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Exchange

The Uses of Hell': An Exchange

By Peter Novick, Steven T. Katz, Tad Szulc, Reply by Eva Hoffman

In response to The Uses of Hell' (March 9, 2000)

To the Editors:

I was, of course, pleased that Eva Hoffman thought so well of my *The Holocaust in American Life* [NYR, March 9], and I was flattered by the many generous things she said about it. It is therefore with some reluctance that I write to say that she has, in important respects, misunderstood (and, as a result, unintentionally misrepresented) the book's argument.

In her review, Ms. Hoffman, citing examples drawn from my book, repeatedly deplores the fact that collective memory of the Holocaust has been used to support "ideological positions" or "narrow interests"; that it has been "drawn on in order to create a usable past." Above all, and repeatedly, she is outraged by the "politicization" of Holocaust memory, which, for her, is "an abuse of memory." She makes an invidious comparison between "authentic" or "genuine" collective memory of the crime, and a memory "shaped by contemporaneous values and ideological pressures." Accordingly, she is harshly critical of those—American Jewish leaders in particular—who have "expediently" used the memory of the Holocaust to further this or that communal purpose.

In her review Ms. Hoffman mistakenly assumes (and asserts) that I share this view: that in my book I, like her, find all this a disreputable "misuse" of collective memory of the Holocaust; that, like her, I deplore the use of Holocaust memory to further current agendas, particularly those which can be designated "political." Nothing could be further from the truth. At the beginning of the book I explain that I understand collective memories—in particular those which are centered in collective consciousness and achieve iconic status—to be *always and inevitably* grounded in current concerns, current self-understandings, and current perceived needs. I am neither surprised nor offended that this is true of Holocaust memory.

Ms. Hoffman's objection to the invocation of the Holocaust for this or that purpose is thus "principled"—such invocation is, for her, *inherently* wrong. While I personally favor some such purposes and oppose others (for reasons having nothing to do with the Holocaust), I find nothing outrageous about invoking the Holocaust for causes which are not mine. Thus, while myself conventionally "pro-choice," I make clear in the book that I find nothing untoward about those who insist on the humanity of the fetus finding an analogy between

abortion and the Nazi slogan "life unworthy of life." Apart from a handful of nakedly self-aggrandizing examples, which I mention in passing, I repeatedly underline the sincerity and good faith of those who invoke the Holocaust for this or that cause. To be sure, in making analogies to the Holocaust, those doing so were often led to excess: for example, exaggerating Israel's peril or American anti-Semitism. As I wrote in the book, "Once one starts using imagery from the Holocaust—that most extreme of events—it becomes impossible to say anything moderate, balanced, or nuanced; the very language carries you along to hyperbole." In the same spirit, I express skepticism about the value of holding up the Holocaust as the benchmark of "absolute evil." I try to show in the book how this has been an invitation to a grading process, in which other horrific events (inevitably) wind up as "95% evil," "75% evil," or get an even lower grade: "evil, but less than *absolute* evil"; merely "*impure* badness." In short, in all of this, my objections are not, like Ms. Hoffman's, "principled," but "pragmatic."

The same pragmatic (or "consequentialist") considerations govern my judgments on the role of the Holocaust in both American Jewish and in general American consciousness.

In the case of Jews, I observe that memories, once deployed for this or that immediate purpose, can become an enduring force for self-definition, telling us not just about the past, but about who we are now and what we can expect in the future. Rabbi Irving Greenberg, recently named head of the council which oversees the Washington Holocaust Museum, has argued that while one may *hope* that America will remain hospitable to Jews, it is *likely* that it will not, and awareness of the Holocaust would help prepare Jews for the day when they had to flee. To the extent that the Holocaust has become the "emblematic memory" among American Jews it seems to me to have had the consequence of promoting this sort of consciousness. And it is this *consequence* (among others) which I deplore.

