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Review

The Uses of Hell

By Eva Hoffman

The Holocaust in American Life

by Peter Novick

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1.

More than fifty years after it took place, the Holocaust seems to have a larger presence than ever in American life. News stories about long-delayed discoveries of Nazi crimes and lawsuits brought by victims and survivors are reported on the front pages of the daily papers. In several states, the teaching of this somber subject is mandated by legislation. Politicians enjoin us to preserve the memory of the tragedy and to heed its message. Directions for observance of Yom Hashoah, or Holocaust Remembrance Day, have been distributed throughout the American military establishment. Since its opening in 1993, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., has been the best-attended museum in US history. At the same time, the word "holocaust" is used to refer to such far-flung phenomena as environmental destruction, the availability of abortions, and the oppression of Cubans by Fidel Castro.

How has one of history's most terrible and complex catastrophes met this strange fate? How has it become both the object of official homage and a shorthand for atrocity? And what are the sources of the American fascination with this essentially European tragedy? These are some of the questions Peter Novick raises, and controversially answers, in his important new book, *The Holocaust in American Life*.

Of course, the Holocaust was an event of profound importance, whose nature demands our attention and response. But Novick is not the first commentator to be made uneasy by the distinctive preoccupation with that catastrophe in the US. Various observers have from time to time raised doubts about the authenticity of ritualized remembrance and the depth of putative identification with the victims of the Nazi extermination. Others have been disturbed by the disparities between the nature of the event and the kinds of interest it has aroused: the tourism and commercial activity that have grown up around concentration camps, the voyeurism discernible in the widespread popularity of Holocaust imagery, the simplification and vulgarization of Holocaust themes in numerous books and films. Recently, discussion of such questions has become more open, perhaps as the exploitation of Holocaust events has become more flagrant. Several recent books, such as *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz*

to *Schindler* by Tim Cole and *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, a collection of essays edited by Hilene Flanzbaum, subject various manifestations of the Holocaust cult to close scrutiny.

But in *The Holocaust in American Life*, Peter Novick has made the most sustained and challenging criticism yet published of these sensitive matters. His book belongs among the Holocaust studies that concern themselves not with the primary history of that event, but with the character and quality of later reactions to it. Novick's approach differs in two crucial ways from other inquiries into his subject: first, he emphasizes the political uses and implications of Holocaust memory in America; and second, he recognizes that this memory has by now accumulated its own, heretofore largely ignored, history.

His argument is easily summarized, although its elaboration is highly intricate. The widespread preoccupation with the Holocaust in America, he contends, has not been driven purely by moral considerations; nor has it been achieved by entirely spontaneous means. It has come about through a confluence of sociological needs and available cultural resources, as well as through tactical calculation. The legacy of the Holocaust has been treated as a political issue and deliberately used for political ends. Novick puts the onus for shaping and manipulating Holocaust memory mainly on Jewish organizations and leaders who, for obvious reasons, have been its main inheritors in the US.

This is a provocative premise and, on one level, *The Holocaust in American Life* is an unabashed polemic. Novick, professor emeritus of history at the University of Chicago, and formerly a member of its Committee on Jewish Studies, wants to ask whether the "centering" of the Holocaust in American consciousness is good for anyone, including, and especially, American Jews. He believes it is not. He is openly dismayed by the current forms and applications of Holocaust memory. He deplores the use of transcendent rhetoric about the Shoah, with its implicit sacralization of horror, and is offended by the frequent insistence on that event's uniqueness—a claim he finds both vacuous and tacitly condescending in its suggestion of superior historic suffering. He thinks the often-invoked "lessons of the Holocaust" are either spurious, banal, or ineffectual.

The Holocaust in American Life has already been criticized for the harshness and alleged "cynicism" of its tone, and it is indeed a tough-minded work, sharp, brusque, and sometimes nearly Swiftian in its acerbities. But the anger is a measure of Novick's involvement; his candor is part of the argument. Novick is clearly intent on cutting through the circumlocutions of habitual Holocaust discourse, on challenging what he sees as its obfuscations with uncompromising logic and saying out loud what is often intimated in private.

