

The Assault on Holocaust Memory

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JEWISH LITERATURE OF THE HOLOCAUST is animated by the imperative to remember. Through the innumerable pages of the testimonial writings of those who endured the ghettos and camps of occupied Europe runs a passionate determination to record the Nazi crimes and transmit knowledge of them to others. These authors, for all the differences in their backgrounds and the diverse nature of their Jewish identification, issue one common appeal: know what has happened to us in these infernal places, and keep the memory of our fate alive.

To be sure, the inscription, transmission, and reception of historical memory are not simple matters. The work of the Holocaust deniers, whose manifest malevolence and dishonesty—as proven in Deborah Lipstadt’s legal victory over David Irving in a British courtroom in 2000—put them beyond the pale, should be less a cause for concern than the work of the critics of what is coming to be called, pejoratively, “Holocaust consciousness.” These are writers who question not the facts but the prominence of the Holocaust in public consciousness and the motives of those who seek to perpetuate its memory.

Norman Finkelstein is a case in point. His book, *The Holocaust Industry*, published in 2000, indicts “The Holocaust” as an ideological representation of history that has been fraudulently devised and “sold” to the American public in order to revive a faltering Jewish identity and to “justify criminal policies of the Israeli state and U.S. support for these policies.” Beyond these motives, Finkelstein charges, those who run the so-called “Holocaust industry” are embarked on a multibillion dollar scheme of extortion, and the major share of these funds goes not to the survivors but to those who exploit their suffering for personal and communal gain.¹ Finkelstein’s book caused a stir in Europe, largely because of its harsh and inflammatory language. Yet for all its extremism, it represents little more than a new stage of a polemical engagement with the Holocaust that has been building over the years in the work of other writers, many of whom employ terms that resemble Finkelstein’s. As a result,

¹Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London and New York, 2000), pp. 7–8.

Holocaust memory at the outset of the 21st century finds itself under mounting attack.

Like all traumatic memories, the memory of the Holocaust has long evoked ambivalent and even antithetical reactions. These reactions have often been intense, compounded, as they frequently are, by complex issues of national identity, political ideology, economic interests, religious passions, cultural loyalties, and more. Two prime examples, strange as the implied comparison may seem, are Germany and Israel.

Since 1945, contrary pulls within German culture have given rise to periodic, heated, and public debate among intellectuals and politicians about responsibility for the Nazi crimes against the Jews. As Jane Kramer has put it, the Germans are looking for ways to resolve "a duty to remember and a longing to forget,"² a goal that so far has eluded them. As long as this radical ambivalence persists, sharply divided debates about Germany's Nazi past are likely to continue. The most recent manifestation of this division came to the fore in the Walser-Bubis dispute. In October 1998, in his acceptance speech upon receiving the Frankfurt Peace Prize, author Martin Walser declared his doubts about the construction of a central Holocaust memorial in Berlin. Arguing that "public acts of conscience run the risk of becoming mere symbols," Walser called for an end to the "incessant presentation of our disgrace." In response, Ignatz Bubis, president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, accused Walser of "spiritual arson." The debate took off from there and revealed some strong differences in German public opinion regarding memory of the Holocaust.³

A similar ambivalence, though from an altogether different historical perspective, can be observed in Israel. Israeli culture is marked, on the one hand, by highly ritualized forms of public memorialization of the victims and, on the other, by a desire to be relieved of the burdensome legacy of the European catastrophe. Thus Tom Segev, who has chronicled this emotionally charged story in *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, calls the Israelis' confrontation with the Holocaust a "great human drama of repression and recognition." And Segev is hardly alone in noting the deeply conflicted role that Holocaust memory plays in Israeli society.⁴

²Jane Kramer, *Politics of Memory: Looking for Germany in the New Germany* (New York, 1996), p. 258.

³For an incisive analysis of the Walser-Bubis controversy, see Amir Eshel, "Vom eigenen Gewissen: Die Walser-Bubis-Debatte und der Ort des Nationalsozialismus im Selbstbild der Bundesrepublik," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geschichte* 74, June 2000, pp. 333-60.

⁴Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York, 1993), p. 11.

Because the Shoah is such a significant fact of Israeli life and is also subject to manipulation and misuse, many have voiced disquiet over the prominence of the Holocaust in the public sphere and, on occasion, have even advocated something like suppression. In a controversial essay published in the Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* in 1988, Yehuda Elkana, at the time a prominent scholar at Tel Aviv University and himself a child survivor of the Holocaust, argued that his countrymen suffered from a surplus of memory and would do well to unburden themselves of the symbols, ceremonies, and purported lessons of their traumatic past. While it "may be important for the world at large to remember," Elkana wrote, "for our part, we must forget!" Indeed, Elkana was so convinced of the pernicious effects of Holocaust memory that he saw "no greater danger to the future of Israel" than the perpetuation of such memory, and he exhorted his country's leaders to uproot "the rule of historical remembrance from our lives."⁵

Elkana wrote his article during the time of the first intifada, in protest against the "abnormal" behavior of Israeli soldiers towards Palestinians. Searching for ways to understand this behavior, he attributed the soldiers' actions to the negative effects of a Holocaust consciousness that pervaded Israeli society and perverted the morality of the young. In his view, Israelis harbored an exaggerated sense of themselves as victims, and this fearful self-image, itself the result of "wrong" lessons learned from the Holocaust, prevented them from seeing the Palestinians in a more realistic light and thus impeded a reasonable political solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Elkana's position was not representative of majority sentiment within Israel and provoked a good deal of criticism, but his "plea for forgetting" was endorsed by some prominent figures. As Amos Elon put it in an article of his own that ran along parallel lines, "our hope lies in the possibility that the vision of Yehuda Elkana will prevail" since, Elon believed, "a little forgetfulness might finally be in order."⁶