A final point on the "politicization" of Holocaust memory, about which Ms. Hoffman suggests that I share her objection, and which she contrasts with "genuine" or "authentic" memory. It is often maintained that in the US the Holocaust has become a significant memory for gentiles as well as for Jews. In my book I dispute this. I argue that in countries where the Holocaust *has* become an important collective memory, this is because—as with other significant memories in history—it has been an arena of political contestation, in which competing narratives about central symbols in the collective past, and the collectivity's relationship to that past, are disputed and negotiated in the interest of redefining the collective present. I offer, among other examples, France, where the Holocaust has become entangled in later struggles over racism and xenophobia; Poland, where it remains a touchstone of cultural conflict between the forces of clerical reaction and of liberal modernism. In the United States, I suggest, memory of the Holocaust is so banal, so inconsequential—not a genuine collective memory at all—precisely because it is so uncontroversial, so unrelated to real divisions in American society, so *apolitical*.

Peter Novick

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To the Editors:

In her otherwise excellent and thoughtful review of Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life*, Eva Hoffman commits an injustice—I am sure, inadvertently—to the American Jewry in terms of saving European Jews from the Holocaust. She writes that more Jews might have been rescued "if there had been some Americans comparable to Raoul Wallenberg," but the fact is that the US government had secretly authorized the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, based in New York, to provide funds to Wallenberg, until the last moment, to "buy" and save Jews. The Wallenberg operation was entirely funded by the Joint (with the money delivered by its agents in Budapest), and this brave Swedish diplomat was thus able to protect some 50,000 Jews in Hungary. Joint's funding obviously does not detract from Wallenberg's valor and heroism, but this is a matter of history. May I add that this story is told in detail in my book, *The Secret Alliance*, published by FSG in 1991.

Tad Szulc

Washington, D.C.

To the Editors:

In her review of Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* Eva Hoffman asserts that "Stephen [*sic*] T. Katz, a leading Holocaust scholar, . . . argued, for example, that the massacre of the Pequot Indians was not genocide because many Pequots survived and 'were still listed as a separate group residing in Connecticut.'" This statement misrepresents my position. That is, while I do not believe the "massacre" of the Pequot in the early seventeenth century was a case of "genocide," I hold this position as a result of careful reflection on (a) the meaning of "genocide"; and (b) a thorough study of the seventeenth-century evidence relevant to this issue. I set out my arguments in support of this conclusion in an essay entitled "The Pequot War Reconsidered" that originally appeared in the *New England Quarterly* issue of June 1991. There I reexamined the Pequot War of 1637, and its recent interpretations by a number of scholars. The entire essay dealt with the original seventeenth-century evidence and its current interpretations and was the basis for my conclusion that the behavior of the Puritans and their Indian allies, while morally reprehensible, did not constitute, in the technical sense, "genocide" (a term very loosely used in many situations today). Genocide is a specific legal term that defines a particular type of action. The United Nations Treaty on Genocide, which, though problematic for a variety of reasons, is the most widely accepted definition, describes it as an act that involves "the intent . . . to destroy a group." Given the available seventeenth-century evidence I believe proof of such "intent" is absent, particularly in light of the actions of the Puritans and their Indian allies during and after the end of hostilities in 1637. What I therefore wrote in a conclusion to my 1991 essay, portions of which I now quote, and which I trust the *NYR* will print so as not to make it possible to misrepresent my views once again, was:

From our point of view, it is easy to sympathize with the Pequots and to condemn the colonists' actions, but the scope of our condemnation must be measured against the facts. After the Treaty of Hartford was signed, Pequots were not physically harmed. Indeed, in 1640 the Connecticut leadership "declared their dislike of such as would have the Indians rooted out," that is, murdered. Before the Pequots capitulated, many of their tribe had died, but the number killed probably totaled less than half the entire tribe. Sherburne Cook's estimate is even lower: "If the initial population [of Pequots] was 3,000 and 750

were killed, the battle loss was twenty-five percent of the tribe."

