

Clemens Heni: Former Yale Antisemitism Scholar, One Year Later

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Just four years ago, Yale became one of a handful of universities worldwide to establish a center dedicated to the study of antisemitism. Led by Dr. Charles Small, the Yale Initiative for the Study of Antisemitism (YIISA) offers a public seminar series featuring renowned scholars and speakers from around the world, and has already hosted a major international conference on contemporary antisemitism. In September, YIISA welcomed its third group of graduate students and post-doctoral research fellows. These young scholars, both Jewish and non-Jewish, are selected from a worldwide pool of applicants and spend an academic year furthering their research in a field of study often unpopular among their peers.

The Ledger spoke to a member of the inaugural group of post-doctoral research fellows, to see how his experience at YIISA helped shape his current work, and how he sees the state of antisemitism in the world today.

Clemens Heni describes the pressures he faced as a student of antisemitism in his native Germany. Heni earned a BA in political science and cultural studies from the University of Tübingen. "I started studying National Socialism in my first semester in the early 1990s," he says. "While most of my colleagues and former friends were also remembering the Holocaust, they became anti-Zionists. This is the reason I lost many friends in 2000, during the second Intifada, and after 9/11. Anti-Americanism is extremely widespread among European and German elites and activists."

Heni, who has no Jewish background, was not put off. Antisemitism comprised a major part of his research during what was known in academic circles as the "Goldhagen Debate" in April 1996, when American political scientist Daniel Jonah Goldhagen published his influential doctoral dissertation on Hitler's willing executioners, later a book with the same title. In 1999, Heni wrote his master's thesis at the University of Bremen on Goldhagen and the role antisemitism played during the era of National Socialism and the Holocaust.

Antisemitism became the most important area of Heni's research, writing, and activism starting in 2000. That year, he and several friends wrote a brochure about left-wing anti-Zionism and antisemitism, and the 1976 Operation Entebbe hostage-rescue mission carried out by the Israeli Defense Forces.

"German left-wing terrorists were involved in the hijacking, and for the first time since Auschwitz, Germans with guns in their hands selected Jews from non-Jews!" Heni says. The repercussions were still felt in the 2000 Intifada, he says, due to widespread German support for the Palestinians.

Heni has been invited to many international conferences on antisemitism, beginning in 2002, when he presented a lecture on anti-Zionism and German political culture after 9/11, at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Heni was a Felix Posen Fellow of the Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 2003 and 2004.

Heni wrote his PhD thesis about right-wing extremism, anti-Americanism, and antisemitism in mainstream Germany from 1970 to 2005. He earned his PhD from the University of Innsbruck in Austria in 2006, graduating summa cum laude.

While at YIISA in 2008 and 2009, Heni worked on a research project entitled "Shoah Remembrance and New Antisemitism in Today's Germany." One result was the publication of his second book in 2009, "Antisemitism and Germany - Preliminary Studies of a 'Heartfelt' Relationship." His op-ed, "Antisemitism is not the same as Islamophobia," was published in The Jerusalem Post in Dec. 2008.

"A key element of my research is to focus on the specificity of antisemitism," he says. "Antisemitism harshly differs from 'normal' racism or prejudice. Antisemitism provides a whole worldview, an irrational ideology of hatred, aiming at Jews and the Jewish state of Israel. Antisemitism is the 'longest hatred,' in the words of Prof. Robert Wistrich, and you can find antisemitic conspiracy theories in countries like Japan."

After his fellowship at YIISA, Heni began work on a project examining German Middle Eastern studies and Islamism after 9/11, funded by the Middle East Forum Educational Fund in Philadelphia, directed by Dr. Daniel Pipes. The report will be published in 2011 in German, and is intended as part of a book on Middle Eastern studies marking the tenth anniversary of 9/11.

He has also been active on Shoah remembrance and antisemitism today in Europe, and in the Baltics, especially Latvia and Lithuania. He lectured at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic, and in Jerusalem, Berlin, Riga, and Kiev between October 2009 and May 2010, on the topic of Holocaust obfuscation, antisemitism, and the Prague Declaration, which attempts to obfuscate the Holocaust by equating it with Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe.

For the past year, Heni has served on the board of the first international scholarly journal for the study of antisemitism, JSA (Journal for the Study of Antisemitism), based in New Jersey. He contributed to the publication and spoke on Muslim antisemitism at the JSA's first annual conference in October in Manhattan.

He is currently focusing his scholarly research on two areas: Islamic antisemitism, anti-Zionism, the problematic equation of antisemitism and criticism of Islam - often framed as "Islamophobia - and hatred of Israel; and Holocaust remembrance, right-wing extremism in Europe, antisemitism, and Shoah obfuscation. He hopes to teach in the U.S.

"It is tremendously important to study antisemitism in our times and I try to strengthen scholarship on antisemitism in all its forms," Heni says. "I was and I am very irritated by German scholarship on antisemitism. Many German scholars are biased against Israel and would never speak out literally in favor of Israel. Several leading German scholars even compare antisemitism with criticism of Islam, obfuscating the history of antisemitism and the Holocaust."