Moreover, he wants to place the current American attitudes to the Holocaust in historical perspective. Much of *The Holocaust in American Life* consists of a densely documented account of the shifts and changing phases in the American responses to the Holocaust throughout the postwar decades. In his reading of this history, Novick draws on the theories of the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, who in the 1920s coined the phrase "collective memory" for the processes of communal or tribal remembering. This kind of memory, Halbwachs observed, is, if not exactly false, then tendentiously falsifying. Unlike genuine historical consciousness, which strives to understand the multiple aspects of the past, collective memory "reduces events to mythic archetypes." It uses the resulting conceptions to

support a group's interests, mobilize its loyalties, or express supposedly eternal truths of collective identity. The Battle of Kosovo in 1389, to give a frequently mentioned example, has been a powerful "collective memory" for the Serbs, and has been used by them, quite apart from the actual circumstances, as the emblem of their martyrdom at Muslim hands.

The Holocaust in postwar America, Novick believes, has been repeatedly used as a similarly potent symbol. At each successive stage, the understanding of that enormous event has been shaped by contemporaneous values and ideological pressures, and at each point, the symbolism of the Holocaust has been used in the service of specific causes and interests. In Novick's historical account, this thesis is supported by voluminous and detailed evidence. In contrast to most studies of Holocaust memory, which concentrate on literature, art, survivors' testimonies, or Holocaust memorials,¹¹ Novick is interested in what could be called the politics of the Holocaust in everyday life—in official rhetoric, commonly held attitudes, and public opinion. When he looks at films or texts, he chooses those that are best known, like *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *Schindler's List*. But mostly, he draws his evidence from the press and television, from official statements, and, above all, from the records of American Jewish organizations, such as, among others, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the National Community Relations Advisory Council.

The information Novick has unearthed by examining such seemingly mundane materials throws an unexpected and often disturbing light on familiar aspects of recent history. This is particularly striking in the chapters called "The Postwar Years," which make up the most intriguing section of the book, and where Novick is doing something both subtle and dramatic in decoding the reasons for an absence.

The fact of that absence, the virtual silence that surrounded the Holocaust for some years after the war, has been often noted. The survivors who came to America were, for the most part, met with seeming indifference; and they became aware, they later said, that they had best keep their painful stories to themselves. The usual explanations for this apparent lack of sympathy have been psychological: American Jews, it has often been said, felt guilty about not having done more to save European Jews or simply having been spared their fate; or the knowledge of the extermination camps was so unbearable that it had to be suppressed or blanked out. Novick dismisses such interpretations as glib psychologizing and anachronism and brings in other, more concrete reasons for the silence.

He rightly stresses that the Holocaust was not at first seen as a distinct atrocity, crucially and qualitatively different from other horrors of the war. It took a long time for the disparate facts about the Shoah to come together in a coherent picture. The word "Holocaust" did not come into usage until the late 1950s. While the impact of the first news and images emerging in 1945 from the newly liberated concentration camps was enormous, the ghastly revelations were not initially understood as touching specifically on Jewish victims. Dwight Eisenhower was deeply shocked by what he saw; but he spoke of the camps as places where Germans "have placed political prisoners." The emaciated and anguished figures in Margaret Bourke-White's photographs of Buchenwald were perceived not as Jews—as they are today—but as victims of Nazi crimes.

As it happened, Novick points out, most of the surviving inmates of the camps freed by American troops in Germany were not Jewish. And even when information about Jewish victims began to become available, the extermination was understood to include other groups

as well. For example, Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jew who invented the term "genocide" and was the driving force behind the United Nations Convention on Genocide, spoke of the Nazi program as the

intent to wipe out the Poles, the Russians; to destroy demographically and culturally the French element in Alsace-Lorraine, the Slavonians in Carniola and Carinthia. They almost achieved their goal in exterminating the Jews and gypsies in Europe.