Elon entitled his article "The Politics of Memory," and he was surely right in pointing out the role politics play in the memorialization of the Holocaust. But if there is a politics of memory, so, too, is there a politics of forgetting, evading, suppressing, and denying. Both—memory and forgetting—are in contention whenever the Holocaust is prominently invoked, and both are affected by contemporary social realities and political concerns as much as they are shaped by serious reflection on the past. In Germany and Israel, many yearn for normalization, which argues for

⁵*Ha'aretz*, Mar. 16, 1988, quoted in Segev, *Seventh Million*, pp. 503–04.

⁶Amos Elon, "The Politics of Memory," *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 7, 1993, pp. 3–5.

one kind of response to the Nazi era, while others respond that the time is not yet ripe, a view that entails a very different response. When prominent German figures such as Martin Walser publicly declare that the time has come to begin to “look away” from the shaming images of the Nazi era, they strike a sympathetic chord among many Germans, just as they bring on protests from others, who insist that it is too early to draw a final line under the worst chapter of their nation’s history. A similarly strong yearning for normalization exists within Israel as well, particularly among those who are convinced that an end to the conflict with the Arabs is being frustrated by the weight of the past.

In an essay published several years before Elkana’s piece, Boas Evron argued that Holocaust memory was responsible for creating a “paranoid reaction” among Israelis and even a “moral blindness,” which posed a real “danger to the nation” and could lead to an occurrence of “racist Nazi attitudes” within Israel itself.⁷ In line with this view, Elkana worried that a Holocaust-induced image of the Jews as eternal victims might encourage Israelis to justify the cruelest behavior toward the Palestinians. Drawing parallels between the “excesses” committed by soldiers in the territories and “what happened in Germany,” Elkana was concerned that his countrymen could end up mimicking the behavior of the worst of their enemies and thereby grant Hitler a “paradoxical and tragic victory.”⁸

The evocation of Hitler in this context recalls some famous words of the philosopher Emil Fackenheim, but with a notable twist. Fackenheim exhorted Jews to remember the victims of Auschwitz, and thereby *not* hand Hitler a posthumous victory, while Elkana’s exhortation to forget is based on the conviction that Hitler will prevail precisely if Jews continue to hold fast to the memory of the victims. What Fackenheim took to be the historical and moral imperatives of Holocaust memory, Elkana, Evron, and others have taken to be its dangers. There is simply no way to reconcile these two positions philosophically or to harmonize the different political understandings of present-day Jewish and Israeli life that derive from them.

In contrast to Germany and Israel, Holocaust memory in America had not been so passionately contested until recently. Indeed, since the 1960s, the Holocaust has come to public attention in ways that most people considered more salutary than not. But this consensus now finds itself em-

⁷Boas Evron, “The Holocaust: Learning the Wrong Lessons,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10, Spring 1981, pp. 17, 19, 21. See also Evron, “Holocaust: The Uses of Disaster,” *Radical America* 17, July/Aug. 1983, pp. 7–21; Evron, *Jewish State or Israeli Nation?* (Bloomington, 1995), pp. 250–53; and Israel Shahak, “The ‘Historical Right’ and the Other Holocaust,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 10, Spring 1981, pp. 27–34.

⁸Quoted in Segev, *Seventh Million*, p. 503.

battled and, in some instances, under outright attack. The issues on which the arguments typically turn have less to do with the Holocaust as a historical event than with accusations about the manipulative use of the Holocaust as an exaggerated element of contemporary Jewish identity.

What is at stake in these increasingly bitter debates, in other words, is yet another version of the politics of memory, according to which American Jews allegedly use the moral advantages that are theirs as privileged "victims" to advance parochial aims and partisan political agendas. The "centering" of the Holocaust in Jewish consciousness and general public awareness, it is charged, not only distorts Jewish identity and deforms Jewish life, but also seriously injures others, whose own histories of persecution and suffering have been marginalized and all but forgotten as a consequence of the overwhelming emphasis that has been placed on Jewish suffering. As it has been advanced in America by a "substantial cadre of Holocaust-memory professionals"—the term is Peter Novick's⁹—Holocaust consciousness serves the purposes of Jewish self-aggrandizement and prevents other victimized peoples from receiving a proper share of public attention and sympathy. For these and related reasons, critics see it as their proper function to expose the "Holocaust industry" for what it is and thereby loosen the hold that Holocaust memory has had on the Jewish and general American imagination for too many years.

While these charges have become more overt and impassioned over the last decade or so, versions of them, in milder form, appeared in American Jewish journals as far back as the late 1970s and picked up steam in the 1980s. The complaints then had to do with what some thought was the disproportionate amount of money and attention being devoted to Holocaust-related matters, at the expense of other priorities. Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf was among the first to maintain that the Holocaust had become the very "center of Jewish self-consciousness" and "is being sold—it is not being taught." Wolf charged that the "Holocaust now overshadows all else." He complained that in New Haven, Connecticut, the Jewish community was spending "about ten times as much money on the Holocaust memorial as it does on all the college students" in the city.¹⁰ Robert Alter, writing in *Commentary*, charged that a proliferation of college courses on the Holocaust was drawing on scarce academic resources that might better be spent helping students "find out what the Haskalah was, how a page of Talmud reads, or who Judah Hanasi might have

⁹Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston, 1999), p. 6.

