

## U.S. Propaganda during World War II and the Cold War and the American Response to the Holocaust

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Abstract

*This essay focuses on the reception of the Holocaust in the United States. It attempts to explain the reasons behind Americans' rather indifferent response to the genocide of Jews during World War II and in the early years of the Cold War. It illuminates the impact of propaganda on the response to the Holocaust in both parts of a geopolitically divided world. The purpose of this essay is to show how the reception of the Holocaust in American society affected the representation of this tragic event in American literature and culture in the postwar period.*

*Keywords: Holocaust, World War II, propaganda, Jews, American culture*

When in 1948 the gruesome reality of the death camp in Auschwitz was revealed to the general public in its full extent, Jewish American writer and journalist Isaac Rosenfeld responded to it in the following words:

We still don't understand what happened to the Jews of Europe, and perhaps we never will. There have been books, magazine and newspaper articles, eyewitness accounts, letters, diaries, documents certified by the highest authorities on the life in ghettos and concentration camps, slave factories and extermination centers under the Germans. By now we know all there is to know. But it hasn't helped; we still don't understand... there is no response great enough to equal the facts that provoke it. (qtd. in Kremer 11)

Similar feelings were expressed in the novel *In the Beginning* (1975) by Chaim Potok through his protagonist, a small boy named David Lurie, a child of Polish Jewish immigrants to America, who gets acquainted with the terror of the Nazi genocide vicariously from the pictures published in magazines and newspapers:

I saw a photograph of dead children, eyes and mouths open, bodies twisted and frozen with death and I tried to enter it and could not. I bought the papers and magazines and saw the photographs of the chimneys and the furnaces and the death trains and tried to penetrate the borders of the cruel rectangles – and I could not do it. They lay beyond the grasp of my mind, those malevolent rectangles of spectral horror. They would not let me into them. (400)

Both quotations point to the same fact: that the events of the Holocaust are beyond our understanding and that we can hardly find words for the destruction of almost six million Jews because words lose their meaning in the face of brutal actuality. Yet a disquieting question comes to our mind: is this seeming inaccessibility of this subject, its inexpressibility, the only reason for the long-lasting silence about the Holocaust in the United States? Does it sufficiently explain Americans' hesitance to tackle this experience of atrocity?

If we settle for a more general approach to the Final Solution, we will hardly be able to explain a certain discrepancy in the response to this historical collapse in America and Europe. Obviously we must consider geographical factors and admit that the long distance between the European wartime scene and American shores had an impact on the delayed response of Americans to the Nazi genocide. An overwhelming majority of Americans did not come into touch with the *Shoa* directly, and unlike many Europeans, they had no immediate

experience of this mass disaster. However we must also look for answers in the historical context – in the social and political situation in the United States during World War II and in the postwar years marked by the Cold War.

It is understandable that Americans' knowledge of the mass extermination of Jews was limited during World War II. Even in Europe, news about the systematic killing of the Jewish population spread very slowly, and many people – including Jews themselves – refused to believe it. They tended to dismiss information on the atrocities in death camps as false rumors or overblown fantasies. In a way their disbelief was justifiable, because they could hardly imagine the efficiency of the modern technology of killing. Moreover, the unreliability of the sources of information also contributed to the general questioning of their truth. The news was disseminated through illegal, unofficial channels that did not breed confidence. With increasing distance from Europe, skepticism toward the destruction of European Jewry was even bigger. It is not surprising that many Americans considered the news about the mass murder of Jews in Europe to be exaggerated, a part of the war propaganda.