Such perceptions of what happened in part reflected the assimilationist, "family-of-man" ethos of the time. But Novick adds a more surprising reason for this universalizing approach. The muting of the Holocaust's Jewish aspects was actively encouraged by Jewish organizations that were made nervous by the postwar political climate. Soon after the war had ended, the Soviet Union was being reclassified from a heroic comrade in arms into a totalitarian menace; Germany was transformed from a despised enemy into a trustworthy democratic ally. As Novick shows through citation after citation, Jewish groups felt they had to accommodate the new rules of the international game and keep to themselves what they took to be politically incorrect views. In memoranda and various communiques, they instructed their members to stop saying "irrational" or hostile things about Germany, including the Nazi record of racial extermination. A staff memorandum of the American Jewish Committee regretted the fact that "for most Jews reasoning about Germany and Germans is still beclouded by strong emotion."

The cautiousness of mainstream Jewish organizations was reinforced by well-founded fears of a revived anti-Semitism in the US. They were particularly anxious to counter the perception of Jews as perpetual victims—not a popular image at the time—and to answer "the 'Jews are Communists' charge," which had been used in anti-Semitic propaganda before and during the war. The McCarthy hearings, in which many of the people accused were Jewish, did not help; and neither did several spy cases, including that of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. In leftist publications, such as the newspaper *PM*, the Holocaust was sometimes used to demonstrate the odiousness of right-wing regimes. But in the postwar atmosphere, the Holocaust became, as Novick puts it, "an awkward atrocity"; making too much of it might only bring unwelcome attention to specifically Jewish concerns. In drafting legislation on behalf of World War II refugees, American Jews played down the presence of Jewish DPs. "We have been spending thousands of dollars to try to get across the idea that displaced persons are not all Jews," one Jewish activist wrote. Jewish leaders later watched with chagrin as it became clear that the new laws were going to accommodate and even favor, as Novick writes, "Eastern European veterans of the Waffen-SS, pro-Nazi *Volksdeutsche*...and 'nominal' Nazi Party members."

When Novick comes to the late 1950s, he adds a new element to his analysis of absence. If people weren't talking about the Holocaust, he suggests, it was because by that time most of them weren't thinking about it. As the turbulence of the immediate postwar years subsided and the economic boom got under way, the prevailing mood of optimism made people reluctant to dwell on the horrors of the war. American Jews, like other ethnic groups, were eager to take advantage of the expanding opportunities and to become fully "American"—the universally desired and unambivalently embraced norm. Novick cites sociological surveys by Jewish authors and symposia conducted by Jewish publications in which the Holocaust was barely mentioned. In his essay on Jewish thought, published in *Commentary* in 1957 and

entitled "The Intellectual and Jewish Fate," Norman Podhoretz has nothing to say about the Holocaust.

It was only during the 1960s, in what Novick calls the "years of transition," that the Holocaust became an active presence and symbol. In his account, the mutation from absence to presence was accomplished partly through the relaxation of some of the rigid attitudes of the cold war, and partly through a number of critically important events, the first of which was the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem.

The controversies stimulated by the trial, and by Hannah Arendt's articles on it in *The New Yorker*, are well known, but less well remembered are the reactions to the news of Eichmann's capture, which ranged from satisfaction to legalistic disapproval and eruptions of raw anti-Semitism. An editorial in the Catholic newspaper *The Tablet* said,

All this Eichmann business... sadly reminds us that there are still some influential people around who—like Shylock of old—demand their pound of flesh.... They are a powerful group largely responsible for this country's unconditional surrender demands which prolonged the Second World War....

The National Review was annoyed at the prospect of being submitted to

the luridities.... The counting of corpses, and gas ovens, and kilos of gold wrenched out of dead men's teeth.... There is under way a studied attempt to cast suspicion upon Germany.... It is all there: bitterness, distrust, the refusal to forgive, the advancement of Communist aims.

That such views could appear in respectable publications makes more intelligible the earlier fears of anti-Semitism among Jewish organizations; and the continuing apprehensions of anti-Semitic reaction may have accounted, Novick suggests, for the ambivalence of some Jewish commentators toward an Israeli trial for Eichmann. The trial itself, however, was one of the events that subsequently made the public expression of crude anti-Semitism much less acceptable from then on. The worldwide coverage of the proceedings brought the facts of the Final Solution forcefully to public awareness and confirmed that Jews had been its primary targets and victims.