¹⁰Arnold Jacob Wolf, "The Holocaust as Temptation," *Sh'ma*, Nov. 2, 1979, p. 162; Wolf, "The Centrality of the Holocaust is a Mistake," *National Jewish Monthly*, Oct. 1980, p. 8.

been."¹¹ Jacob Neusner bemoaned the fact that, as a result of their being so decidedly focused on the destruction of the Jews of Europe and the rebirth of Jewish life in Israel, Jews in this country were being kept from discovering America as their true Promised Land.¹² Others argued that an overemphasis on the Holocaust has returned Jews to a lachrymose sense of Jewish history, submerging more positive aspects of Jewish identity; that it has distanced Jews theologically from the promises inherent in the biblical Covenant and left them too little room for hope; or that it has provoked anger and resentment among other minority groups and impeded constructive dialogue and useful political alliances with them. These and other criticisms demonstrate that there never has been an absence of voices within the American Jewish community to oppose what some have called the Jewish "fixation" on the Holocaust.

Of late, though, these criticisms have become more expansive and have taken on a tone of disparagement and derision that seldom appeared in earlier years. Michael Goldberg, in his 1995 book, *Why Should Jews Survive?* decried the emergence of Holocaust consciousness as something that "mutilates Jewish self-understanding" and insisted that "the challenge to Jews today is not outliving Hitler and the Nazis but overcoming the life-threatening story created in their aftermath." The Holocaust, according to Goldberg, had become a "cult," with its own "tenets of faith, rites, and shrines," presided over by a "High Priest," Elie Wiesel. Goldberg criticized Wiesel for the cultic powers he allegedly wields, the lecture fees he demands, and his supposed failure to sensitize his followers to the sufferings of others, most especially the Palestinians, who were "beaten, tortured, and worse" during the intifada. So convinced was Goldberg of the pernicious effects of Holocaust consciousness that he concluded his book by stating that "Jews cannot long remain Jews while holding a Holocaust-shaped story" and "neither can humankind stay human."¹³

Goldberg, like Wolf, a rabbi, opposes the "Holocaust story" also on theological grounds. He believes that its negative impact subverts religious faith and, with it, the very ground of Jewish existence. Philip Lopate, a prominent essayist who refers to himself as a "secular, fallen Jew," has other reasons to oppose what he sees as an excessive Jewish preoccupation with the Holocaust. Writing in 1989, he declared the very term

¹¹Robert Alter, "Deformations of the Holocaust," *Commentary*, Feb. 1981, p. 49.

¹²Jacob Neusner, "The Real Promised Land is America," *Washington Post*, Mar. 8, 1987, p. B1. See also Neusner's "Beyond Catastrophe, Before Redemption," *Reconstructionist*, Apr. 1980, pp. 7-12; *Stranger at Home: "The Holocaust," Zionism, and American Judaism* (Chicago, 1981); and elsewhere.

¹³Michael Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive? Looking Past the Holocaust toward a Jewish Future* (New York, 1995), pp. 5, 41, 59, 175.

"Holocaust" objectionable because it has a "self-important, strutting air." As a rhetorical figure, "the Holocaust is a bully," used by the "Holocaustians" as a "club to smash back their opponents." Those who insist on the term's exclusivity "diminish, if not demean, the mass slaughter of other people": "Is it not possible for us to have a little more compassion for the other victimized peoples of this century and not insist quite so much that our wounds bleed more fiercely?" Like Goldberg, Lopate is not shy in singling out Elie Wiesel as the one most responsible for this Jewish chauvinism. Wiesel, he says, heads up the Holocaust as if it were "a corporation." Lopate acknowledges that millions of Jews were murdered by the Nazis, but he knows that multitudes of Bengalis, East Timorese, and Ibos have also been murdered, and "when it comes to mass murder, I can see no difference between their casualties and ours." Finding no justification in Jewish "extermination pride," and having no taste for "tribal smugness," Lopate argues that the most authentic stance toward the Holocaust today is one of resistance. As he puts it, "just because someone has suffered a lot doesn't mean you have to like them [sic]."¹⁴

These critical voices must be understood against the development of Holocaust consciousness in America over time. For years after the end of World War II, Jews in America were unable or unwilling to face up to the horrors of what was not yet even called the "Holocaust." It was only in the 1960s, beginning with Israel's abduction and 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, and intensifying in June 1967, when the State of Israel seemed, like European Jewry a generation earlier, to be on the verge of destruction, that American Jews came to grips with the full significance of the Holocaust. Following Israel's victory in the Six-Day War of 1967 and continuing after the perilous situation that Israel faced in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, there was an outpouring of writing about the Holocaust, an exceptional effort by Jews to educate themselves and the public at large about the Nazi crimes. This was an important and legitimate goal, and it succeeded in bringing the Holocaust into the mainstream culture. That success, however, perhaps made it inevitable that Holocaust consciousness would become subjected to the compromises and abuses that come along with the popularization, commercialization, and politicization of history. Inevitable, though, does not mean desirable, and it is salutary that critical attention has been drawn to some of the more dubious ways in which the stories and images of the Holocaust have circulated in the public sphere.