While many Pequots were absorbed by other tribes—it is estimated that Uncas's Mohegan tribe, for example, received hundreds—evidence clearly indicates that soon after the conclusion of the war, the Pequot began to regroup as a tribe. By 1650 four special towns were created to accommodate them, each ruled by a Pequot governor, and in 1667 Connecticut established permanent reservations for the tribe, which by 1675 numbered approximately 1,500-2,000 members. That year, no more than two generations after the Pequot War had ended, the Pequots allied with the colonists to fight King Philip's War. As recently as the 1960s, Pequots were still listed as a separate group residing in Connecticut. Such factors suggest that while the British could certainly have been less thorough, less severe, less deadly in prosecuting their campaign against the Pequots, the campaign they actually did carry out, for all its vehemence, was not, either in intent or execution, genocidal.

This revision of the revisionists is not meant to deny the larger truth that the conquest of the New World entailed the greatest demographic tragedy in history. The wrongs done to the Native Americans, the suffering they experienced, the manifest evil involved in the colonial enterprise is in no way to be deflected or minimized. However, this sorry tale of despoliation and depopulation needs to be chronicled aright, with an appropriate sense of the actuality of seventeenth-century colonial existence.

Steven T. Katz

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Eva Hoffman replies:

I am of course sorry to know that Mr. Novick, whose work I found important and valuable, feels that I have misrepresented his book in essential ways. However, much as I have tried to decipher his objections to my review, I confess that I continue to find his letter puzzling.

Mr. Novick charges me with two kinds of misunderstanding. On one level, he suggests that I posit some notion of an "authentic" or "genuine" memory, thus misconstruing the very conception of collective memory he puts forth in his book. Not so. Nowhere do I speak about "authentic" or "genuine" memory. Instead, I differentiate between "collective memory" and "genuine historical consciousness"—as does Novick himself when he writes, "Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective.... Historical consciousness, by its nature, focuses on the *historicity* of events..." (p. 4). I am not so naive as to believe in a definitive "authentic" memory of past events—especially those as immense as the Holocaust; but I was following Mr. Novick in making what I think is an important distinction between two modes of understanding the past.

The other kind of misunderstanding Mr. Novick ascribes to me has to do with questions of

attitude toward and evaluation of collective memory. Here, several issues have to be disentangled. First, I readily agree with Mr. Novick in one respect. It is true that while, in his book, he seems to be mostly concerned about the uses of Holocaust memory for the "wrong" causes (usually ones that could be described as "conservative"), I am more troubled by the conversion of Holocaust memory into political currency, *tout court*. I think the Holocaust, of all subjects and pasts, should be treated with utmost sensitivity, effort at understanding, and respect for its manifold meanings; and I therefore feel disturbed when those meanings are deliberately subordinated to the necessarily reductive (and often inappropriate) categories of immediate politics, or to self-serving sentiments. But while I do depart from Mr. Novick's position in this, I make this difference of views clear in my review. Indeed, my main criticism of Mr. Novick's book is that he does not address "the underlying incongruities of... a transformation" of the Holocaust "into an issue and a metaphor." When I speak about the abuse of memory attendant on such transformation, I do so in my own voice, and not on his behalf.

However, when Mr. Novick attributes all the sense of "outrage" and "offense" to me, I think he is being disingenuous. While he may take the politicization of memory for granted, he hardly refrains from strong judgments about its specific manifestations. I quote from his introduction, which establishes the framework of the book: "The assertion that the Holocaust is unique—like the claim that it singularly incomprehensible or unrepresentable—is, in practice, deeply offensive" (p. 9). And, "The greatest victory is to wring an acknowledgment of superior victimization from another contender.... Apart from being our ticket of admission to this sordid game, American Jewish centering of the Holocaust has had other practical consequences" (pp. 9-10).