For American Jews, Novick argues, the trial marked the beginning of a new phase not only in their understanding of the Holocaust but also in its strategic uses as a powerful symbol. Novick's account of the 1960s and 1970s combines many themes and juxtaposes several perspectives on the triangular relationship between American Jewry, Israel, and the Holocaust. The link between Israel and the Holocaust had been made before, for the decision of the UN and the US to establish the new state was widely seen as having been abetted by widespread guilt over the destruction of the Jews. Novick discounts such impressionistic explanations; indeed he may reject them too readily. But during the Eichmann trial, the idea of Israel as the redemptive inheritor of the Shoah was consciously promoted by Israeli politicians, and soon became accepted among American Jews. (The history of Israel's response to the Holocaust is told most extensively in *The Seventh Million* by Tom Segev—a book whose omission from Novick's bibliography is curious, since Segev's account in many ways parallels his own.)

The subsequent series of crises in the Middle East gave this rhetorical linkage a more fervent ideological coloration. The first of these was the outbreak of the Six-Day War in 1967, when for a brief time Israel's existence seemed seriously threatened. Novick shows some sympathy for the anxieties aroused among American Jews by the exterminationist—if ineffectual—rhetoric of the Arab nations. The zeal of Zionists who were newly inspired by the Six-Day War proved in many cases to be short-lived; but in 1967, the possibility of another Holocaust seemed to many an imminent danger. Still, as Novick perceptively notes, if Mideast conflicts had stopped with Israel's quick victory in 1967, the symbolism of the Shoah might have taken a different turn, and become incorporated into a story of destruction and rebirth. As it was, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, whose outcome was much less certain, evoked the possibility of Jewish martyrdom. Now, Novick writes, the Holocaust began to be conceived as the quintessential emblem of Jewish vulnerability and the ever-present threat to Israel posed by the hostile world.

The vision of Israel as the fragile protective barrier against annihilation, Novick argues, was circulated in American Jewish life as an effective instrument of moral and political pressure. From the 1967 war onward, the motto "Never again" was routinely used in raising funds for Jewish causes or in lobbying for policies favorable to Israel. Among other examples, Novick cites Oscar Cohen of the Anti-Defamation League, who advised the president of the National Conference of Christians and Jews in 1980 that "unless there is some relationship between the Holocaust and the position of Jews today, I feel that we...gain very little from these Holocaust conferences, how wonderful though they might be. Specifically I would refer to Israel and the dangers which confront that nation as well as the support it must receive."

But as the baby-boom generation became adults in the 1970s, Novick suggests, the cause that began to seem most endangered was not the State of Israel but the state of American Jewish identity. Here, he differs from some other analysts who perceive support of Zionism as still the chief motive for the promotion of the Holocaust. He acknowledges that this linkage lingers in some quarters; but, in his view, the memory of the Holocaust began to be used mainly to address a different need in the American Jewish community. By the late 1970s, American Jews were probably the most successful minority group in America, educated, prosperous, accepted, and increasingly assimilated. But what did it mean to be Jewish in America when intermarriage was becoming a commonplace occurrence, and religious observance was steeply declining?

Increasingly, the Holocaust seemed to provide the only plausible answer, the only element in the Jewish-American world view large enough—and, as Novick points out, uncontroversial enough—to serve as a basis for collective self-definition. But Novick's point is that this response did not arise spontaneously. Jewish institutions, worried about the dilution of Jewish commitment, were aware of the Holocaust's value as "moral capital," as one leader put it, and its potential as a unifying "collective memory." Bertram Gold, head of the American Jewish Committee, echoed a generally accepted diagnosis when he suggested that if young American Jews did not feel sufficiently Jewish, it was because the Holocaust had not been "seared into the memory of a generation born after World War II." The donor who funded the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles said that it was "a sad fact that Israel and Jewish education and all the other familiar buzzwords no longer seem to rally Jews behind the community. The Holocaust, though, works every time."

2.