Quite different, though, are the glib, caustic, and often mean-spirited

¹⁴Philip Lopate, "Resistance to the Holocaust," in David Rosenberg, ed., *Testimony: Contemporary Writers Make the Holocaust Personal* (New York, 1989), pp. 307, 287, 289, 300, 293, 299, 286. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Tikkun* 4, May/June 1989, pp. 55-65, with critical replies from Yehuda Bauer and Deborah Lipstadt, pp. 65-70.

attitudes that some of these critics show towards those they accuse of “selling” the Holocaust or otherwise promoting it for pecuniary or parochial ends. Attacks against the “purveyors” of Holocaust consciousness often carry exaggerated claims about a Jewish “obsession” with the Holocaust, Jewish “hegemony” over news about mass suffering, the elevation of the Holocaust as American Jewry’s substitute “religion,” and the like.¹⁵ Peter Novick, who has written the most comprehensive study of the development of Holocaust consciousness in America, names the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as “the principal ‘address’ of American Jewry” and states that the Holocaust is now regarded by American Jews as “the emblematic Jewish experience.”¹⁶ Propelled by the power of American Jewish organizational skill, money, and media power, he charges, a virtual Holocaust juggernaut is sweeping away all other claims to Jewish identity, morality, and political sensitivity.

What is behind these charges is often a range of complaints about perceived failings in American Jewish life and in the broader American culture, for which the Holocaust is said to be responsible. Long before *Schindler’s List* and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum drew the attention of millions, Rabbi Wolf lamented that “one does not learn about God or the Midrash or Zionism nearly as carefully as one learns about the Holocaust,” and that while Jews found the money to erect memorials to the victims of the Nazis, there were no memorials in America “to the pioneers of Israel or to the rabbis of the Talmud, or even to the patriarchs and matriarchs.”¹⁷ Similarly, Michael Goldberg charged that “virtually every Jewish community of any size is assured a turnout at its annual Holocaust observance that easily dwarfs synagogue attendance on Passover.”¹⁸

Surely, however, Holocaust consciousness is here taken to be the cause of developments that have their origins elsewhere. Well before the Holocaust had overwhelmed the Jews of Europe, for instance, most American Jews had stopped going to the synagogue on Passover, stopped engaging in substantial religious study, and stopped caring about the rabbis of the Talmud, let alone the biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. It was not attendance at public gatherings commemorating the Holocaust that distanced American Jews from traditions of Jewish piety and learning but rather the transforming influences of Americanization and secularization.

Interestingly, just as the rabbis lament that attention to the Holocaust

¹⁵Tim Cole, *Selling the Holocaust: From Auschwitz to Schindler, How History Is Bought, Packaged, and Sold* (New York, 1999), p. 1.

¹⁶Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 11, 10.

¹⁷Wolf, “The Centrality of the Holocaust is a Mistake,” pp. 15–16.

¹⁸Goldberg, *Why Should Jews Survive?* p. 4.

is distracting American Jews from their religious duties, so avowed secularists like Peter Novick and Philip Lopate charge that too much Holocaust on the brain is eroding the social consciousness of American Jews and hardening their hearts to the sufferings of others. If, as Novick claims, American Jewry has turned “inward and rightward in recent decades,” it is surely not owing to the “centering of the Holocaust in the minds of American Jews,”¹⁹ a claim that Novick does not, indeed cannot, prove. Taking this line of thinking to another level of crudeness, Lopate contends that “the Jewish preoccupation with the Holocaust” has made American Jews “uncharitable, self-absorbed, self-righteous—and pushy.”²⁰ Had he seen fit to add “venal,” he would have rounded out the profile of the Ugly Jew in classic anti-Semitic fashion (Norman Finkelstein, in fact, has done exactly that through his brutal sketches of the opportunistic, money-grubbing Jew).

The Holocaust, in short, is supposed to be to blame for much of what ails American Jews. Traditionalists hold it responsible for distorting Judaism and replacing religious observance with a new civil religion that enshrines Jewish victimization, instead of God, at its core. And liberal-minded thinkers call it to account for narrowing the Jewish political vision and replacing an older, broader-based universalism with a chauvinistic particularism. The result, then, is that almost every deviation from what is held to be normative or desirable—the growing assimilation of American Jews, an alleged indifference to the pain and sufferings of other people, an apologetic attitude to what some regard to be Israeli “atrocities”—all of this, and more, is placed at the doorstep of those who have worked to perpetuate Holocaust memory.

To make matters even worse, one now commonly hears that Jewish Holocaust advocates are responsible, in no small measure, for what ails other groups as well. As proponents of a so-called radically ethnocentric view of history, “certain Jewish scholars and their acolytes” insist that the Holocaust is an unprecedented crime that bestows upon the Jews a pre-eminence of suffering.²¹ This “cult” of “zealots” with “powerful friends in high places” has managed to win broad sympathy for the Jews through a “self-serving masquerade of Jewish genocide uniqueness,” and anyone who raises questions about this “deception” is “immediately in danger of being labeled an anti-Semite.” Nevertheless, writes one author unintimidated by this Jewish strategy, “not only is the essence of their argument demonstrably erroneous, the larger thesis that it fraudulently advances is

¹⁹Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, p. 10.

²⁰Lopate, “Resistance to the Holocaust,” p. 307.

