


Book Review: Harmful and Undesirable: Book Censorship in Nazi Germany by Guenter Lewy

Stuart Bailey
University of Arkansas

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

 Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bailey, Stuart () "Book Review: Harmful and Undesirable: Book Censorship in Nazi Germany by Guenter Lewy," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 92 : Iss. 2 , Article 12.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol92/iss2/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Lewy, Guenter. *Harmful and Undesirable: Book Censorship in Nazi Germany*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xii + 268 pages. Hardcover, \$34.95.

The image of piles of burning books lighting the faces of Nazi functionaries and Hitler Youth standing at attention remains a powerful image of book censorship in the Third Reich, and offers a glimpse of the horrors to come. This scene was replayed in over seventy German cities in 1933; yet, the drama of these episodes obscured the varied and subtle policies that developed in practice during the years of Nazi domination. These neglected policies provide the material for political scientist Guenter Lewy's recent book, *Harmful and Undesirable: Book Censorship in Nazi Germany*. Unlike the book burnings that were realized through the initiative of politically charged students, official Nazi policy strived for more inconspicuous forms of censorship including prior restraint, mandatory membership in Nazi controlled organizations, generating psychological pressures to self-censor, and controlling book printing supplies. Using private letters and official bureaucratic correspondence, Lewy contributes to the literature on the Third Reich by offering this well-managed narrative of book censorship as an example of the Nazis' wider cultural policy.

Lewy divides his book into four parts, each with its own objectives. Part One deals with the emergence of censorship and looks at the Weimar Republic's policies as well as the book burning episodes. Part Two and Part Three constitute the bulk of the work. In Part Two, Lewy charts the growth of the bureaucracies that were involved in book censorship as well as the power struggles and back biting that occurred due to overlapping jurisdictions. Of particular importance was Joseph Goebbels, who personally retained the right to ban specific titles through his presidency of the German Chamber of Culture, which housed the Reich Chamber of Literature. This power created friction with a number of other agencies that were also involved in book policy, especially Alfred Rosenberg's Reich Office for the Promotion of German Literature, which worked to undermine Goebbels' authority.

Lewy interlaces specific examples of books and authors with detailed descriptions of bureaucratic structure and conflict, keeping the narrative engaging. The author also captures the distance between the policymakers and those who implemented the policies. These structural problems are picked up in Part Three, which focuses on the practice of censorship. Going beyond the bureaucratic narrative, Lewy looks at the reasons for and special cases of book censorship, including the fate of Jewish books and Jewish presses, foreign books, and the complications of books mailed from abroad. The reasons given for a book being censored were often intentionally vague, for example, a book could be rejected on the basis of the quality of the writing. Once the war began in 1939, censors were kept busy trying to keep up with literature about the ever-changing occupied areas and enemy nations.

Finally, Part Four evaluates the phenomenon known as the “Inner Emigration,” which focuses on writers who stayed in Germany and kept their writings private, that is, they “wrote for the drawer” or found ways to subvert the regime through parables (p. 165). In this section, Lewy charts the trajectory of German writers such as Ricarda Huch, Werner Bergengruen, and Ernst Jünger, but avoids making blanket generalizations on the moral culpability of the inner emigration.

With this book, Lewy is breaking new ground as there are no other English language studies that manage a narrative on this topic. Lewy’s text confirms rather than transforms the interpretive framework that historians use when they approach the Third Reich, particularly emphasizing the importance of racial ideology and protecting the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community), the inefficacy of the polycratic state, the limits of control, and the ad-hoc nature of policy creation. Lewy is careful not to overstate the limitations of Nazi control because, despite the problems of administration, the Nazis banned over 5,000 titles and prevented many more books from ever going to print. Although Lewy covers literature, poetry, as well as academic and scientific works, he leaves research that has been done on Nazi censorship in the realm of art, radio, periodicals, and advertising unmentioned. Also, there are other issues that Lewy raises that are not fully addressed, giving fertile ground for future discussion. One such moment comes in the conclusion when Lewy considers censorship’s role in Germany’s “intellectual suicide,” which was the loss of credibility of German academics who acquiesced to the whims of the state (p. 196). If a generation of German researchers was subtly pushed into areas that were deemed safe by the state, then researchers could go further than Lewy in order to explore the issue of the decline of the humanities in Germany.

Lewy’s innovative narrative succeeds in its investigation of such a complex issue. This short book would be a welcome addition to graduate level (and possibly advanced undergraduate) seminars on intellectual life in Nazi Germany, particularly for classes that want to consider implementation as well as ideology. *Harmful and Undesirable: Book Censorship in Nazi Germany* will also inform researchers working on Nazi intellectual culture particularly the history of reading during the Third Reich.

Stuart Bailey, Ph.D. Candidate (History)
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas