

2017-2018 Hans Rosenberg Article Prize Laudatio

Jonathan Wiesen, "American Lynching in the Nazi Imagination: Race and Extra-Legal Violence in 1930s Germany," *German History* 36 (2017): 38-59.

It is our true pleasure to present the Hans Rosenberg Article Prize to Jonathan Wiesen for his remarkable essay "American Lynching in the Nazi Imagination," which examines how Nazi officials and propagandists used violence against African Americans in the United States in defending and shaping their own racist policies.

Wiesen builds on and extends a growing trend in German historiography that situates the Third Reich in a broader comparative and transnational web, that traces learning processes by which the Nazis looked abroad to construct their own racial state at home, and that ultimately helps us understand National Socialism not as *sui generis* but instead as thoroughly embedded in global trends. Settler colonialism, labor exploitation, eugenics, "anti-miscegenation" policies around the world, and, as Wiesen underscores, American policies toward native Americans and African Americans in particular all informed how the Nazis presented their own policies to the world. As Wiesen points out, "National Socialism never saw itself as an isolated, rogue movement, on the vanguard of a German biological reordering that found no parallels abroad," but rather Nazis drew from existing models (39).

In his article Wiesen paints a complex and nuanced picture of Germany's racial imagination during the 1930s, exemplifying the close source reading and attention to contradictions and paradoxes that we prize as historians. He focuses on the issue of lynching in the 1930s—as seen through German eyes—to provide a more nuanced analysis of not only how Nazi writers saw American race relations, but also more importantly, what lessons they took away from what they saw. Using a variety of fascinating sources, including reportage from a largely under-explored cast of mid-level publicists and government officials and visual imagery, he shows how German views of American race relations were by no means monolithic. The great outpouring of anger in Germany over the framing of the Scottsboro Boys in 1931 illustrates how sections of the media and public could sympathize with the plight of African Americans. As Wiesen shows, this complexity persisted even after 1933. He locates Nazi writers in this longer history of German commentary on American racial politics, which included a combination of "hostile and sympathetic attitudes towards African Americans" (42). Such ambiguity was therefore easily accessible to Nazi writers who sought to use their analysis of American racial violence for multiple purposes. Following Hitler's rise to power, Nazi publicists and German media used American racial violence—which in their view was "unruly"—to claim that their own anti-Semitic policies were "legal" and "disciplined" (46). Wiesen skillfully guides the reader through the myriad of overlapping and potentially contradictory components of Nazi writing on lynching. The Nazis sought to point out the hypocrisy of American critiques of Nazi racial policy but in a way that did not also undermine their own racial theories. The violence of lynching

mobs had to be condemned, for example, but without also condemning the “healthy racial instinct” that had incited them in the first place or drawing attention to the racial violence happening in Nazi Germany at the same time. Wiesen goes on to illustrate how this reading vastly mischaracterized both the Nazis’ own policies as well as the nature of American race relations. Nazi periodicals, for instance, thoroughly doctored images of American lynching to suit their own ends. But these efforts nevertheless functioned as a public relations bonanza. Crucially, the process of studying American “lynching helped the Nazis to puzzle through their own project of racial engineering” (39).

Given the valuable contribution this article makes to the scholarship on Nazi racial policy, a contribution enhanced by its innovative transnational focus, the selection committee is proud to award this year’s Hans Rosenberg Prize to Jonathan Wiesen.

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