²¹David Stannard, “Preface,” to Ward Churchill, *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present* (San Francisco, 1997), p. xvii.

fundamentally racist and violence-provoking. At the same time, moreover, it willingly provides a screen behind which opportunistic governments today attempt to conceal their own past and ongoing genocidal actions." Among these governments, the worst is Israel, which has used the Holocaust as "justification for [its] territorial expansionism and suppression of the Palestinian people," a crime that for too long has gone unacknowledged, thanks to the "hegemonic product of many years of strenuous intellectual labor by a handful of Jewish scholars and writers. . . ." ²²

I have been quoting from David Stannard, a scholar of Native American history. His work, and that of others like him, raises the argument against Holocaust consciousness to a new polemical level, introducing a rhetoric of aggression against Jews that, until now, has rarely been encountered outside of anti-Semitic literature. This same note is forcefully sounded in Ward Churchill's *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present*. A scholar of Native American history like Stannard, Churchill is convinced that too little attention has been paid to the fate of indigenous peoples in the "American Holocaust" because too much attention has been paid to the Jewish victims of the Nazi Holocaust. He charges that victims of other genocides have been virtually erased from history because a "substantial component of Zionism . . . contends . . . that no 'true' genocide has ever occurred other than the Holocaust suffered by the Jews. . . ." The politics of this militant chauvinism are clear for all to see: Jewish "exclusivism" serves to "compel permanent maintenance of the privileged political status of Israel, the Jewish state established on Arab land in 1947 as an act of international atonement for the Holocaust." It also seeks to "construct a conceptual screen behind which to hide the realities of Israel's ongoing genocide against the Palestinian population whose rights and property were usurped in its very creation." ²³

Both Stannard and Churchill accuse Jewish scholars of the Nazi Holocaust of "denying" other "holocausts." Stannard charges the "Jewish uniqueness advocates" with being the equivalent of Holocaust deniers, even claiming that they "almost invariably mimic exactly the same assertions laid out by the anti-Semitic historical revisionists." ²⁴ Churchill denounces these scholars in similar terms: "The techniques used by pro-

²²David Stannard, "Uniqueness as Denial: The Politics of Genocide Scholarship," in Alan S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (Boulder, 1996), pp. 192, 198, 168, 167, 194, 167. On this question see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, "The Politics of Uniqueness: Reflections on the Recent Polemical Turn in Holocaust and Genocide Scholarship," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13, Spring 1999, pp. 28–61.

²³Churchill, *Little Matter of Genocide*, pp. 7, 73–74.

²⁴Stannard, "Uniqueness as Denial," p. 198.

ponents of Jewish exclusivism in presenting their doctrine of ‘uniqueness’ [are comparable] to those of the neo-Nazi revisionists.” And he carries the accusation one step further: “The proponents of ‘Jewish exclusivism’ represent a proportionately greater and more insidious threat to understanding than do the Holocaust deniers,” for in denying that other peoples have been the target of genocidal crimes, they have marginalized the sufferings of countless others and rendered them inconsequential. They have, he says, peddled a “mythology” about history that “dovetails perfectly with the institutionalized denials of genocide” put forth by numerous governments intent on seeing to it that their own “hidden holocausts” remain hidden. For the sheer invidiousness of their work, therefore, the Jewish scholars—Churchill names Steven Katz, Yehuda Bauer, Elie Wiesel, Lucy Dawidowicz, Leni Yahil, Yisrael Gutman, Michael Marrus, Deborah Lipstadt, and Martin Gilbert—are in a class by themselves: “Those who would deny the Holocaust, after all, focus their distortions upon one target. Those who deny all holocausts other than that of the Jews have the same effect upon many.”²⁵

Stannard and Churchill are clearly guilty of the same fallacy that mars the work of some of the Jewish critics referred to above. While it is true that the history of Native American peoples has been neglected over the years, the fault lies not with scholars of the European Holocaust but with generations of American historians and political leaders who, for their own reasons, have not focused on some shameful chapters of their own country’s past. The omission is a serious one, but, chronologically, it long predates the Holocaust and therefore cannot reasonably be explained by pinning the blame on proponents of “Zionism” or “Jewish exclusivism.” Castigating scholars of the Nazi Holocaust for neglecting the history of Native American suffering would be equivalent to charging scholars of Native American history of diverting attention from the immense sufferings of African slavery, the massacres of Armenians, or the murder of millions of Cambodians. Each of these histories has unique features, and those who write about them are justified in saying so. Nevertheless, Stannard and Churchill place blame specifically on the work of those scholars who have understood the Holocaust to have unique historical dimensions. In their view, “uniqueness” equals “denial” of others, and the “Jewish uniqueness advocates,” in consciously aiding and abetting “the willful maintenance of public ignorance regarding the genocidal and racist horrors . . . that have been and are being perpetrated by many nations,” are in “murderous complicity with both past and present genocidal regimes.”²⁶

²⁵Churchill, *Little Matter of Genocide*, pp. 9, 50, 36.

²⁶Stannard, “Uniqueness as Denial,” pp. 198–99.

