and claimed the trials were an “unrealistic mixture of morality and vengeance.” [1]

Wiesenthal relates a statement by one of the American officers involved in packing up the archives at Nuremberg: “Europe cannot be defended against the Russians without the Germans. We must rebuild the German army and we cannot do this if the German officer class is in prison.”

In fact, as the East-West conflict heated up, the only references to genocide in the American press became those attacking Stalin and the Soviet bloc.

The US began a fierce headhunting race with the Soviets, seeking to attract as many Nazi scientists, intelligence operatives, and other useful professionals into the United States. The scope was huge; later, the American Office of Special Investigations would admit that at least 10,000 Nazis entered the US between 1948 and 1952. (As of 1995, only 44 were deported.)

“All the major powers considered German scientists part of the booty of war. The Americans, British, and Soviets each had established special teams that concentrated on the capture and preservation of German laboratories, industrial patents, and similar useful hardware of the modern age. Scientists were generally regarded as another technical asset to be appropriated,” writes Christopher Simpson in his book *Blowback*.

The position of the US government was succinctly spelled out by the director of the Joint Intelligence Objectives Agency (in charge of “Operation Paperclip,” the recruitment of German scientists), who stated, “...in so far as German scientists are concerned, Nazism no longer should

be a serious consideration from a viewpoint of national security when the far greater threat of Communism is now jeopardizing the entire world.... To continue to treat Nazi affiliations as significant considerations has been aptly phrased as ‘beating a dead Nazi horse.’” [http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/radiation/dir/mstrett/commeet/meet13/brief13/tab_f/br13f3.txt]

The Americans and British created a Combined Intelligence Objectives Subcommittee, carrying out raids in Italy, France, Holland and Germany to retrieve these men. Simpson points out that these organizations pioneered the methods later used to bring a whole range of Nazis and their collaborators into the US, as they gradually stretched their justification to include recruiting “almost any anti-Communist, regardless of what he or she had done during the war.”

Not only did the Americans import Nazis, they also established an international network for anti-Communist purposes. Simpson points out, “Greece in 1947 and Italy in 1948 also taught the CIA that it could employ former Nazi collaborators on a large scale in clandestine operations and get away with it.” It is estimated that in 1948, \$5 million was poured into American support to ex-Nazis now reassigned to right-wing émigré organizations. A project code-named Bloodstone brought in scores of Nazi-collaborationist organizations thought to be useful for political warfare in Eastern Europe into the US.

These Nazi collaborators were brought into the US or hired within Europe for specific political sabotage and assassination assignments. “The men and women enlisted under Bloodstone were not low-level thugs, concentration camp guards, or brutal hoodlums, at least not in the usual sense of those words. Quite the contrary, they were the cream of the Nazis and collaborators, the leaders, the intelligence specialists, and the scholars who had put their skills to work for the Nazi cause,” states Simpson. These men were funneled into a special Office of Special Projects within the CIA as a clandestine warfare agency.

One example of the use to which these elements were put was explained by a top aide to George Kennan: “We had the problem of the Communist labor unions in France. The AFL was working with their people, trying to combat this large subversive force in France. We couldn't just send in the 82nd Airborne, you know [to help them], nor could we do it with diplomatic means. So we did what worked at the time.” One can only imagine that the Nazis had great relish for such assignments under the aegis of the Americans.

By the end of 1947, the US Army had at least half a dozen large-scale official programs to recruit SS and German military intelligence veterans including Operation Pajamas, Project Dwindle, Apple Pie, Project Panhandle, and Project Credulity.

Perhaps the most important coup, however, was Reinhard Gehlen, Hitler's most senior military intelligence officer on the eastern front. Gehlen and his entire organization (largely of SS or SD men including well-known leaders) was enlisted en masse by the American OSS, where he continued his specialty of spying on the Russians. Gehlen's position and reputation inside the Third Reich had rested on his wealth of information derived from the torture, interrogation and murder by starvation of approximately 4 million Soviet prisoners of war.

Was there opposition among the official Jewish organizations to the new American policy—was this a highly charged or contested issue? Hardly, explains Norman Finkelstein in his book *The Holocaust Industry*. These organizations in the postwar period concurred with the policy to downplay Nazi criminality and to support the new anti-communist cause.

“The real reason for public silence on the Nazi extermination was the conformist policies of the American Jewish leadership and the political climate of postwar America. In both domestic and international affairs, American Jewish elites hewed closely to official US policy.... The American Jewish Committee (AJC) was the first to preach the virtues of realignment. The pro-Zionist World Jewish Congress (WJC)...dropped opposition after signing compensation agreements with Germany in the early 1950s,” states Finkelstein. He points out that remembrance of the Nazi holocaust was tagged as a communist cause and that both the AJC and the ADL, seeking to distance themselves from any left-wing association, actively collaborated in the McCarthy witchhunts and offered their files to the government. The AJC actually endorsed the death penalty for the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, going so far as to claim that they weren't *really* Jewish.

Meanwhile, Wiesenthal was outspoken in opposing the actions of both Israel and Jewish groups such as the WJC to pressure Germany for “restitution” payments to the newly created Jewish State. He felt this was an opportunistic cover-up for the failure to de-Nazify Germany and prosecute Nazi criminals. In 1952, the Israeli government accepted the deal, shocking many Jews the world over, and agreed to receive \$862 million in West German reparations to be paid over 12 years, the major factor along with US loans in stabilizing the fiscal crisis of the new government.

These events make clear why Wiesenthal worked in isolation and poverty during these years.

While Wiesenthal's exact role in the Eichmann case is disputed, there is no doubt it was his obsession. He continued to forward information to the Israeli authorities over the years, and is credited with shaming them into finally pinpointing and abducting the Nazi criminal.

