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## Review of *The Holocaust in American Life*, by Peter Novick.

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*The Holocaust in American Life.* By Peter Novick. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1999. Pp. 373. \$27.00. ISBN 0-395-84009-0.

The Holocaust has undeniably become a fixture in American culture. What has come to be called the “Americanization of the Holocaust” is the subject of several recent books, a lively discussion within the American Jewish community, and even a course in American history at the University of Heidelberg. Among the many attempts to document and explain how the Holocaust has been Americanized, perhaps the most ambitious and provocative is Peter Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life*. The book is ambitious both on account of its chronological breadth, covering the entire period from the Second World War to the present day, as well as on account of the wide range of published and unpublished sources consulted by the author. It is provocative primarily because it argues that the preoccupation with the Holocaust has not been a healthy phenomenon for American society, its Jewish minority, and a balanced understanding of the Holocaust itself.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, and through the 1950s, American Jews did not devote a great deal of attention to the

catastrophe that had recently befallen the Jews of Europe. Novick posits several explanations for this attitude. American Jews were concerned more with the founding and preservation of the new state of Israel. Their assimilationist impulse made them reluctant to engage in what they feared might be perceived as special pleading, or, even worse, a manifestation of stereotypical Jewish vengeance. In the early stages of the Cold War they feared that criticism of Germany would be seen as contrary to American interests, or as evidence of (again, stereotypical) Jewish left-wing sympathies. Although this argument is not especially novel, Novick's study is among the first to document, from the archives of American Jewish organizations, how this downplaying of the Holocaust was in part the result of a conscious intention on the part of Jewish leaders.

American Jewish attitudes toward the Holocaust shifted gradually in the 1960s and 1970s, and then dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s. As the Holocaust moved further toward the center of Jewish consciousness in America, Novick maintains, it entered into the mainstream of American culture as well as a morality tale, a metaphor for evil, and a worst-case scenario for intolerance. Jewish religiosity and common ethno-cultural characteristics had been eroded by assimilation, leading American Jews to derive their identity instead from Zionism and a collective consciousness of victimization, the latter encouraged by a culture of victimization that emerged in American society more generally.

Novick concedes that he writes from a secular, progressive Jewish perspective, and the title of his book notwithstanding, his emphasis is on how the preoccupation with the Holocaust has distorted the identity and values of American Jews. He regards it as intrinsically unhealthy for a people to construct its identity on the basis of collective victimization, and especially unfortunate for American Jews, who have integrated into American society rather successfully, and whose Jewish heritage has so much that is positive to offer. Ironically, this dimension of Novick's argument resonates in some Jewish communal, intellectual, and academic circles in which there is also sentiment in favor of decentering the Holocaust, mainly in order to revive the religious component of Jewish identity, a goal that Novick does not endorse (nor, it should be emphasized, explicitly reject). Primarily for this reason, Novick's book has not proved quite as controversial among Jewish readers as some might have expected before its publication.

The book is, nonetheless, provocative in several respects. Its many polemical (at times sarcastic) passages will bother some readers who expect a more respectful tone in a study of Holocaust memory. Substantively, aside from its central point that the Holocaust is disproportionately pervasive in American life, the book is provocative in its account of how Jewish leaders, organizations, and Holocaust "memory professionals" have consciously and methodically

instrumentalized the Holocaust in support of various causes, most notably the state of Israel. Novick attempts to explain this practice in the context of the more general shift in attitudes among American Jews and in American society, and does not explicitly assert that the Holocaust has been exploited in a cynical or conspiratorial way. Yet several previous reviews have claimed that this accusation is strongly implicit, but insufficiently substantiated, in Novick's book.

Notwithstanding the question of whether Novick overstates the degree to which the Americanization of the Holocaust has been driven by a conscious Jewish-American agenda, he probably understates the degree to which American Christians, for their own reasons, have contributed to it. Many American Christians feel a strong need to confront the Holocaust as a manifestation of Christian intolerance. As Novick points out, some American Christians have also appropriated imagery or putative lessons of the Holocaust for purposes unrelated to interfaith dialogue, a good example being the "pro-life movement." Whatever the motive, much of the impetus behind the Americanization of the Holocaust has come from the Christian side, a factor that is not adequately appreciated in Novick's Judeocentric analysis.

The narrative presented in Novick's book is that of an upward trajectory of Holocaust consciousness since the late 1960s. Novick worries that the current American preoccupation with the Holocaust might be permanent. His point about the ongoing institutionalization of Holocaust memory in the form of museums and university professorships is well taken. But his implication that this trajectory will continue into the future is speculative, and quite possibly incorrect. The 1990s saw the convergence of several factors that brought the Holocaust to the forefront of American consciousness, for example Hollywood films like *Schindler's List*, and the opening of the Washington museum, the latter being closely connected with the end of the life cycle of a large percentage of Holocaust survivors. Media excess further magnified the attention focused on the Holocaust by these chronologically specific developments. While there can be little doubt that the Holocaust has been permanently absorbed into American culture, Novick fails to recognize that the obsessive attention to the subject, which he very effectively describes and documents, might very well be a transitory phenomenon. Time will tell.

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