These are serious accusations, and they have moved well beyond the sphere of academic Native American studies. The charge is now commonly made that Jews use their own past history of suffering as a pretext to inflict suffering on others or to divert attention from the oppression of other peoples. The State of Israel is often singled out, an Israel whose image has been transformed into that of an aggressor state shielded by the protective cover of Holocaust memory. No less an establishment media figure than *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote, during the first intifada, that "Israel today is becoming Yad Vashem with an air force."²⁷ At the same time, but in less colorful language, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman reiterated the notion of an aggressive Israel that manipulates Holocaust memory for self-serving ends: "The Jewish state [has] tried to employ the tragic memories [of the Holocaust] as the certificate of its political legitimacy, a safe conduct pass for its past and future policies, and above all as the advance payment for the injustices it might itself commit."²⁸ Bauman's words are favorably cited by Stannard, Churchill, Novick, Finkelstein, and others, for whom it is now a given that the Holocaust has been cynically used by the Jews, and especially by the Jewish state, as a matchless resource against its foes.

As it defines Holocaust memory as little more than a tool of Jewish empowerment, the political logic of this thinking is evident. In the name of Auschwitz, the Jewish state is said to be brutally oppressing another people. What is required to restore the Holocaust to its proper historical perspective and the Jews to their authentic ethical vocation is an "end to Auschwitz." This critique of Holocaust consciousness, in other words, links an appeal to disengage from the Holocaust with an appeal for Jews to disengage from the exercise of political power by disconnecting from the State of Israel.

No one has stated this as clearly as Marc Ellis, a Jewish theologian and professor of religion with strong pro-Palestinian sympathies. From his standpoint, "Jews are essentially a diaspora people" that does not require a state organization anyway. For them to live freely and ethically among the peoples of the world, the Jews should recognize the need for the "de-absolutization of Israel," which, he reasons, entails at the same time "de-absolutizing the Holocaust"²⁹:

Auschwitz has become a burden to the Jewish future. . . . To continue Auschwitz as a central overriding memory is in a sense to postpone . . . the explosive realities within our community as they relate to power and injustice. . . . Thus,

²⁷Thomas Friedman, *From Beirut to Jerusalem* (New York, 1989), p. 281.

²⁸Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1989), p. ix.

²⁹Marc H. Ellis, *Beyond Innocence and Redemption: Confronting the Holocaust and Israeli Power* (San Francisco, 1990), p. 187.

to end Auschwitz is to admit that we are no longer innocent and that Israel is not our redemption. . . . "Ending Auschwitz" would also allow us, or perhaps even compel us, to think the unthinkable—that our future is bound up in an essential solidarity with those whom we have displaced, a solidarity with the Palestinian people. . . . The only way for the renewal of Palestine in the Jewish imagination to take hold is through ending Auschwitz; or, put another way, ending Auschwitz and the renewal of Palestine are bound together.³⁰

The theological/political argument Ellis makes is predicated on the belief that "Auschwitz was in fact killing us as a people long after the crematoria were destroyed,"³¹ and that in the name of Auschwitz, Jews have felt at liberty to humiliate, oppress, and kill another people. Avishai Margalit describes the same connection even more cynically: "Against the weapon of the Holocaust, the Palestinians are amateurs. . . . As soon as operation 'Holocaust Memory' is put into high gear, . . . the Palestinians cannot compete."³² It is no doubt due to this perceived linkage of the Holocaust and the State of Israel that Palestinian schoolbooks and newspapers, as well as the media in Arab countries, are so intent on exposing the Holocaust as a "myth," and that the most passionate critics of Israel are so intent on deriding the "Holocaust industry" and putting an "end to Auschwitz."

Although the notion of a "Holocaust industry" has been popularized by Norman Finkelstein, Peter Novick—a much more serious scholar—employs roughly similar terms in *The Holocaust in American Life*, which appeared in 1999.³³ Through his repeated references to the work of well-placed Jewish influentials—including a "substantial cadre of Holocaust professionals," a "growing cadre of Holocaust professionals," Jews who "occupy strategic positions in the mass media" and who project images of the Holocaust "through the culture at large"—Novick comes close to positing a "Holocaust industry" in all but name. His book, which one reviewer has called "sharp, brusque, and sometimes nearly Swiftian in its acerbities,"³⁴ is a combination of carefully researched historical analysis and harsh political complaint. It provides a valuable exposition of the evolution of Holocaust consciousness in America, but also puts forward

³⁰Marc H. Ellis, *Ending Auschwitz: The Future of Jewish and Christian Life* (Louisville, 1994), pp. 40, 42, 43.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 39.

³²Avishai Margalit, "The Kitsch of Israel," *New York Review of Books*, Mar. 9, 2000, p. 19.

³³Novick is on record as a critic of Finkelstein's work and has written a sharply negative review of *The Holocaust Industry*; see "A charge into darkness that sheds no light," *Jewish Chronicle* (London), July 28, 2000, p. 28. For Finkelstein on Novick, see *London Review of Books*, Jan. 6, 2000, p. 33.

