

# An assessment of Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life*

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The *Holocaust in American Life* by Peter Novick, published by Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999. The author is a nationally prominent professor of history at the University of Chicago. His 1988 book, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, was awarded the prize for best US history book of the year by the American Historical Association.

Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* is an historical review of American attitudes towards the Nazi Holocaust from the time of the war until the present. It has been highly controversial. The book's mission is to argue against the misuse of the Holocaust and to reveal how contemporary consciousness is lodged in political conditions.

One does not have to agree with every statement in the book to appreciate its insistence on delving behind public opinion and commonplace truths to reveal political agendas. It is at times fascinating and insightful. In the end, however, the author's decision to describe the problem without addressing the solution—what *is* the proper place of the Holocaust in American life—leaves the reader unsatisfied.

Novick aims to show how the Holocaust came to be viewed by Americans. His contention is that, unlike other major world events, the Holocaust did not loom large in the thinking of people either during or immediately following World War II, but became a central concern among Jews and other Americans approximately 20 years later.

He details the impact of the rise of Zionism and support for Israel in general, the turn away from social activism by a large layer of Jewish intellectuals, and the development of "identity politics," all of which, he contends, contributed to the rise of "Holocaust consciousness."

In introducing his themes, the author contrasts an historical approach with the current infatuation with memory and narratives as the main yardsticks of reality. He refers to a reflection by French sociologist Maurice Halbachs: "Collective memory simplifies; sees events from a single, committed perspective; is impatient with ambiguities of any kind; reduces events to mythic archetypes. Historical consciousness, by its nature, focuses on the *historicity* of events—that they took place then and not now, that they grew out of circumstances different from those that now obtain. Memory by contrast, has no sense of the passage of time; it denies the 'pastness' of its objects and insists on their continuing presence" (*The Holocaust in American Life*, p. 4). This is the philosophical injunction, so to speak, of Novick's work: to understand events in context, to view the historicity of events.

Novick begins by pointing out that the very notion of the Holocaust was not contemporaneous. While the horrific fate of six million Jews is easily recalled, most people today fail to place it in the context of the global war in which 50-60 million died. It was the opposite at the time, the author contends: it was the war itself that dominated the thinking of Americans.

Opposing the ethnic exclusivity that largely characterizes Holocaust literature, the author points out that the policy of mass murder was in the first instance directed against Soviet POWs, and that for the first five years of Hitler's regime concentration camp inmates were overwhelmingly

Communists, socialists, trade unionists or other opponents of the regime. The killing of gypsies was proportionally equivalent to that of the Jews, says Novick, and Hitler also sought to wipe out the Slavic peoples. The author aims to counter the view that the cause of the Holocaust was simply anti-Semitism, and that opposition to anti-Semitism is a sufficient "lesson" for future generations.

In one of the more controversial sections of the book, Novick argues that Americans did not "abandon" Hitler's victims. Here he is arguing against the position that Americans supported the founding of Israel as an act of moral expiation for being passive bystanders to genocide. Novick emphasizes the wartime preoccupation with military events and the genuine fear of millions of people that the Nazis could prevail throughout Europe. When reports of atrocities against Jews began accumulating by 1940-42, the author insists, there was no unanimity that a Jewish homeland was the answer. American Jews identified themselves at that time, as did most people, primarily by their political affiliation and social status: leftist, trade unionist, Republican banker, Rooseveltian, labor Zionist, Communist, etc., and disagreed thoroughly as to the best policies to halt the killing. (More on this issue later.)

The author then discusses the relationship between the official interpretation of the "Final Solution" and the aims of US foreign policy. By the late '40s and throughout the '50s, American politics revolved around the axis of "freedom" versus "communist totalitarianism." Soon after the war, key American political figures were hard at work to create a definite mindset: all evil resided within communism.

Novick writes, "Not only did the cold war make invocation of the Holocaust the 'wrong atrocity' for purposes of mobilizing the new consciousness, but the theorizing about totalitarianism itself served to marginalize the Holocaust." The victims of the Nazis needed to be defined in political terms, not ethnic ones, in order to equate the Nazis with the Soviets.