The Shoah, in other words, was drawn on in order to create a usable past. It required a further shift of cultural climate, however, to turn it into a jealously guarded and assertively promoted past. In tracing that shift, Novick carries his analysis into the recent phase of minority-group politics in the US, in which ethnicity is seen as the main characteristic of social identity, historical catastrophe serves as the warrant of group legitimacy, and "the status of victimhood" becomes proof of moral innocence and rectitude. Novick unsurprisingly sees this major change in attitudes as originating largely in the reactions to the Vietnam War and in the disaffection and fragmentation that have since become a part of American life.

However one interprets the causes of the altered mood, the Holocaust, in this new atmosphere, began to be construed not only as the central event of modern Jewish history but as an atrocity that almost transcends history, the standard against which evil must be measured. Of course, it can legitimately be understood as exactly that. But in the American context, as Novick persuasively demonstrates, the Shoah's enormity began to be proclaimed in a more proprietary spirit, in turn provoking what has been called "wound envy" from other groups. He describes instances of wrangling among ethnic groups over the relative size and implications of historical tragedies, which might be comic were they not so insensitive in bringing competitive rhetoric to bear on the subject of suffering. On the one hand, Jewish proponents of the Holocaust's "uniqueness" resolutely reject suggestions that other catastrophes deserve to be called genocide. Stephen T. Katz, a leading Holocaust scholar and later head of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, argued, for example, that the massacre of the Pequot Indians was not genocide because many Pequot survived and "were still listed as a separate group residing in Connecticut."

Other minorities, in clamoring for recognition of atrocious treatment, resort to more aggressive tactics. While Novick is most concerned about Jewish attempts to monopolize the vocabulary and symbolism of oppression (such as the word "ghetto"), he also cites, for example, the crudely invidious and contemptuous statements of Louis Farrakhan and his followers. ("The black holocaust," one of his aides said, "was a hundred times worse than the so-called Jew Holocaust.") But Novick also observes that the repeated, if tacit, claims to "most historically victimized" status by some members of the Jewish minority have also provoked resentment from far more reasonable ethnic spokesmen.

All of these unhappy issues were present in the protracted and often bitter debates leading up to the creation of the Holocaust Museum on Washington's Mall. The preparatory discussions, which took place over eleven years, have been painstakingly detailed in *Preserving Memory*, by Edward T. Linenthal.²⁴ Novick summarizes the conflicts over the purposes of the museum, which largely turned on questions of uniqueness as opposed to inclusiveness. Should ethnic groups other than Jews—including, for example, some three million Poles killed by the Nazis—be classified as the Holocaust's victims, and should the number of people exterminated therefore be stated as six or (rather arbitrarily) eleven million? Does the massacre of the Armenians by the Turks qualify as a genuine genocide? Would mentioning that massacre in the museum's literature dilute the Holocaust's exceptional status?

Certainly the museum that has emerged is an impressive and valuable educational and commemorative institution, but the rationales given for its being installed in the heart of the capital, which suggest that the museum affirms American values by graphically showing their violation, tend to sound strained. Novick follows Edward Linenthal in believing that

President Carter initially agreed to give his approval to the museum out of a need to regain the loyalty of Jewish voters and contributors who had become alienated by his Middle Eastern policies.

Indeed, for Novick, the stakes in thinking about the role of the Holocaust in American life are primarily political. The fixation on the Shoah, in his view, is a symptom and contributing cause to the unfortunate "inward and rightward turn" he perceives within American Jewry. He thinks that the concentration on Holocaust observance and spending on Holocaust-associated causes detracts from Jewish involvement with other groups and issues, such as helping less advantaged Americans. He finds it unfortunate that Holocaust symbolism is used to support conservative Israeli policies in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Novick also believes that emphasizing the Holocaust serves to deflect attention and a sense of responsibility from distinctively American historical transgressions, such as slavery and the massacres of the American Indians.

He is particularly incisive in examining the putative "lessons of the Holocaust." He rightly observes that the Holocaust presented circumstances so stark and extreme that to use it as a prototype for other situations is either impossible or perversely comforting. The nature of evil in the Holocaust is reassuringly easy to discern, and other forms of evil may pale by comparison. In any case, he believes that whatever lessons the Holocaust may actually offer, they have not as yet been heeded in any meaningful way. Analogies to the Holocaust have called attention to the urgency of the situation in Bosnia, but they failed to prompt any decisions or action. In the case of Rwanda, "just to be on the safe side," Novick says, the Clinton administration hastened to declare that the slaughter taking place there was not a genocide.