³⁴Eva Hoffman, "The Uses of Hell," *New York Review of Books*, Mar. 9, 2000, p. 19.

a polemical, quarrelsome, and cynical treatment of "American Jewish leaders," whom the author holds responsible for shaping the history of Jewish suffering to further parochial Jewish aims. Novick's book, in fact, is a determined critique of the politics of Holocaust memory, stresses many of the same themes found in the writings of Stannard, Churchill, and others, and foreshadows the later full-blown attack of Norman Finkelstein.³⁵

Novick, who undervalues the Jewish historical tradition of memorializing national tragedies,³⁶ aims to expose Holocaust consciousness as a deliberate construct of American Jewish organizations and institutions. The leaders of these organizations, he says, recognized that Jewish identity in America was weakening. They focused on the Holocaust as "the one item in stock with consumer appeal" and set about shoring up flagging Jewish commitment by creating "a Holocaust-centered Jewish identity." In addition, they worked to spread Holocaust awareness to "mobilize support for a beleaguered Israel, pictured as being in a kind of pre-Holocaust danger." They were aided in these efforts, claims Novick, by a powerful Jewish presence among the "media and opinion-making elites"—the Jews who "play an important and influential role in Hollywood, the television industry, and the newspaper, magazine, and book publishing world." Through the dedicated work of these people—and Jews are "not just 'the people of the book,' but the people of the Hollywood film and the television mini-series, of the magazine article and the newspaper column, of the comic book and the academic symposium"—the Holocaust was repositioned from the margins to the very forefront of American consciousness. In addition, thanks to the efforts of certain powerful individuals of a traditionalist persuasion, such as Elie Wiesel and Irving Greenberg, the Holocaust underwent a "perverse sacralization" and emerged, for many American Jews, as something of a "mystery religion." In a culture that has come to valorize victims, Jews established primacy of place for the Holocaust and have reaped the benefits that come with such success. Not to be outdone in the high-stakes arena of "comparative atrocitology," the Jews now "possess the gold medal in the Victimization Olympics."³⁷

Novick much prefers an earlier generation of American Jews with whom he more closely identifies, Jews who were integrationist and universalistic. He claims that it was "Holocaust consciousness" that "contributed to the erosion of that larger social consciousness" that was the

³⁵Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 6, 168, 208, 12.

³⁶This has led one reviewer to the conclusion that Novick is "a stranger to the inner life of the Jews." David Roskies, "Group Memory," *Commentary*, Sept. 1999, p. 64.

³⁷Novick, *Holocaust in American Life*, pp. 186–88, 269, 207, 12, 201, 110, 195.

“hallmark of the American Jewry of [his] youth—post-Holocaust but pre-Holocaust fixation.”³⁸

This negative note brings us, finally, to Norman Finkelstein. Drawing on the work of earlier critics of Holocaust consciousness—Novick, Arnold Jacob Wolf, Jacob Neusner, David Stannard, Boas Evron, and others—Finkelstein, in an earlier work, had already indicted “The Holocaust” as little more than “the Zionist account of the Nazi holocaust.”³⁹ In *The Holocaust Industry*, he appreciates what he calls the “muckraking” quality of Novick’s book and affirms Novick’s view of Holocaust memory as “an ideological construct of vested interests,” but argues that Novick does not carry his argument nearly far enough. Finkelstein deplores the “soft” categories that Novick employs—“‘memory’ is surely the most impoverished concept to come down the academic pike in a long time”—and prefers to think in terms of “power,” “interests,” and “ideology.” In making the shift from the “bland” categories of cultural analysis to the more “robust” categories of political analysis, Finkelstein is convinced that he has discovered the real culprits—not just the Holocaust memory manipulators, but the Holocaust racketeers and extortionists. He has nothing but contempt for these people, whom he denounces as shakedown artists whose corrupt practices are “the main fomentor of anti-Semitism in Europe.” It is they who run the Holocaust industry, and it is they whom Norman Finkelstein is determined to run out of business so that “those who perished [can] finally rest in peace.”⁴⁰

In a gesture that is calculated to win him special sympathy, Finkelstein adopts the persona of the indignant son of Holocaust survivors. Though a fierce opponent of the “exploitation of Jewish suffering,” Finkelstein exploits the fact that his father and mother had been in Hitler’s camps and were the sole members of their family to survive. His book, he avers, is an attempt to “represent my parents’ legacy,” but whatever that legacy might be, the book is, more than anything else, a tirade against a non-existent Judeo-Zionist conspiracy. But armed with the credentials of the son of his suffering parents, Finkelstein feels entitled to wage war on anyone and everyone who has dealt with the Holocaust in ways that he dislikes. With few exceptions, the works of other Holocaust scholars are dismissed as “worthless”—no more than “shelves upon shelves of shlock.” The resources contributed to memorializing the Nazi genocide are also “worthless, a tribute not to Jewish suffering but to Jewish aggrandize-

³⁸Ibid., p. 10.

³⁹Norman G. Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn, *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth* (New York, 1998), p. 94.

⁴⁰Finkelstein, *Holocaust Industry*, pp. 4, 5, 130, 150.

ment.” As for Israel, “one of the world’s most formidable military powers, with a horrendous human rights record,” it has used the Holocaust as an “indispensable ideological weapon” to “cast itself as a ‘victim’ state,” even as it continues its unconscionable abuse of the Palestinians. Finkelstein charges the “American ruling elites” who support the “criminal policies” of the Zionist state with complicity in Zionist crimes. Avaricious lawyers intent on bilking Swiss banks and German industrial corporations in the name of Holocaust survivors are excoriated for running a “restitution racket.” In his view, many people who pass themselves off as Holocaust survivors often are not survivors at all, but masquerade as such to get money. Furthermore, the testimony of the true survivors is often suspect, and Elie Wiesel is contemptuously derided as the biggest fraud of all, guilty of a “shameful record of apologetics on behalf of Israel,” and a “charlatan.”⁴¹