The Allied postwar "de-Nazification"—an agenda never pursued with much vigor—soon gave way to the recruitment of ex-Nazis into Allied security services and other positions suitable for prosecuting the Cold War. Many ex-Nazis resumed their positions in German government with only a brief interruption of service. Novick points out that in the US many prominent Jewish organizations, far from opposing the new political orientation, fell into ideological line with the anticommunist crusade. For example, the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee volunteered to share files with the House Un-American Activities Committee.

In the subsequent years of the postwar boom, Novick asserts, the prevailing attitude among Jews, like most Americans, was optimistic and universalist. He writes, "An integrationist rather than a particularist consciousness was the norm ... difference and specificity were at a discount; a 'brothers under the skin' and 'family of man' ethos was dominant. Blacks weren't yet being brought effectively under this umbrella, but Jews were, and Jewish groups did everything in their power

to further this. In other words, the Holocaust was an inappropriate symbol of the mood of the country including the Jews.”

What motivated Jewish concern? One interesting study in the late 1950s, cited by Novick, queried Jews in a Midwestern suburb as to what was considered being a good Jew. “Supporting Israel” was listed by 21 percent, compared with 58 percent, who listed “help the underprivileged” (p. 147).

The term “Holocaust” was coined following the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, when for the first time, according to Novick, the genocide perpetrated against Europe’s Jews was presented to the American public as an entity in its own right, distinct from Nazi barbarism in general. But it was the Six-Day War of 1967 which marked the dramatic turning point in American Jews’ relationship to Israel and to the Holocaust. A new birth of concern and support for Israel was consolidated in the course of the Yom Kippur War of October 1973.

Rejecting the thesis that the Middle East conflict arose from the displacement of the Palestinians, many Jewish organizations ascribed the continuing wars to the world’s having forgotten the Holocaust, says Novick. While other strategies were also employed to mobilize support for Israel, its importance as a strategic US asset, Biblical claims, and so forth, the Holocaust was far and away the most effective public relations tool.

The shift in consciousness regarding the Holocaust was a direct result of the political needs of the American government in mobilizing support for Israel, its prime client state in the indispensable Middle East, the author contends. “Never again” became the war cry in support of Zionism.

Initially, Novick points out, the Holocaust was viewed as part of history, an aspect of a period, the era of fascism. But as the Holocaust moved from history to myth, it became the bearer of “eternal truths” not bound by historical circumstances; it came to symbolize the natural and inevitable terminus of anti-Semitism. Where the political exigencies of American interests left off, the historical relativism fostered by postmodernist intellectual tendencies stepped in. It became fashionable, if not mandatory, to insist on the incomprehensibility and inexplicability of the Holocaust, while at the same time presenting it as a symbol of the impasse of modern society and its moral collapse.

Novick emphasizes the point that these views were compounded by a generally rightward shift by better-off Jews from the social activism of a previous era. The popular idea in some circles that the first question should be “Is it good for the Jews?” was reflective of the general income gap developing within society as a whole.

“By the 1970s,” the author writes, “Jews were preeminent among the ‘haves’ in American society and the gap between Jews and non-Jews, in income as well as in representation in all elite positions, widened over subsequent decades. For a large number of Jews, they had everything to lose and nothing to gain from the more equal distribution of rewards which had been the aim of liberal social policies. It ceased to be true that Jews were markedly more liberal than other Americans of similar age, education and income when it came to bread and butter issues.”

From the 1960s on, the Jewish right began to oppose assimilation and even described it as a “quiet Holocaust.” The thinning of Jewish identity needed to be countered: many advised that the Holocaust was not properly “seared into the memory of a generation born after WWII” (p. 187). The millionaire who provided most of the original funding for the Simon Wiesenthal Center told a reporter 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” (p. 188).

Novick stresses that these trends coincided with the general growth of identity politics and the “new ethnicity” promoted in the wake of the decline of American liberalism. In this fetid climate of identity politics, Elie Wiesel and others singled out the Holocaust as the ultimate, incomprehensible symbol of identity and oppression. This view was

complemented with statements such as “any survivor has more to say than all the historians combined” (Wiesel) and “If you were not there, you cannot imagine what it was like” (Raul Hilberg).

Novick concludes his volume by condemning the ubiquitous invocation of the Holocaust in recent years by the American authorities and media—the victims range from the Afghan mujahadeen to aborted fetuses, depending on the right-wing choice of cause. The author specifically takes exception to such all-embracing rhetoric in the justification of military interventions against Iraq in 1991, Somalia in 1992 and the Balkans in both 1992 and 1999.