There was another reason for the marginalization of the Holocaust in the United States: the persecution and annihilation of Jews were, in fact, overshadowed by the wartime events in which Americans were involved directly. One of these was undoubtedly the attack on Pearl Harbor. People's focus was shifted to the Japanese, who had become America's worst enemy. For the American mass media and their audience it was much more interesting to follow the dispatches from theatres of war in the Pacific and Europe than to pay attention to disturbing news about the fate of Jewish people in the old continent. Consequently, only few Americans were aware of what was happening to Jews in the concentration camps and death camps. The extent of the Jewish catastrophe remained hidden – and not only because of the skilful tactics of the Germans, who kept the terrible conditions in the concentration camps secret. Peter Novick in his book *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999) mentions another factor that led to Americans' indifference to the Jewish catastrophe. He points to the blunting of people's senses, which resulted in ignorance:

It has often been said that when the full story of the ongoing Holocaust reached the West, beginning in 1942, it was disbelieved because the sheer magnitude of the Nazi plan of mass murder made it, literally, incredible – beyond belief. There is surely a good deal to this, but perhaps at least as often, the gradually emerging and gradually worsening news from Europe produced a kind of immunity to shock. A final point on disbelief. Accounts of the persecution of Jews between the fall of 1939 and the summer of 1941 often spoke of 'extermination' and 'annihilation.' This was not prescience but hyperbole, and prudent listeners took it as such. By the following years, when such words were too accurate, they had been somewhat debased by premature invocation. (25-26)

Novick also mentions the passivity of the Jewish civilian population during World War II, which is in contrast with the American desire to present victims as heroes, in the spirit of the American tradition. Stories about Jews going like sheep to the slaughter did not match the American fondness for heroism, embodied by Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill or Davy Crockett in tall tales and various stories from the Frontier, and extensively voiced in mass culture. Put briefly, the Holocaust was not an American story.

The failure of the USA to make efforts to save as many Jews as possible was also influenced by the American immigration policy established before World War II. In spite of the relatively liberal approach of Americans to immigration, from time to time anti-immigration sentiments prevailed among them as a reaction to strong immigration waves. These sentiments provoked a response in Congress, which passed restrictive legislation aimed at the limitation of the influx of immigrants. The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924, by which each nation was given a quota according to the number of people of that national origin already

living in the United States, handicapped nations from South and East European countries because it assigned low quotas of admission for them. In the late thirties and at the beginning of the war, before Jews were entrapped in Central and Eastern Europe, this discriminatory law turned out to have a fatal effect on a part of Jewish population in this region.

All these factors, in combination with the residues of isolationism from the early republic, contributed to the general unconcern of Americans with the Holocaust. On the other hand, Americans were aware of the rapid growth of anti-Semitism in Europe since the thirties, when Hitler came to power in Germany. They were informed about Kristallnacht and other events leading to the persecution of Jews. They knew that the victimization of European Jewry was one of the priorities of the Nazi regime. Considering this aspect, it is striking that American Jews showed only little interest in the fate of their European brothers and sisters. Strictly speaking, they conformed with the indifferent response of the American non-Jewish population to the Nazi genocide. The question is why these conformist tendencies among American Jews in their approach to the European Jewish catastrophe became prevalent.

On a general level this indifference can be explained by the inevitable process of assimilation of Jews in the American Diaspora. Already the first generation of Jewish immigrants to the New World realized that their Americanization was a key to success. Abraham Cahan's David Levinsky in the novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) is a notorious literary example of the transformation of East European Jews through assimilationist forces. However, to "make it in America" meant paying a high price. Levinsky's social rise was achieved at the cost of the oblivion of his ancestral roots. This was the case with many American Jews. Their assimilation as a result of conformity led to the lessening of their awareness of Jewishness and a weakening of their feeling of solidarity with European Jews. So many years after the arrival of immigrants in America, their children and grandchildren felt little affinity with their ancestors' motherland.

It is a sad truth that the Jews in America did very little for the rescue of their brethren in the old continent. As Novick suggests, their priority was the Zionist program of the foundation of a new Jewish state in Palestine. Apart from a lack of unity, Novick also mentions another reason for their disinterest in the destruction of European Jewry. According to him, they had a cowardly fear that their engagement might arouse anti-Semitism in America itself (40). An indication of this was to be found in several voices claiming that Jews had too strong an influence on the government, due to which American soldiers were sent to European battlefields. American Jewish organizations wanted to avoid a confrontation with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had very good relations with them. Nevertheless it is also true that even if they had been more active, their chance to influence the rescue of Europe's Jews would still have been minimal.