These people—bogus Holocaust scholars, Zionist ideologues, Israeli aggressors, Jewish influence peddlers, phony survivors, and other assorted Jewish politicians and mercenaries—make up Finkelstein’s “Holocaust industry,” a corrupt, ruthlessly exploitative bunch that has used the Holocaust to acquire personal wealth and political power, and to gain immunity for those in the Zionist and American Jewish camps who are busy “lording it over those least able to defend themselves.” Rising above the machinations of this morally bankrupt crowd is the figure of the author’s mother, whom he cites more than once for her moral probity and worldly wisdom. Instead of exploiting Jewish suffering for selfish ends, Finkelstein writes, “the time is long past to open our hearts to the rest of humanity’s sufferings. This was the main lesson my mother imparted. . . . In the face of the sufferings of African-Americans, Vietnamese and Palestinians, my mother’s credo always was: We are all Holocaust victims.” Or again: “If everyone who claims to be a survivor actually is one,” my mother used to exclaim, “who[m] did Hitler kill?”⁴²

One is tempted to set aside this book as so much sentimental drivel or bullying rant, but that would be a mistake. To be sure, while Finkelstein has not been taken seriously in the United States—the reviewer for the *New York Times Book Review*, for example, called his book “sad,” “indecent,” “juvenile, self-contradictory, arrogant and stupid,” “irrational and insidious,” among other things⁴³—he has found an attentive audience in England, Germany, and elsewhere. His book, even before its translation into European languages, was widely discussed and, in some circles,

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 7, 55, 32, 8, 3, 7, 94, 82, 45, 4, 56.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 38, 8, 81.

⁴³Omer Bartov, “A Tale of Two Holocausts,” *New York Times Book Review*, Aug. 6, 2000, p. 8.

lauded.⁴⁴ The notion that “we are all Holocaust victims” appeals to people who have had enough of the Jews and their sorrows. They do not like it that the Jews, and they alone, are singled out for special sympathy. In addition, Finkelstein’s argument that crafty “Holocaust hucksters” are pumping up the numbers of survivors in order to cash in on Jewish suffering wins sympathy among those already inclined to see a predatory hand in the much-publicized Holocaust-related litigation.

Inevitably, the notion of an enterprising and manipulative “Holocaust industry” has found a willing audience among the worst of the Holocaust deniers. Though these people may not be his natural allies, Finkelstein, like them, has vilified Israel and “organized American Jewry” in relentless fashion and held “The Holocaust” up for scorn. Not surprisingly, extreme right-wing circles in Europe and the U.S. have been touting his book. Thoughtful people in Germany, in particular, worry that Finkelstein’s fantasies will encourage the most dangerous elements in that country, who will find in the book ample confirmation of a Jewish conspiracy to exploit German historical guilt for selfish ends. In fact, as the alert reader will see, Finkelstein’s “Holocaust industry” is as much an ideological construct as neo-Nazi constructions of a Holocaust-that-never-was. But for people who are weary of hearing about Hitler and the Jews, Finkelstein’s impassioned “exposé” of an elaborate Holocaust extortion racket will be a welcome development long overdue. As one of his German reviewers has commented, reading *The Holocaust Industry* “is like opening a window for a sudden gust of fresh air.”⁴⁵ The German translation’s initial print run of 50,000 quickly sold out, and, for a time, the book topped the German best-seller list for nonfiction. In a poll taken by the prestigious Emnid Institute soon after the German translation appeared, 65 percent of Germans questioned agreed, either fully or partially, that Jewish organizations exaggerate Holocaust-related compensation claims in order to enrich themselves.⁴⁶

Even under the best of conditions, Holocaust memory, like all historical memories, is bound to attenuate over time. Indeed, the very enormity of the Nazi crimes against the Jews makes it notoriously difficult for the mind to assimilate the horror, let alone to make any sense of it. One can hardly be confident, then, that public awareness of the Holocaust will be widely and responsibly maintained. It is no wonder that writers like Primo Levi, Jean Améry, and others, who reflected most deeply about the Nazi assault against the Jews, often came close to despair when they contem-

⁴⁴Finkelstein has posted the laudatory reviews, and replies to the negative ones, on his Web site.

⁴⁵Lorenz Jäger, “Necessary Hyperbole,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Aug. 14, 2000.

⁴⁶*Der Spiegel*, July 2000, p. 224.

plated the future of Holocaust memory, for they recognized how tenuous a thing such memory is.

However, even the best of these writers could not have foreseen the invidiousness that has come to accompany attacks on Holocaust consciousness, often delivered in a tone that amounts almost to mocking the dead. The popularization of the flippant expression, "There is no business like Shoah business," is symptomatic of the derisive attitude that is now so common, one that calls into question the value of *any* ongoing engagement with the Holocaust. Add to this belittling tendency an inclination to reduce the catastrophe to an ideological construct of vested interests, and the story of Jewish fate under Hitler suffers further devaluation. And the integrity of Holocaust memory is weakened still more by those who link their critique of Holocaust consciousness to a critique of Jewish "power," especially as such power is exercised in Israel. One would never know, from the work of Finkelstein and some other critics of Holocaust consciousness, that people might feel compelled to think about the Jewish catastrophe under Hitler for other, less cynical reasons. One would never suspect that there might be historical, religious, moral, or ethical claims on consciousness as legitimate prods to remember the Nazi crimes.

The accumulated force of the tendencies encouraging forgetting may, over time, bring about the "end of Auschwitz." But the result will be neither the return of the Jewish people to traditional religious practice nor to a higher ethical calling, but their return to the kind of vulnerability that preceded Auschwitz and helped bring it about.