Novick writes as a Jewish historian who opposes the contemporary Holocaust “industry,” both from the standpoint of its intellectual paucity and its harmful effect on human behavior. He attacks the “victimization Olympics” between competing ethnic groups. His biting attacks on ideologues like Elie Wiesel are apt. Novick points to the choices men make and the role of historical interpretation in making those choices. He sees the role of the historian as an active one in the improvement of society. By illuminating some of the political factors at work during the postwar period, *The Holocaust in American Life* sheds light on the evolution of social attitudes towards the Holocaust.

But while Novick exposes how much of “American thought” has been manipulated by governmental interests, his perspective has limitations. It is not surprising that public opinion roughly corresponded with official US policy—first to ignore the plight of Holocaust refugees, then to revive interest in these events when it was politically expedient. But this is not the whole story. Independently, many millions of people were trying to make sense of the horror of this historical period.

Novick fails, in this reviewer’s mind, to give weight to the opposing ideological trends. He deals with many official trends and nuances in the debate among official Jewish and Christian organizations, government and the media, but omits the views of socialists as well as the vast bulk of citizens whose views do not find expression in polls or in the media. One cannot make a survey of thought by simply tracing the trends that dominated, without reviewing the ongoing polemical debate within society. This omission is especially glaring in light of the leading role played by the international socialist movement in spearheading the fight against anti-Semitism and fascism.

Moreover, there is a difference between Novick’s depiction of the Holocaust “looming large” in consciousness today—thousands of full-time Holocaust professionals, countless books, curriculums, etc.—and the fact that for millions of people the idea of the “Final Solution” was always profoundly and deeply troubling, leading large numbers to question the premises of capitalist society and doubt that the profit system was leading mankind forward to social progress. The fact that millions of people visit Holocaust museums and take such courses points to a healthy popular concern and thirst for historical answers, something which cannot be equated with the cynical manipulation carried out by reactionary interests.

Similarly, the fact that ordinary Americans, including Jewish Americans, differed on how to assist Hitler’s victims and are not individually guilty for abandoning them can hardly be cited to exculpate the US and British governments’ war-time policy of suppressing information on the “Final Solution” and barring entry to fleeing refugees. That is another matter altogether.

US policy flowed from its position as an imperialist competitor, ruthlessly establishing its hegemony over the European continent. But to ordinary people the fact that the geopolitical interests of the United States took precedence over the fate of millions of Jews and others, suffering the most inhumane barbarities imaginable, was truly a revelation. Is this not abandonment? If there had been an America with the interest of the masses at heart, it would have responded entirely differently—spearheading a humanitarian campaign to investigate the atrocity reports and stop the killings, followed up by a massive rescue effort. Such events would have

created an entirely different forum for public opinion.

Novick is right in asserting that “American guilt” over the Holocaust was not the rationale behind the US government’s support for the creation of a Jewish state. Nevertheless, millions of people who sympathized with the plight of the Jewish people became susceptible to Zionist arguments. Conversely, the moral contradictions in American policy did lead many people to question whether the US truly entered the war to “save democracy,” or if it adhered to its self-professed altruism at all. The behavior of the American government during this period was a catalyst in awakening a new generation of critical thinkers.

Novick appears to be correct in linking the transformed place of the Holocaust in American thought to the 1967 Six-Day War, followed by the 1973 Yom Kippur War. But to understand this coincidence of political events, it is vital to note the fundamental political change 1967 marked within the state of Israel. With massive US military aid, Israel invaded Egypt, Syria and Jordan, occupying the West Bank of the Jordan River, the Golan Heights and the Gaza Strip. Zionism emerged as a major force of aggression and expansionism. Israel’s socialistic pretensions were swept away as the Begin government pursued a policy of expansionism in the region.

Just at the point where over a million Palestinians were brought under a military dictatorship, American policymakers embraced the Holocaust, carefully edited of course, institutionalizing it and using it to mobilize public opinion behind Israel. It provided the moral cover for US aims. This became particularly critical after 1973 when public criticism of Zionist expansionism began to escalate.

Novick writes of this period, “Current conflicts were endowed with all the black-and-white moral clarity of the Holocaust, which came to be, for the Israeli cause, what Israel was said to be for the United States—a strategic asset” (p. 156).