In the first post-war years the refugees who survived the death camps and emigrated to America met with a rather callous response of Americans to their former plight. These people, who were first classified as "liberated prisoners" and later on as "displaced persons" and "survivors", lacked a sensitive audience to share their trauma. On the contrary, they sometimes faced negative reactions because their miraculous survival was regarded as the result of their collaboration. Despite the shocking revelation of the inhuman suffering of Jews in concentration camps through photographs published in some prominent magazines in 1945, survivors did not find Americans eager to listen to their stories about their adversities. Many years later their feelings were faithfully depicted by the Jewish American writer Cynthia Ozick in her novella *Rosa*, in which her protagonist refuses to be called a "survivor" and expresses her contempt for those people who "take human beings for specimens" (Ozick 43), referring to Dr. Tree, a scholar of social pathology who conducts research into Holocaust survivors and who represents "Holocaust vampires, feeding on maimed lives and twice victimizing them" (Cohen 163). Rosa revolts against the apathy of Americans toward her

suffering by the aggressive destruction of her New York antique store. Rosa's rejection of being labeled a "survivor" parallels the view voiced by the former camp prisoner Werner Weinberg:

I have been categorized for remainder of my natural life. I have been set apart for having been in the Holocaust, while in my own sight I am a person who lived before and who is living after... To be categorized for having survived adds to the damage I have suffered; it is like wearing a tiny new Yellow Star... It is a constricting designation that can easily make its bearer appear – to others and himself – as a museum piece, a fossil, a freak, a ghost. (qtd. in Novick 67)

In the years immediately following World War II, Americans' reaction to the Holocaust was influenced by the Cold War, which contributed to the marginalization of the *Shoa* in their consciousness. Jewish organizations in the United States inclined not to emphasize the topic of the Holocaust in order to distance themselves from the left, which had appropriated the tragedy of the Jews for propagandistic purposes. According to Finkelstein, "with the inception of the Cold War, mainstream Jewish organizations jumped into the fray. American Jewish elites 'forgot' the Nazi holocaust because Germany – West Germany by 1949 – became a crucial postwar American ally in the US confrontation with the Soviet Union" (14). To paraphrase Ralph Waldo Emerson, they did not want to "grope among the dry bones of the past" that scared them.

It is also known that the Holocaust became a suitable tool for Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in their ideological campaign against the West. In other words, the legacy of the Holocaust was misused for purely propagandistic purposes. In their effort not to be identified with this leftist propaganda, many American Jews preferred to remain silent about the Holocaust. This was even more visible during McCarthyism. Their fear that American Jews could be associated with Communists had its historical roots in the 1920s and particularly in the 1930s, when many of them – including influential Jewish intellectuals – were involved in the Old Left. Espionage prosecutions such as the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed in 1953 for passing secret U.S. nuclear information to the Soviet Union during World War II, only raised general distrust of Jews in America. The high percentage of Jews among the members of the Communist Party of the USA and the frequent investigation of Jews by the Un-American Activities Committee (distinguished dramatist Arthur Miller was one of them) stoked Jewish organizations' fear that they would be associated with Communism, which was one reason why these organizations collaborated so actively with the Un-American Activities Committee in the McCarthy-era witch hunts. It is also worth noting that "the American Jewish Committee endorsed the death penalty for the Rosenbergs" (Finkelstein 15).

In their effort not to appear to be in conflict with mainstream America and to dispel doubts about them, Jews conformed with general response of Americans to the Holocaust. As Novick points out, due to the Cold War the Holocaust became universalized. Western propaganda introduced the term genocide, which was used more in connection with the totalitarian regimes in Communist countries than with Nazism. In the context of the Cold War, it is characteristic that in the United States any discussion about genocide only rarely dealt with the Holocaust; instead, it related to the crimes of the Soviet bloc, particularly to those of the Stalinist regime. The uniqueness of the Holocaust was called into question by drawing parallels between Nazism and Communism. On the opposite side, propagandistic employment of the Holocaust as a weapon against the USA and other Western countries was paradoxical because in Communist countries anti-Semitism was revived very soon after the war. As a matter of fact, political, religious and economic persecution of Jews in post-war Eastern Europe was the reason for their massive immigration to America and other Western countries.