Novick makes his case lucidly and convincingly. The documents of Jewish organizations he cites show all too clearly how much expediency there has been in the management of Holocaust memory. While, in institutional politics, this could be seen as nothing worse than business as usual, it is distressing and startling to find the language of opportunism and narrow interests used about the Holocaust, often by the very leaders who would urge us to respect that event's profound meanings. And it is hard not to share some of Novick's impatience with the current climate of public discussion about the Holocaust. Aside from everything else, the vocabulary stressing that the Holocaust is both incomparable and incomprehensible has by now become, through sheer reiteration, an encouragement to the sort of automatic response that is itself a kind of forgetting.

Still, Novick's concentration on the political aspects of his vast subject neglects or leaves out some of its significant dimensions. *The Holocaust in American Life* does not try to convey what it would mean to have a genuine understanding of the Holocaust, or what kind of reflectiveness it could promote. The extremity of the Holocaust, aside from being a pretext for complacency, has also forced reconsideration of fundamental questions—the nature of collective sadism, the mechanisms of bureaucracy, the workings of prejudice. Despite Novick's justified suspicion of popularized psychology, psychoanalytic investigations of the Holocaust's after-effects have resulted in penetrating insights into the nature of suffering and how it can be transmitted. One could mention a great number of works, beginning with Primo Levi's writings, that, by grappling with the infernal universe of the Holocaust, have altered our perceptions of our own world.¹² Such approaches and texts are not themselves part of the mass phenomena in which Novick is mainly interested; but he neglects, or

underestimates, the effects of serious postwar research, scholarship, and interpretation on the general understanding of the Shoah.

But also, Novick may be writing too much from within an American perspective to take sufficient account of that perspective's limitations in understanding the Holocaust itself. This is particularly noticeable in the early chapters on the war years, where he considers the American involvement in events before and during the Holocaust. Currently, the most widely accepted view—summarized in the title of David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews*¹⁴—is that the Allies, including America and American Jews, were guilty of almost culpable passivity in the face of Hitler's exterminationist policy. Novick, with his emphasis on political conflicts and pressures, is not shocked or surprised that American policy on Jewish issues during the war was strictly subordinated to pragmatic considerations at home. While many historians blame the Roosevelt administration for failing to admit more Jewish refugees in the 1930s, Novick points out that the Depression and rising unemployment made it very hard to do so. At the beginning of the war, it was equally understandable, in his view, for Jewish organizations to refrain from pressing for relaxation of refugee quotas, which might have led to an anti-Semitic backlash.

Novick rightly reminds us, too, that World War II was an immense drama and that the initial news of Jews being murdered in remote parts of Eastern Europe could easily get lost amid more visible disasters. In fact, news of such horrors was consistently relegated to the back pages of newspapers. But even as he considers the later, most anguishing period of the Final Solution, Novick concludes that from the realistic point of view, nothing more could have been done for European Jews than was actually done—in effect, nothing. He dismisses as irresponsible various retrospective solutions for rescue, particularly the idea of destroying railway lines along which transport trains traveled, or bombing the murder installations of Auschwitz. Neither scheme, he believes, had any reasonable chance of success.

Still, his conclusion that whatever happened was inevitable is less than persuasive. The story he tells is one in which the Allies, in the face of an escalating catastrophe, took minimal action and followed the safest course at every point. We can't know what would have happened if at least some risks had been taken, if fears of provoking American anti-Semitism had not prevented the Jewish community from pressuring the government with greater force, if the resources of that community had been marshaled more intensely toward rescue, if there had been some Americans comparable to Raoul Wallenberg. The Jewish National Committee in underground Poland kept sending out desperate messages condemning the inaction of Jewish leaders in free countries. But for those leaders, and for American and Allied politicians, the sense of a desperately urgent crisis was missing; and it is surely possible to deplore their failure of imagination and courage.

