

Henry Ford and the Jews: The Mass Production of Hate. *By Neil Baldwin*. New York: Public Affairs, 2001. 432 pp. Illustrations, references, index. Cloth, \$27.50. ISBN 1-891-62052-5.

Reviewed by Leonard Dinnerstein

A psychiatrist should have written a biography of Henry Ford. A bigoted and bizarre industrial genius, this man's hostility towards Jews presents a conundrum for trained historians and journalists. He always claimed that he was not anti-Semitic and did not dislike Jews. Nonetheless, beginning in May 1920, he published a series entitled "The International Jew" in his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, which ran for ninety consecutive weeks and intermittently thereafter. The articles did little more than paraphrase "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," a notorious Russian forgery prepared early in the twentieth century, which claimed that Jews were out to undermine Christian society and take over the world. Complicating the problem for those who wish to understand Ford is the lack of appropriate manuscript sources. As Neil Baldwin clearly explains, the Ford Archives have no files on the subject and do not know if they ever existed. Therefore Baldwin had to rely on secondary sources and oral interviews. He probed the memories of anyone he could find who had recollections of Ford's behavior in the 1920s. Despite prodigious efforts, Baldwin has unearthed little new information. There is a smattering of useful knowledge, colorful vignettes of different individuals, but nothing of additional value to people who are already familiar with the subject.

Baldwin covers Ford from his birth in southeastern Michigan on July 30, 1863, through his death in April 1947. As is well known, Ford pioneered in the mass production of automobiles in factories that turned out millions of cars affordable to most Americans. Because of these accomplishments he was lionized in life and after death, at home and abroad.

With such enormous success and adulation, how can one explain this capricious, cantankerous, and cranky industrialist's attitudes toward Jews? Baldwin makes a valiant effort, but his speculations are no different from those others have offered before him. Among the factors suggested were his early years in the fundamentalist area of southeastern Michigan and a childhood spent in a Christian society that scorned Jews. His sister recalled that he hated Wall Street bankers and referred to all of them as "Jews," regardless of their religious preferences, but his prejudices seemed more casual, like most of those around him, rather than visceral. The first public evidence, however, of his strong dislike of Jews did not occur until 1915, when he set out to end World War I. A militant pacifist his whole life, at the urging of Rosika Schwimmer, a Jew of Hungarian birth, he launched a "peace ship" and invited many distinguished individuals to hop

aboard and join in his peace-making efforts. The ship crossed the ocean, reached Norway, and accomplished nothing. Ford's venture became a laughing stock, and a number of people traced his anti-Semitic behavior to his venom toward Schwimmer for making him look foolish. Ford ran on the Democratic ticket for United States Senator from Michigan in 1918 and was defeated; he allegedly blamed his defeat on the influence of "Wall Street" and "a gang of Jews." The following year he purchased the *Dearborn Independent* and hoped to use the newspaper as a vehicle for his views. A consultant recommended that the newspaper could be spruced up by sensationalism. Ford focused his attention on the Jews; he and one of his editors thought an "educational" series on Jews might work well (p. 97).

Throughout much of the 1920s, the paper slandered the Jews, accusing them of sabotaging society, undermining its morals, and controlling the world's finances. Ford's understanding of the impact of the paper's contents seems naive, if not totally bewildering. In the summer of 1920, following his custom of several previous years, he had a new car delivered as a gift to Rabbi Leo Franklin, a neighbor down the street, who promptly send it back. Ford had absolutely no idea why Franklin refused the gift. "What's wrong, Dr. Franklin?" a perplexed Ford wrote to the rabbi. "Has something come between us?" (quoted on p. 133).

Then, in 1924, Ford's newspaper attacked Aaron Sapiro, a Jew who had been promoting farm cooperatives. Sapiro demanded a retraction that was not forthcoming. He then sued both Ford and the *Dearborn Independent* for slander, and the attacks on Jews ceased. But the suit never came to trial. When Ford claimed to have been in an accident, the trial was postponed. Then, after it was rescheduled, he sought to settle the suit out of court. Louis Marshall, president of the Jewish defense organization, the American Jewish Committee, composed an apology for Ford's signature, in which the industrialist promised to refrain from publicizing anti-Semitism in the future.

Why did Ford first continue his diatribes against the Jews in the 1920s and then abruptly declare that he had never meant to harm anyone? Again, many reasons are offered. Sales of Ford cars had been declining, and the Ford Motor Company was producing a new car whose prospects would be hindered by the continued bigotry. It is known that both his wife and son had urged him to cease the attacks on Jews, apparently to no avail. And it has also been suggested that Ford had a lady friend who gave birth to a son in 1923. While paternity was never established, he might have been afraid that this information would become public during a trial.

Baldwin's account covers most of this territory and more. Adolf Hitler kept a life-sized portrait of Henry Ford on his office wall in Munich in the early 1920s, and Baldwin devotes a chapter to Ford's influence upon the Nazi leader and German politics in the 1920s and 1930s. It

is doubtful, however, whether the course of history would have been any different had Hitler been unaware of Ford's existence.

Anti-Semitism was prevalent and growing in the United States between 1918 and 1945. Most Americans during this era wanted less contact with Jews, but there is no indication that Ford's attacks influenced immigration policy, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, or the establishment of quotas in higher education. Ford may have had some impact on Father Charles Coughlin's anti-Semitic views, but I would venture to say Catholic teachings about Jews were probably a much greater influence.

On the other hand, Ford may have affected the spread of anti-Semitism in the world by publishing "The International Jew." Editions of this series of articles, along with translated versions of "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," have been published and republished in at least thirty-seven other countries. They are still available today.

What has Baldwin contributed to our knowledge? Not much. Baldwin read Albert Lee's book, *Henry Ford and the Jews* (1980; yes, it has the same title) but decided that he would have to redo the topic. He was not satisfied with Lee's comment that William Cameron, the man who helped write "Mr. Ford's Own Page" in the *Dearborn Independent*, had little influence on Ford's views; he was not completely satisfied with Lee's summaries of the *Dearborn Independent*'s comments about Jews; and he could not believe Lee's remark that "[t]he nation's history is a blank sheet on the subject of Jew-baiting." Baldwin accomplished what he set out to do, but the significance of that accomplishment is another question. Yes, Lee was wrong about Jew-baiting, but he got the story of Ford and the Jews right in most other respects.

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