

Letters to the Editor

To the editor:

The Fall 1990 edition of your journal carries an article by Michael Greenberg and Seymour Zenchelsky (“The Confrontation With Nazism at Rutgers”) that attacks a book I co-authored (*The Case of the Nazi Professor*) in an extremely unfair and distorted way. The book is about an academic freedom case at Rutgers in the 1930s, in which a young instructor of German named Lienhard Bergel charged that he had been fired because of his political (i.e., anti-Nazi) beliefs. I was the chairman of a committee of three Rutgers University historians, appointed by the Dean of the Faculty in 1985, to have another look at that dismissal.

1) Greenberg and Zenchelsky allege that my co-authors and I set out to exonerate Rutgers at all costs. In doing so, they claim, we ignored obvious truths, omitted crucial information, undermined academic freedom, and acted as “agents” of the University to cover up the harm done to Dr. Bergel. Furthermore, by quoting with remarkable selectivity from a long and thorough review of our book by Professor Richard Challener of Princeton University, they imply that impartial students of the case criticized our “keen partisanship” in this controversy.

In fact, the opposite is true. Our book has won wide praise for its research methods and its objectivity. Since Greenberg and Zenchelsky have seen fit to employ the dishonestly selective quotation, let me begin by quoting exactly what Professor Challener *did* say about our methods:

The book is superior in its research design. . . The authors unquestionably have exhausted the possible archival materials on their subject. Moreover, they do not. . . pull any punches. They honestly chronicle the errors of omission and commission—and the moral obtuseness—of important members of the Rutgers administration and of the trustee committee. The dirty linen is hung on the line for all to see. (*New Brunswick Home News*, January 29, 1989)

Indeed, Professor Challener concluded that our version of events was “strong” and “convincing.” And his review considered *all* parts of the Bergel case—including those which Greenberg and Zenchelsky have carefully chosen to ignore. As Professor Challener put it, our book also

demonstrates that Bergel was often his own worst enemy. He [Bergel] neglected his department and collegial responsibilities in an era when . . . these were major criteria for promotion; his behavior made it apparent that he thought himself the intellectual and social superior of all his colleagues; and, a telling flaw, he never raised the question of political bias against him until . . . almost two years after he had been notified his job would be ending.

Professor Challener's review (in the *New Brunswick Home News*) does not stand alone. Almost every New Jersey newspaper that followed the case closely published similar words. The list includes the *Newark Star-Ledger*, the *Asbury Park Press*, and the *Trenton Times*, which called our book "a gem of a mini-history."

2) Greenberg and Zenchelsky barely mention the fact that the Rutgers chapter of the American Association of University Professors took a personal interest in the reopening of the Bergel case. And the reason for their amnesia is obvious. After months of careful study, the AAUP *refused* to support the Greenberg-Zenchelsky position that Professor Bergel's academic freedom had been violated in the 1930s. In their article, Greenberg and Zenchelsky attempt to brush aside this setback by suggesting that my co-authors and I "lobbied" the AAUP into changing its position. What a pathetic explanation! Greenberg and Zenchelsky know only too well that the AAUP welcomed—and received—vigorous comments from all sides. Indeed, their own "lobbying" of the AAUP was strenuous enough to make the local newspaper. (*The Home News*, April 17, 1987) Sadly, Greenberg and Zenchelsky seem incapable of imputing honest motives to those who happen to disagree with them. In their minds, opposition equals conspiracy.

3) What is most distressing about this article, I believe, is the complete failure of Greenberg and Zenchelsky to honestly identify themselves as major players in the Bergel controversy. They *never* inform the reader that they were dedicated partisans to the Bergel cause. They never mention that the man who revived the Bergel case in 1985—a Rutgers alumnus named Alan Silver—relied heavily upon the research and analysis supplied by Greenberg and Zenchelsky. Silver routinely referred to the pair as "my personal advisors," and the local newspaper described Greenberg and Zenchelsky as "Silver's informal research team."

Greenberg and Zenchelsky write glowingly of Mr. Silver's pivotal role in reviving the Bergel case; their article even carries his photograph. But many people in the New Brunswick area remember another side to Alan Silver—a man who wrote hundreds of letters to our committee and to others, accusing us (and all who disagreed with him) of being racists, or "soft" on Nazism, or "lackeys" for the Rutgers administration. (Mr. Silver modestly described himself as the new Emile Zola, fighting an American Dreyfus case). It goes without saying that Greenberg and Zenchelsky had every right to embrace Mr. Silver and his cause. At issue, however, is whether they also had an obligation to truthfully and carefully inform your readers about their close personal relationship with Mr. Silver, and about their intense commitment to his cause.

I will add, in closing, that my co-authors and I worked very hard to get our facts straight and to weigh all the relevant factors of this troubling case as carefully—and objectively—as possible. That was our mission. We have done our best, I think, under very trying circumstances. We invite those interested in the controversy to read our book, *The Case of the Nazi Professor*, and to draw their own conclusions.

David M. Oshinsky
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To the editor:

Regrettably, David Oshinsky's letter fails to address the substantive issues of our Fall 1990 article ("The Confrontation with Nazism at Rutgers"). Instead of debating these issues, he attacks those who disagree with him. Similar attacks (against *Home News* reporter Peter Parisi, his paper, and others) prompted Professor Richard Challener to call the epilogue of the Oshinsky committee's book "unfortunate," saying it gives the "impression of wagons being circled . . . to defend Rutgers." (*New Brunswick Home News*, 29 Jan. 1989). But our role (and even that of Oshinsky's committee) is a secondary matter. *The subject of our article is the Bergel case*. And its central issue is: Why was Lienhard Bergel dismissed? On this question Oshinsky is silent.

1.) The thrust of our article is that, in the 1930s, an avidly pro-Nazi chairman created an entirely pro-Nazi German department by firing its single anti-Nazi faculty member on the pretext of "incompetence." We contend that when Rutgers officials found the incompetence charge insupportable they substituted administrative reasons for the firing (budget, enrollment, and a personnel rule). We demonstrate that the pro-Nazi chairman could not tolerate disagreement, and we reveal private memoranda and other evidence that contradict crucial testimony by Rutgers officials. But Oshinsky's letter does not mention our evidence.

2.) Oshinsky further avoids debate by citing notices of his committee's book by the local press. *But reviews cannot substitute for evidence*. Moreover, reviewers relying on the book would have been unaware that it omits the memoranda and other evidence that impeach crucial testimony in the case. Nor would they have known from the book that, in five days as a witness, the pro-Nazi chairman failed to mention the administrative reasons that are central to the Rutgers case. The reviewers also would have been unaware that the personnel rule essential to that case was not uniformly enforced at the time. And they would have held a severely distorted picture of the career of anti-Nazi instructor Lienhard Bergel.