



## **Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England**

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David Cesarani (1956–2015)

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## David Cesarani (1956–2015)

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The death of David Cesarani, an accomplished historian of British Jewry and the Holocaust as well as a public intellectual, has shocked and saddened friends and admirers of his skilful, diverse, and sophisticated body of work. David was a gifted critical thinker who radiated gentlemanly warmth. His endeavours are far too numerous to mention, but include original and revisionist books such as *Eichmann: His Life and Crimes* and *Arthur Koestler: The Homeless Mind* as well as his work as the Director of the Wiener Library, his advising of the British government on the establishment of the national Holocaust Memorial Day, his contributions to the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism, and his research professorship at Royal Holloway, University of London.

David rejected facile interpretations of history and contemporary life alike. Distinguishing his portrait of Adolf Eichmann from sensationalist popular accounts of the early postwar era and Hannah Arendt's pivotal and controversial *Eichmann in Jerusalem: The Banality of Evil*, he averred in his typically provocative and yet measured tone: "Eichmann may have been mythologized and misunderstood, but this does not mean he was a really decent fellow. He was a knowing and willing accomplice to genocide, a criminal whose acts offended all humanity. But it doesn't help us to grasp how he descended to this by starting with the impression that he was 'evil' or 'mad' or an unthinking 'robot', or even that he was naturally anti-semitic. The making of a *génocidaire* is far more complex and more disturbing than that" (*Eichmann: His Life and Crimes*, 6).

He took a similar approach to contemporary issues. In the "Report of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism" (2006), David contended that the phenomenon of contemporary antisemitism on the political left in Britain is especially difficult to identify and combat "because it no longer has any resemblance to classical Nazi-style Jew hatred, because it is masked by or blended inadvertently into anti-Zionism, and because it is often articulated in the language of human rights" (32). In the same report, while acknowledging that Muslim–Jewish relations in the United Kingdom are marred by Muslim ambivalence towards antisemitism, David noted pointedly that British Jews "are going to have to learn a lot more about Muslims in order not to see them simply as terrorists and a potential threat" (31).

A supporter of the “two-state solution” to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and a fervent and vocal opponent of public antisemitism, he went where he believed the evidence took him, regardless of whatever opprobrium or praise might come his way. As a public intellectual, David called for dialogue – painfully honest, truthful dialogue rooted in understanding of past conflicts and shunning of irrational fears.

David was a critical thinker par excellence. At the half-way point of my doctoral studies, I had the opportunity to experience first-hand some of the piercing questions one might expect at an oral interview the purpose of which was to advance a provisional student to full candidate status. David was one of the examiners at the interview. As he had been appointed recently as a research professor at Royal Holloway, I had not yet gotten the opportunity to get to know him. I feared the worst, of course. David’s questions were indeed piercing, but also respectful. He exuded the sort of understated British warmth that this American came to appreciate about him.

A few years later, I was in Evanston, Illinois, where I would participate in my first academic conference as a brand new Ph.D. The occasion was the biennial Lessons and Legacies conference. David’s tenure as a senior scholar at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and mine as a fellow had overlapped by a few months. David, Martin Dean, and I began chatting after we saw each other in the lobby of the hotel where conference participants were gathering. As I recall, it was David who chimed in that it was a beautiful day outside and that the three of us should go for a walk.

So, off we went – two senior British scholars and one newly minted American Ph.D. After we had walked for some time, David noticed that we were approaching an ice cream shop and wondered aloud about whether it was any good. It was my favourite ice cream chain. During my four years in England, I had almost always found British dairy products tastier than their American counterparts. So, it was with some inward trepidation that I recommended to David unreservedly, and with outward confidence, this American shop. I knew he would be sceptical. When David received his cool, creamy treat, he took a first bite as I looked on with anticipation. “This is good!” he exclaimed, his eyes as big as saucers. Whether it was a historical topic of great importance or a pot of ice cream, David always followed the evidence.

David possessed in immense measure both intellectual depth and graciousness. Despite his many accomplishments, he treated post-graduate students with great respect. We look forward, in bittersweet

anticipation, to the publication of his final work, *The Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933–1949*. May his memory be for a blessing.

Christopher Probst