When located by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, Eichmann was living in Buenos Aires, under the assumed name Ricardo Klements. He was kidnapped in 1960 and transported to Israel where he stood trial. He was convicted on 15 criminal counts and hung in 1962. Wiesenthal was reinvigorated both by the capture of his number-one “client” and particularly by the publicity (he wrote a book, *I Hunted Eichmann*, widely felt to be self-promotional in the extreme.). As a result of the book, Wiesenthal became an overnight legend and shortly thereafter reestablished his Documentation Centre in Vienna.

There he would work for four decades, in two nondescript, three-room offices, using his photographic memory and computer-like brain to piece together the trails of thousands of fleeing Nazis. He did not actually “hunt Nazis”—he gathered and analyzed information and compiled dossiers.

Among his most famous successes were the capture and trials of Karl Silberbauer, the Vienna police inspector and Gestapo aide who arrested Anne Frank and her family; Franz Stangl, commander of the Treblinka (up to 800,000 were gassed there while he was commandant) and Sobibor killing camps, as well as Hartheim, a facility for euthanasia experiments; Hermine Braunsteiner, an Austrian guard at Ravensbruck and Majdanek, a killing center in Poland where 200,000 prisoners died; Gustav Franz

Wagner, a commandant at Sobibor; and Josef Schwammberger, an SS officer convicted in the killings of prisoners and slave laborers at camps in Poland.

After the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, political winds shifted again. The military success of the Israelis solidified the decision of the United States to adopt Israel as its main client state in the Middle East. It became a strategic asset in world affairs.

Slowly, the Holocaust was reasserted as the issue most suited to attract public support for Israel. And as the Holocaust became a cause celebre, Wiesenthal was no longer an isolated outcast. He was awarded doctorates from universities all around the world and received honoraria for numerous public speeches. Nazi-hunting now dove-tailed with US foreign policy; unfortunately, Wiesenthal was uncritical of this process—and became an explicit defender of many Zionist crimes against the Palestinian people.

In line with this foreign policy, US President Jimmy Carter announced in 1978 he was setting up a commission to create a national memorial to the Holocaust. It was, in fact, a politically motivated attempt to placate American Jews who found his mild overtures to the Palestinians unpalatable.

The proposed museum soon escalated into a major debate between Wiesenthal and Elie Wiesel over the question of who should be commemorated. Wiesel was placed in charge of the presidential commission and insisted it be only the 6 million Jews, while Wiesenthal stated it should be the 11 million Nazi victims of many nationalities.

To his credit, Wiesenthal was appalled by Wiesel's view of the Holocaust as an example of the unending 2,000-year persecution by Gentiles and opposed his view that Jews alone constituted the real victims. This was an emotional and principled issue with Wiesenthal.

Moreover, Wiesenthal rejected Wiesel's mystical and pessimistic outlook on the Holocaust, one that made it impossible to resist, learn from or really do anything about it. Wiesel's position was that “Auschwitz cannot be explained nor can it be visualized.... The Holocaust transcends history.... The dead are in possession of a secret that we, the living, are neither worthy of nor capable of recovering.... The Holocaust [is] the ultimate event, the ultimate mystery, never to be comprehended or transmitted.” [2]

In the end, a compromise was struck, but many felt that Wiesenthal's position on the museum (particularly on the inclusion of the Roma and Sinti gypsies) may have cost him the Nobel Peace Prize, a grave disappointment to Wiesenthal, a man for whom prestige and acclaim meant a great deal.

Wiesel was the sole prize winner and became, more or less, America's chief popular interpreter of the Holocaust, a decision more in line with contemporary identity politics and postmodernism.

Wiesenthal's well-known failing was a craving for recognition. He actively sought to build up his persona as a larger-than-life threat to his prey, and in the course of it chose unwisely. He agreed to provide his name to Orthodox Rabbi Marvin Hier for the establishment of a Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. The Center and its multimedia Tolerance Center have become huge and wealthy tourist attractions, very much a part of what Finkelstein dubs “the Holocaust industry.” While envisioned by Wiesenthal as an educational institution to promote human rights and tolerance, they are, in fact, a multimillion-dollar advertisement and mouthpiece for the state of Israel.

The personal weaknesses of Wiesenthal were rooted in his politics. His early anti-communism, unchecked by any serious political investigation and study, developed into a hardened defense of right-wing regimes, including Israel.

To understand the cataclysmic history through which he passed would have required a complex analysis. Instead, he took a simple approach: avenge the dead and pursue the killers—one that, at best, has an entirely

limited social effect and, in fact, allows the ongoing crisis of capitalism, the root cause of fascism, to fester and worsen.

In a telling passage describing Wiesenthal's youth, biographer Hella Pick points out, "Even Wiesenthal's elders...probably did not fully understand the finer points of Social Democratic tactics during the First World War years...but as he became an adult..., he became convinced that the Social Democrats, supported or even encouraged by the Jewish intelligentsia, failed to grasp the realities of dangers facing Austria's Jews."

These "finer points" were the issues that divided the Social Democracy into factions of revolution and reform, and that led finally the most powerful working-class party, German Social Democracy, into a capitulation to Hitler without "firing a shot."

The why and how of Hitler's coming to power never greatly preoccupied Wiesenthal. He reduced everything to the guilt or innocence of individuals and failed to study the social causes and thereby unearth the political lessons of these experiences—the only possible guarantee against a repetition of such atrocities.

Concluded

Notes:

1. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 1999, Houghton Mifflin Co.
2. Elie Wiesel, "Trivializing the Holocaust," *New York Times*, 16 April 1978.



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