It is true that Mr. Novick reserves his most forthright expressions of disapproval for current, or recent, applications of Holocaust memory—and I indicate this in my review. But even in his historical narrative, where he largely refrains from explicit judgments, his tone—or choice of materials—often betrays implicit ones. Many of his illustrations and citations show how the successive constructions of Holocaust memory were arrived at through various suppressions or exaggerations of the past; and that the motives of the actors involved in promoting these constructions were often at odds with the high sentiments habitually expressed about the Holocaust. It is possible that I was more dismayed by some of the implications of these materials than Mr. Novick himself. It is hard, however, not to discern at least a measure of critical irony in sentences like the following (to take random examples from the many available): "From the 1970s on, the growth sector in the Jewish organizational world consisted of old and new '*schrei gevalt*' agencies.... The Anti-Defamation League, together with the enormously successful Simon Wiesenthal Center, bombarded Jews with mailings announcing new anti-Semitic threats" (p. 176). Or (in an analysis of reasons for the increasing foregrounding of Holocaust memory), "The Holocaust looked like the one item in stock with consumer appeal" (p. 187).

In his letter, Mr. Novick asserts that his criteria of judgment in all such cases are "pragmatic," rather than "principled." Fair enough, in his own terms (even if I think the terms are insufficient to the occasion). I must admit, however, that the force of the examples he offers to illustrate this distinction eludes me. If Mr. Novick finds "nothing untoward about those who insist on the humanity of the fetus finding an analogy between abortion and the Nazi slogan 'life unworthy of life,'" then I can only express my surprise. But I am not sure that in his book he eschews all appraisal. Although it is true that in his survey of Holocaust analogies he argues that the aptness of all such analogies is in the eye of the beholder (or the

analogy-maker), in a passage summarizing this section he nevertheless writes, "If the Holocaust shows us where technology or modernity or patriarchy lead, or if abortion is really like the Holocaust, surely we have to think more seriously about these questions than we have up to now" (p. 244).

In his other two examples, Mr. Novick seems to point to the difference not so much between the intrinsic processes of collective memory (the "principled" criterion) and its specific uses (the "pragmatic" one), as between specific uses and their effects. But the latter distinction seems much more difficult to draw. Where, in his examples, does cause end and consequence begin? After all, collective memory is already selective, dynamic, and oriented toward certain aims. As Mr. Novick notes, once you use the Holocaust as a benchmark of evil, a grading process for other atrocities follows; once you use the Holocaust as an emblematic memory, a certain kind of self-definition is implied. I don't see how it is possible to separate the two, or why Mr. Novick should deem it as more desirable (or proper) to evaluate one and not the other.

Indeed, to come back to my original comment, it seems to me impossible (or unwise) to divorce thinking about the impact of Holocaust memory, or about its uses within the political scene, from a concern about its moral or psychological content, and from our views and visions of the past. How we remember also matters. Still, in his letter, Mr. Novick exaggerates both the degree of my putative righteous rage about these phenomena and the degree of outrage I supposedly attribute to him. At the same time, he seems intent on blunting the critical edge of a book whose bold sharpness is, in my view, inextricable from its argument.

In response to Tad Szulc's letter, I am grateful to have it brought to my attention that Raoul Wallenberg's rescue mission was funded by the Joint Distribution Committee. But while this somewhat mitigates the picture of American (and American-Jewish) passivity, I think it is still possible to wonder, as Mr. Szulc does in his book, *The Secret Alliance*, "why there could not have been more...Wallenberg operations" (p. 36), or, indeed, more Americans comparable to that courageous diplomat.

I am sorry if in my review I gave the impression (on the basis of citations included in *The Holocaust in American Life*) that Mr. Katz was thoughtless or callous in his position on the war against the Pequot Indians. Clearly, he has given the matter a lot of thought and I sympathize with his attempt to describe precisely the nature of a particular event. However, it needs to be pointed out that his own citation of the United Nations Treaty on Genocide is misleading as to the "technical" definition of genocide. The relevant article of the Genocide Convention of 1948 defines genocide as any of a number of acts "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group." Surely, the murder of one quarter to one half of a group suggests the intent to destroy that group "in part," and therefore can legitimately be referred to as genocide.

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