

Wagner, Julia Susanne: *Nazi Hunters: The Struggle for the Punishment of Nazi Crimes. The Hunt for Adolf Eichmann, the Auschwitz Trial and the Search for Josef Mengele*. Duisburg: Wellem Verlag 2018. ISBN: 978-3-941820-22-7; VII, 300 S.

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For some, the term „Nazi hunters“ might conjure up images of clandestine operations in South American jungles and global searches for former Nazis who have evaded justice. The term is virtually synonymous with the „hunters“ themselves, particularly Holocaust survivors such as Simon Wiesenthal. „Nazi hunters“ are ostensibly the primary focus of this study by Julia Susanne Wagner. The author reminds us of the challenges these individuals faced in tracking down the world’s most heinous criminals in remote locations, with the added complexities of Cold War politics and division. As private citizens (and often themselves survivors of Nazi persecution), the „hunters“ proved themselves adept not only at locating the perpetrators in hiding, but also at identifying eyewitnesses for subsequent prosecutions – even with the added barrier of the „Iron Curtain“ across central Europe – as well as at urging governments to take appropriate action and at raising public awareness of both the criminals and their crimes.

In the introduction, Wagner states that the book examines this „interplay“ between „hunters“ and „larger structures“ such as governments and other organisations. Intriguingly, the author’s intended scope extends beyond these interactions, and promises to explore how the „hunters“ constructed identities that were „projected [...] into their self-representations“, and the „contrasting images of perpetrators they created and propagated“ (p. 3). Given this statement of intent, one might expect that Nazi hunters would be the central focus of this study. Its structure, however, betrays the book’s title and the anticipated subject matter. Its case studies are not about the Nazi hunters, but are three well-known examples in which, it

is argued, they played a significant role: the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann; the trial of Auschwitz personnel in Frankfurt am Main (1963–1965); and the (ultimately unsuccessful) hunt for Josef Mengele.

To this end, the Nazi hunters only appear within the context of their contributions to these three cases. This is one of the book’s primary weaknesses. The case studies are extraordinarily complex, and their investigations took place over many years. They involved various actors outside the category of „Nazi hunters“, each with his or her own personal and political agendas. While the case studies are famous, the book’s stated goal was not to examine the „hunt“ itself, but the „hunters“. Instead, the events and antecedents of the three examples receive the lion’s share of attention. With much ground to cover as a result, these events are excessively described rather than analysed. These descriptions are generally supported by detailed and extensive primary evidence, often in the form of archival documents and correspondence. Nazi hunters, however, are frequently – and noticeably – absent in much of the ensuing discussion. Additionally, the fundamental and circular argument that stems from this approach – one that spans and is repeated throughout the entire book – is that since these three cases contributed significantly to justice and public education and how Nazi hunters contributed to their pursuit and prosecution can be clearly demonstrated, history should recognise Nazi hunters’ claim to a vital stake in these results.

The significance of Eichmann’s capture, trial, and legacy is explored in considerable detail in part one and includes a detailed examination of reactions to the trial at national levels in West and East Germany, as well as Austria (pp. 77–82, 88–90). Nazi hunters appear only fleetingly and at the end of this story (p. 83) in a tacked-on and ineffective conclusion. The second case study, the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, is a confounding choice for a study of Nazi hunters. The conclusions reached – that Hermann Langbein helped locate, contact, and facilitate the travel of eyewitnesses to the trial from Eastern Europe (pp. 139–143, 166), kept pressuring authorities to investigate and arrest perpetrators and had a

prickly relationship with the Frankfurt prosecutors (p. 121), wrote an influential book about the trial (p. 177), gave testimony himself (p. 159), and almost single-handedly prevented the destruction of recorded testimony from the trial (pp. 177–178) – are not new, in any way contested, or particularly significant. That Langbein facilitated contact across the „Iron Curtain“ at the height of the Cold War is an unoriginal point that is repeatedly laboured. Astonishingly, the actual testimony Langbein gave at the trial is barely mentioned, let alone scrutinised in any level of detail. It is odd that, arguably, the book’s most original contribution to scholarship is its analysis of the Auschwitz trial as a propaganda weapon by East and West German political leaders, and in the courtroom itself (pp. 145–149). This narrative is supported by extensive primary and secondary sources, but it is of scant relevance to the topic of Nazi hunters.

Wagner struggles from the outset to convincingly demonstrate why this particular subject demands an extensive historical study. Although the book’s central concept – the „Nazi hunter“ – occupies its title and underpins its entire analytical framework, the author generally fails to grapple with its complexities. Wagner describes the term „Nazi hunter“ as both „inaccurate and limited“, although also able to convey „quite precisely“ (pp. 4–5) the activities of these individuals. There is no probing or further exploration of this blatant contradiction at any point in the book, however. Critically, it is not made plain who in this book should and should not be considered Nazi hunters or whether such a determination should account for the person’s actions, nominal position, or self-perceptions.

In addition to leaving these gaping structural and conceptual holes, the author abjectly fails to engage with the broader literature on this topic. Rather than establishing – clearly – how this study fits within and complements existing scholarship, the author spuriously attempts to claim that the book fills a scholarly „gap“ (p. 5). Frustratingly, the obvious questions as to how this „gap“ will be filled and whether it even needs to be filled – that is, whether there is an actual contribution to historical knowledge that demands to be made – remain unanswered. In no

small measure, this lack of clarity can be attributed to a literature review that merely and descriptively skims over previous scholarship without analysis and fails in its most basic of tasks: to justify the book we are about to read. For example, the controversial book *Hunting Evil* by journalist Guy Walters (2009) is introduced only in passing (pp. 5–6) and is dismissed as unscholarly, given its allegedly limited and uncritical uses of evidence. In *Hunting Evil*, Walters makes the astonishing claim that Simon Wiesenthal, the eponymous „Nazi hunter,“ who had been viewed by many to be a „secular saint“ was, as a matter of fact, „a liar, and a bad one at that.“¹ This seething criticism, however, is not recalled – let alone challenged – by Wagner. Indeed, for a 300-page book seemingly devoted to the subject, there is surprisingly little exploration of the potentially negative aspects of Nazi hunters’ activities, including their misrepresentation.

Moreover, Wagner openly admits that this book is based on a doctoral thesis submitted in 2010, and that subsequently published literature „could only be included selectively“ (p. 5, fn. 1). Those additions amount to a handful of works, the most recent of which was published in 2012. Thus, the author fails to adequately examine not only recent scholarship, but also everything published in this field over the past seven years.² Tellingly, even by the end of the book, its conclusions and its purpose still remain unclear.

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¹ Guy Walters, *Hunting Evil. How the Nazi War Criminals Escaped and the Hunt to Bring Them to Justice*, London 2009, pp. 116–117.

² This includes but is not limited to Andrew Nagorski, *The Nazi Hunters*, New York 2016; Daniel Stahl, *Nazi-Jagd. Su’damerikas Diktaturen und die Ahndung von NS-Verbrechen*, Göttingen 2013; Brigitte Halbmayr, *Zeitlebens konsequent. Hermann Langbein 1912–1995. Eine politische Biografie*, Vienna 2012; and Katharina Rauschenberger/Werner Renz (eds.), *Henry Ormond – Anwalt der Opfer. Plädoyers in NS-Prozessen*, Frankfurt am Main 2015.