

Why honour a war criminal?

Pinto-Duschinsky, Michael. **The Times** [London (UK)] 18 Nov 1995: 1.

▣ Abstract (summary)

An Oxford college's acceptance of cash in the name of a Nazi who used slave labourers is a mistake, says Michael Pinto-Duschinsky. When the Fellows of Balliol College, Oxford, agreed to accept the newly endowed Flick Professorship in European Thought, they were not informed that the chair bore the name of a war criminal sentenced at Nuremberg.

In Nazi Germany, Friedrich Flick headed the largest privately controlled enterprise for the production of iron, steel and armaments. He was jailed in 1947 by the International Military Tribunal for involvement in organisations connected (in the words of the sentence) with "enslavement and deportation of slave labour" and with "murders, brutalities, atrocities and other inhuman acts committed principally by the SS".

Flick was one of the most prominent contributors to the Circle of Friends of Himmler. Some of the funds they gave to Himmler were then used again according to testimony at Nuremberg to finance the "academic" project of transporting 112 Jews from Auschwitz to Natzweiler so that they could be killed and stored in jars for ethnographic research. Friedrich Flick denied during his trial any knowledge of such uses. He explained away his 1936 tour of Dachau concentration camp (with Heinrich Himmler himself acting as his guide) by saying that the conditions he witnessed were of people working "in large airy rooms" and with a canteen where "one could buy practically everything except alcohol" provided by a kitchen "like a kitchen in a large hotel with all installations". Professor Wistrich records in *Who's Who in Nazi Germany* that "Flick's enterprises bought and used 40,000 slave labourers, 80 per cent of whom died". Flick resolutely refused to admit his responsibility or to compensate the victims. Luckily for him, the economic needs of the Cold War led to his release in 1950 from Landsberg Prison and to his rehabilitation as one of West Germany's most prominent industrialists. In 1972, he died, unrepentant and worth more than \$1 billion. He had paid nothing to his victims. John McCloy, who as head of the American occupation authority in Germany had ordered Flick's release, appealed to Flick in vain to respond to the pleas of his victims.

▣ Full Text

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In 1986, when the Flick family sold out some of their interests to the Deutschebank, it was finally agreed to give token compensation of DM5 million (equivalent to about Pounds 50 per slave labourer). As *The Times* of January 9, 1986, reported: "An explanation is... that a new controversy about the lack of compensation threatened to damage the forthcoming flotation of shares... especially among American investors."

To the Oxford University fundraisers the prime purpose was the need to attract donations. Moreover, they accepted the case that the Second World War happened a long time ago and that the main need now was for reconciliation. The issues raised certainly do not involve an implication of "guilt by descent" against the member of the Flick family who endowed the chair in his family's name. Yet, questions arise.

First, though it is possible to have endless metaphysical discussions about whether the money contributed is the same as that obtained during the war, the links are uncomfortably strong. Certainly, Friedrich and his descendants increased their fortune during and after the war. Equally, there is little question that profits from expropriations of Jewish property and from slave labour during the Nazi period were a major basis of the postwar Flick empire.

Secondly, extensive research has so far failed to reveal any compensation to the victims by members of the Flick family apart from the DM5 million mentioned earlier. There is a strong case that any charitable donations from Friedrich Flick's heirs should be directed to the company's former slave labourers and their families.

Thirdly, against this background, is it fitting to append the name of Flick to a professorship at Oxford, especially a chair devoted to European thought? It seems extraordinary that the Fellows of Balliol were not informed. Some have made clear that they would have viewed the decision about accepting the chair differently had they known the background. Why, apparently, was there no meeting of the university's ethics committee, set up to discuss potentially controversial donations, before the contribution was accepted? At present the university has no code governing its fundraising practices, and there is no bar, for instance, against accepting money based on the proceeds of slavery or other grossly immoral practices. Moreover, the ethics committee meets in secret, and as a "self-standing body" is not required to report to the congregation of dons. Safeguards and more accountable procedures are needed, if only to protect the interests of donors and to safeguard fundraising.

The pressure on universities to raise private funds has led to practices reminiscent of the sales of titles by Lloyd George. Oxford, which has created a new pageantry for the "Chancellor's Court of Benefactors", is not alone in devising honours and ceremonies for its large contributors. Universities need to take no less care than political parties when they approach potential donors. There are still broader issues. One line of defence of the Flick chair has been that Oxford has become so heavily dependent on money from individuals and firms enriched by the Nazis that there would be a heavy price for taking a high moral tone. Certainly, the overlap between the list of contributors to the Circle of Friends of Himmler and to the Campaign for Oxford does not end with the name of Flick. Another Oxford

contributor was the late Hermann Abs, the financier, who was on the board that provided the money for the Buna Works at Auschwitz. When Oxford accepted his contribution, he was on the US list of prohibited immigrants.

The danger of accepting a higher percentage of funds from foreign sources, especially to pay for the teaching of modern history and politics, is that course content can be a form of propaganda. This has happened at some universities.

There is the question of the corporate responsibility of German enterprises. A study by the former Nuremberg prosecutor, Benjamin Ferencz, has documented their generally miserly record of compensation to their wartime victims. Though the 1940s may seem a long time ago, the slave labourers especially those surviving in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union are often living in penury, having never recovered. Is it not the primary task of the corporations that ran the slave camps to compensate the slaves rather than to sponsor symphony orchestras and universities?

Finally, is the cause of reconciliation best served by naming a professorship after a war criminal? It would be more fitting to commemorate a German such as Adam von Trott zu Solz, a Balliol graduate executed for his resistance to Hitler, or to establish a chair in the name of the victims of the Holocaust. The writer is the author of *British Political Finance 1830-1980*

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