

The Art of Omission



The art of omission is vital. Voltaire said that the way to be a bore is to say everything; the great Austrian writer Stefan Zweig cut two-thirds of the first draft of much of what he wrote. But sometimes omissions serve other than artistic purposes and amount to evasion, or worse.

The French newspaper of record (insofar as such a thing still exists), *Le Monde*, recently published an interview with the historian Pierre Birnbaum about his book on the rise of American anti-Semitism. America had largely escaped the curse of European anti-Semitism, said Birnbaum, with a few notable exceptions, such as the case of Leo Frank, the young Jewish businessman lynched in Georgia in 1915, and the *numerus clausus* operated by Ivy League universities against Jews until well into the 1950s. But with the rise of Trumpian populism and the proliferation of far-right groups such as the Proud Boys, open and active anti-Semitism has received a boost, he

said, such that synagogues now must be protected in ways that a few years ago would have been unthinkable.

Comparing the situation in the United States with that of France, Birnbaum has this to say: "In the United States as in France, radical populist mobilisations, with their antisemitic prejudices, are on the rise, while in France above all the consequences of conflicts in the Middle East provoke numerous fatal antisemitic attacks."

Is there not something conspicuously missing here? It is as if someone were to try to speak of anti-Semitism in Germany in the 1930s without mentioning Nazism or the Gulag in the Soviet Union without mentioning Communism.

The omission, symptomatic of ideological blindness or a misplaced delicacy, is even more remarkable because Birnbaum's son, Jean, a journalist for *Le Monde*, has published eloquent books on the refusal of the French Left to recognize the religious element in Islamist terrorism, notably *A Religious Silence: The Left in the Face of Jihadism* and *The Religion of the Weak: What Jihadism Says about Us*.

Generational disagreement takes more than one form.