The distance that separated Americans from the events in Europe during the war may be the simple but determining factor in the American responses to the Holocaust since then, and may account for the various reductionist views of that event, and for the excesses of both sanctification and trivialization today. Indeed, sanctification can be the shortest route to trivialization. Religious cults are notorious for producing kitsch: holy relics, mass pilgrimages, sacred memorabilia. The adulation of the survivor as a "secular saint," in Novick's phrase, the cookbook of recipes left by women in-mates of the Terezin concentration camp, the recent embedding of railway spikes from Treblinka in lucite—these are some instances of mass Holocaust worship. Novick gives a telling account of the annual

"March of the Living," in which thousands of American Jewish high school students are taken on tours of concentration camps in Poland, followed by a visit to Israel, where they celebrate Independence Day. While in Poland, the students are accompanied by armed guards and told they are in constant danger from the surrounding population and that the Maidanek gas chambers could within a few hours be put into operation once again.

Novick is particularly offended by the blatant propaganda implicit in the sequence of the tour, "from Holocaust to Redemption." But representatives of the Jewish community in Poland, no less than non-Jewish Poles, have been distressed by the paranoid atmosphere created by the marches, by the hostility of the young visitors to the local population, and by the reductive account of the Polish-Jewish past. Indeed, the marches have been perceived as part of a highly ironic phenomenon: the exportation of the "Americanized" version of the Holocaust back to Europe.

3.

To have been touched by the Holocaust, to study it, to enter into its world, is to find yourself in a profoundly disturbing as well as profoundly depressing moral terrain. There was no satisfactory ethical struggle within the Holocaust—that is indeed one of the problems in representing it in literature or art. However one understands the motivations of the Nazis in carrying out the Holocaust, their perverted ideology, technological prowess, or their sheer sadism, the victims of the Final Solution did not have a chance to die for a cause or for a belief. They died in innocence; and there is infinite sorrow but no moral superiority to be derived from their annihilation.

To use that event, with its terrible human anguish, to support ideological positions or moral posturing of any kind is surely an abuse of memory; to use the destruction of European Jews as the foundation of American Jewish collective identity seems a fundamentally contradictory conception. Certainly, the facts of the Holocaust need to be acknowledged and commemorated and understood historically; those who perished must be lamented and mourned. But the distance between ourselves and that event needs to be taken account of in the ways we remember it. The gulf cannot be closed by insistence on "identification." That is indeed what is so dubious about the ethos of historical victimization, and about any group's attempts to claim ownership of "our" catastrophes and to appropriate past suffering for moral gratification in the present. Such attitudes bear not only on politics but on what could be called the moral tone of memory. They matter for the sake of the past as much as of the present. Memory not accompanied by knowledge and thought can too easily become the vehicle of sentimental subjectivism—or of a collective narcissism.

Novick, from his own political perspective, is above all concerned about the uses of the Holocaust to support what he sees as the wrong ideological tendencies in American politics. Indeed, *The Holocaust in American Life* is so concerned with the manipulations of a symbol that the reader may forget that the symbol has ties to the thing itself. This accurately reflects what has too often happened in the American transformation of the Holocaust into an issue and a metaphor. But Novick's analysis would have been strengthened if he had addressed the underlying incongruities of such a transformation and if he had more to say about the kind of thinking that can and should be derived from the Holocaust.

Still, Novick's deconstruction of the American politics of memory—its distortions and hidden uses—is daring, often brilliant, and powerfully illuminating. Insofar as the Holocaust

has become central to our obsession with memory, his study should have wider reverberations. Certainly, our comprehension of the Holocaust's history in America will never be the same after his book. By raising much-needed and long overdue questions so courageously, by posing his arguments so forthrightly, Novick has helped to relaunch the public conversation about the Shoah on a more candid basis, and to start disentangling the easy pieties of memory from history's difficult and complex truths.

Notes

- ❏ See James Young's *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (Yale University Press, 1993), a valuable study of Holocaust memorials.
 - ❏ *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (Viking, 1995).
 - ❏ Among particularly interesting examples, I would mention Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 1989) and *Reading the Holocaust* by Inga Clendinnen (Cambridge University Press, 1999).
 - ❏ 1984; New Press, 1998.
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Letters

June 15, 2000: Peter Novick, [The Uses of Hell': An Exchange](#) 

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