Speaker examines Nazi propaganda success

BY IAN SQUIRES
STAFF WRITER

Duke University history professor Claudia Koonz is coming to Florida Atlantic University to explain Adolf Hitler’s 1930s public relations success in Germany and the corresponding and resultant rise in racism. Instead of the often simplistic traditional view of Nazism as a dictatorship akin to Stalin and other somewhat primitive totalitarian, she says people need to remember Germany had been a relatively sophisticated society at the time of Hitler’s rise.

“They had more radios than anyone in the modern world; they were a very advanced state,” Koonz said. “I’m saying, let’s bring Hitler and Nazis back into a western European context, and look at the way they marketed racism. How did they convince people that Jews were dangerous?”

She is going to try to explain how Germany, which was a relatively tolerant country before Hitler’s regime, buckled to his propaganda machine — talking about how ordinary German citizens were persuaded that Jews were dangerous and should be destroyed.

Koonz will be the fourth speaker of the biennial K. Frank and Rita Korf Lecture Series. At 3:30 p.m. Thursday at FAU’s S.E. Wimberly Library, she will deliver her lecture, “How Racism Became Respectable in Nazi Germany.”

Patricia Kollander, professor and interim chairwoman of the history department at FAU, selected Koonz because of her expertise in the history of Nazi Germany and because Koonz, author of “The Nazi Conscience,” can help keep people perpetually aware of the dangers of Nazism.

“...because we’re living with the legacy of Nazism to this day,” Kollander said. “I selected her because of her reputation as a scholar and also because she is a dynamic lecturer.”

Kollander is hoping the lecture will draw as many as 100 people.

Koonz said there’s always the potential danger of respectable countries turning to philosophies similar to Nazi Germany.

“Germans, in fact, were less racist than Poles, Russians, people to the east, and they became racist under the Nazis. The Nazis convinced people to turn against their neighbors,” Koonz said. “I’m going to use lots and lots of advertising and photographs to recreate the visual culture of racism in Nazi Germany.”

Koonz said it can be a fine line to walk, to examine and acknowledge the public-relations success of men like Hitler without sounding like a Nazi apologist.

“But, if we’re really going to understand how 65 million people could be swept up in the ideology of mass murder, then we have to look at the roots of the popularity,” she said.

Even today, she maintains, people must remain wary and watchful to be certain no power ever gains the prominence and position Nazi Germany had captured by World War II.

“We always have to be vigilant, to watch how certain categories of people are pushed off the moral map; we [are told we] don’t need to treat them right because they’re not human,” Koonz warned.