It is no wonder that official Holocaust remembrances fail to inquire into any disturbing issues, but serve to obfuscate the class issues, whether in Nazi Germany, Rooseveltian America or within Israel itself.

The shift in American governmental policies and interests are not sufficient to explain why Zionism, previously the outlook of a small minority, was successful in attracting growing support after 1967. Why did a petty-bourgeois nationalist outlook gain ascendancy?

Novick does not ask these complicated but decisive questions. He merely demonstrates the needs of US foreign policy and how they influenced public thought.

To understand the source of Zionism’s support, one must have an appreciation of the struggles of the working class during the twentieth century, and particularly the fate of both the German and Soviet workers. The triumphs of nationalism in these two countries, the first of the fascist variety and the second of the Stalinist type, left the working class physically devastated and ideologically crippled. The subsequent appeal of Zionism was primarily the continuing legacy of these defeats.

For present-day generations to learn the lessons of this period and avoid drawing the most pessimistic conclusions from the horror of the Holocaust, it is necessary to comprehend both the fate of the Soviet Union and the political aims of Hitler’s regime. For example: one must understand what fascism arose in response to? Why *did* Hitler begin with the destruction of the communists, Social Democrats, trade unionists and other political opponents of the regime? What was the political role of modern anti-Semitism? Why did the European bourgeoisie resort to fascism in the 1930s? One must draw the lessons of the betrayal of the German working class by the Stalinist Communist Party. (See the excellent pamphlet by David North, *Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Holocaust* <http://www.wsws.org/history/1997/apr1997/fascism.shtml>).

Novick, on the contrary, skirts these issues. He does not contrast his own ideas about the context of the Holocaust with those he opposes. While he argues for real history, based on the contradictions and

complexities of the time and a broader political context, when it comes to the role of the working class and of socialists, Novick fails to consider the impact on public opinion.

It should be noted that this is a very conscious omission. Novick is a thorough and extremely knowledgeable historian. It is not an oversight, but a political decision. Novick was, in his younger days, an adherent of socialist views, a supporter of the Shachtman tendency. Having discarded his own personal hopes for a socialist future, it appears that Novick dismisses the weight of this tradition.

If ordinary people today have been misled by Zionism and identity politics, it is generally because they understand neither the class interests these ideologies serve, nor the historical context of the Holocaust itself. Novick sees the success of right-wing trends in thought and condemns them, but fails to elaborate the alternative.

In relation to the postwar period, it is especially glaring that the author fails to deal with the role of the US Communist Party, particularly among Jewish intellectuals. To understand the general shift within this milieu from a leftist or socialist orientation to pro-Zionist, one would have to examine the impact of the CP’s support for the formation of Israel, the effect of the anticommunist purges within the trade unions, the Communist Party’s failure to conduct a class defense of the Rosenbergs (executed in 1953), and the overall effect of McCarthyism and the prostration of the Communist Party before the right wing.

The traumatic year of 1956, the year of Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” and the Stalinists’ crushing of the Hungarian Revolution, is not mentioned in *The Holocaust in American Life*. These events fell like bombshells on tens of thousands of socialist-minded Americans. Communist Party USA membership collapsed. A significant section of the population, formerly socialist, despaired of a left-wing solution to the historical plight of the Jewish people.

Subsequently, as the author describes, there was a broad decline of universalist consciousness and the rise of identity politics. This infatuation with racial explanations, while so popular today, itself arises out of a profound disappointment in liberalism, trade unionism and other reform-based outlooks—compounded by the corruption of a layer of those who directly benefit from various forms of “black capitalism,” quotas and similar nostrums. Finally, the seeming failure of the Soviet Union and the inability to explain its contradictions led many people to abandon their hopes for a working class solution, and embrace nationalist, racial or individualist “solutions” within capitalism.

In judging the book, it becomes clear that Novick’s politics limits his scope. His failure to reckon with the relationship between the struggles of the working class and the rise of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and its place in public convention, renders his work one-sided. It is therefore not surprising that he concludes his book on a highly skeptical note, stating that he doubts that mankind can find or teach any lessons from the Holocaust.

Novick’s *The Holocaust in American Life* is a welcome contribution on political life in twentieth century America, but it ultimately falls short in explaining the events it chronicles.



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