

Op-Ed: USC's reckoning with its past needs to include how anti-Semitism was allowed to flourish there

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FULL TEXT

Last month, USC President Carol Folt announced that the school would remove former university President Rufus von KleinSmid's name from a campus building, citing his leadership role in the racist eugenics movement and his refusal to admit Japanese American students to the university after World War II. In explaining the decision, Folt cited Von KleinSmid's actions as being "at direct odds with USC's multicultural community and our mission of diversity and inclusion." What Folt did not mention was Von KleinSmid's ties to Nazism and anti-Semites.

Von KleinSmid led the university from 1921 until 1947, but it was during the 1930s and early 1940s that his tolerance of anti-Semitism was most evident. We know this in part through reports sent to Leon Lewis between 1933 and 1941 from a network of spies he recruited. Beginning in August 1933, Lewis, founding executive secretary of the Anti-Defamation League, coordinated a group of men and women who went undercover and joined every Nazi and fascist group in Los Angeles. Often rising to positions of leadership, they detailed the activities of local Nazis and their supporters, including faculty and students at USC.

According to their reports, Von KleinSmid tolerated and supported pro-Nazi faculty such as Erwin Mohme, the chairman of USC's German department. Mohme, was a frequent speaker at Nazi rallies in Hindenburg Park in La Crescenta, north of Los Angeles, according to Lewis' spies. He worked closely with the Friends of New Germany (predecessor of the German American Bund) and was awarded the Order of the Eagle from Los Angeles' German Consul Georg Gyssling in 1938, the only Southern Californian to receive such an honor. Yet Von KleinSmid kept him in his position as head of a department.

In the summer of 1933, Von KleinSmid was part of a delegation of American university presidents who visited Germany. According to documents I obtained from Germany while researching my book "Hitler in Los Angeles," the German Foreign Office was ordered to extend a "warm welcome" to USC's head, who had requested a personal meeting with Joseph Goebbels. The Germans believed Von KleinSmid was sympathetic to their cause even if he could not say so in public. Upon his return to the U.S. in September 1933, Von KleinSmid denounced German anti-Semitism; but he took no steps to stamp it out at USC.

The USC president also appeared on podiums with his fellow eugenics enthusiast Baron Ernst Ulrich von Buelow, who was, as I documented in my book, head of Nazi spy operations in Southern California. Von KleinSmid also, according to Lewis' spies, lent a hand to Von Buelow's protege, Kurt Bernhard, Prince Zur Lippe, a German undergraduate who enrolled at USC in 1933 claiming he wanted to learn more about the United States. In fact, Bernhard was a secret German agent who recruited Nazi supporters at USC. According to Lewis' spies, Bernhard bragged about his good relationship with Von KleinSmid, and while on campus founded a Nazi-sympathizing fraternity and wrote for an anti-Semitic student newspaper, the Owl. He also boasted of his ability to pass out Nazi propaganda with no blowback from university administrators. In 1938, Bernhard was finally forced to register with the U.S. government as a German foreign agent.

USC's Nomenclature Task Force is currently looking at Cromwell Field, which bears the name of former USC coach

and assistant Olympic track coach Dean Cromwell. During the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Cromwell prevented two Jewish runners, Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller, from competing, something Glickman and many others believed was done in order not to embarrass Hitler by having Jews on the winners' podium. After the Olympics, Cromwell spoke at a Nazi-organized German Day celebration at La Crescenta's Hindenburg Park, which was filled with swastika flags and storm troopers, according to a report in the American Jewish World. Anti-Nazi groups were outraged by his speech, in which he talked about how few U.S.-born people lived in New York and quipped, "Oh boy, if I could only be that handsome boy Adolf [Hitler] in New York for an hour."

Cromwell also marveled that while in Berlin he did not see "a single colored man, woman or children.... They have all chosen to leave for some reason or other, and I for one certainly don't object to that." Following the speech, the audience gave "three shouted Heil Hitlers, the Nazi salute, and a singing of the Horst Wessel song."

When newspaper reporters queried Von KleinSmid about the incident, noting how much it had disturbed the city's Jewish community, USC's leader dismissed reports of Cromwell's anti-Semitism and racism as "a tempest in a teapot." Cromwell's remarks, he insisted, were "only facetious." An unrepentant Cromwell responded that the "criticism comes from a group of people [New York Jews] that raised a big slush fund to keep our team out of the Olympics."

The USC faculty were silent, but not the Los Angeles community. On September 15, 1936, 1,500 people met at the Knickerbocker Hotel to demand that USC fire Cromwell for his "anti-Semitic and anti-Negro remarks." More than 100 telegrams were sent to Von KleinSmid. No action was taken.

Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, Von KleinSmid strongly supported the American war effort to defeat Germany. He built barracks for U.S. troops on campus, and in his 1942 commencement address he asked students to dedicate themselves "toward all that we are and must be after victory to the end that righteousness may again reign in the world." But it was too little and too late to undo the anti-Semitic damage he had allowed to happen at USC.

I first began hearing about Von KleinSmid when I left New York to take a job at USC in January 1979. I was told by older Angelenos that Jews didn't go to USC, they went to UCLA. I asked why, and was told about the legacy of Von KleinSmid and a belief that USC was not friendly to Jews. Things have changed dramatically since then, and now President Folt has taken steps to renounce the mistakes of the past. "This moment is our Call to Action," Folt wrote, "a call to confront anti-Blackness and systemic racism, and unite as a diverse, equal, and inclusive university. You have asked for actions, not rhetoric, and actions, now."

A name change is a step in the right direction, but what happens after those names are changed? What happens to that ugly history? This is a rare moment of reckoning at USC and across the nation to fully air all kinds of past prejudice, including anti-Semitism, and to excise the demons of our collective past. As we have learned from history, silence is never the answer.

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