The marginalization of the Holocaust in the United States due to the Cold War propaganda had its practical consequences in the American government's policy toward displaced persons. The program of aid to these refugees, which was originally aimed at the real victims of the Holocaust, slowly shifted its focus to a different target group – the victims of Stalinism, and more generally, people who wanted to flee abroad from the totalitarian constraints of communist regimes.

All these historical aspects explain the general ignorance of the Holocaust in American society, including its Jewry, in the 1950s and 1960s. This silence about the Holocaust was also visible in American culture. American films, dramas and fiction emphasized universal features of World War II and failed to address the mass suffering of Jews in concentration camps. It is telling that the best American war novels published in the first years after World War II did not reflect the *Shoa*, and instead of portraying the genocide they stressed the absurdity of war and contradictory role of the United States in World War II, conveyed in various external and internal conflicts. The war was often seen as a parable about American life. These features are apparent in such novels as in Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and James Jones's *From Here to Eternity* (1951), which are set in the South Pacific, or in Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions* (1948) with its setting on the European battleground. John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) clearly illustrates which events of World War II had a greater influence on American people. While the Holocaust was on the periphery of public interest as something that was a part of the closed past, nuclear destruction (which would consummate the original meaning of the word "holocaust" literally) was perceived in the face of the coming Cold War as a very topical menace, as a symbol of the potential annihilation of mankind in the near or more distant future. Though Hersey touched on the theme of the Holocaust later in his documentary novel *The Wall* (1950), it is symptomatic that in accordance with Americans' cult of heroism he focused on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of the Jews against the Nazis, the courageous resistance that became an acceptable symbol of the Holocaust for many Americans. Their aversion to the status of a passive victim, so opposite to the adoration of heroes, might be one of the reasons why American artists were reluctant to capture the uniqueness of the program to exterminate the Jews. The Holocaust was simply an uncomfortable theme.

Yet, there were a few exceptions that drew the attention of the American public to the Holocaust at that time. The publication of *The Diary of Anne Frank* is best-known among them. It appeared in Britain and the United States in 1952 for the first time under the title *The Diary of a Young Girl*. For many readers this book has become a "metonymy for both Jewishness and Holocaust" and Anne Frank herself "a kind of martyrological icon, dying so that a new generation of Jews might live – and identify – as Jews" (Young 109-110). However, it took many years before Anne Frank and her diary became perceived in this symbolic way. Later, the new generation's approach to Anne Frank as a cult heroine was reflected in Philip Roth's novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979), in which Roth's autobiographical protagonist Nathan Zuckerman feeds his imagination with the fixed idea that one of the characters, Amy Bellette, is Anne Frank who survived Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen and now denies her identity to keep her testimony urgent. Nevertheless, if we return to the years immediately after the war, they were generally marked by Americans' unconcern with the Holocaust.

The silence about the Holocaust was broken at the beginning of the 1960s. The rise of interest in the Jewish catastrophe was not primarily aroused by the thaw in the Cold War – which was short-lived anyway, as the Berlin Crisis culminating in the erection of the Berlin Wall in 1961, and the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, smashed any hopes of ending the tension between the Soviet bloc and the Atlantic Alliance. What really accelerated public concern with the Holocaust was the capture of Adolf Eichmann by Israeli Mossad agents in Argentina

in 1960 and the subsequent trial of this war criminal in Jerusalem. This interest was symbolically portended by the publication of the first significant American novel on the Holocaust, *The Pawnbroker* by Edward Lewis Wallant, in 1961. Though this writer is very underrated, and even in the United States half-forgotten, his pioneering role in constituting the Holocaust novel in America cannot be denied. As a matter of fact, in many ways he anticipated future tendencies in American Holocaust fiction. In *The Pawnbroker* Wallant established the structural patterns that were later developed in a fuller and more sophisticated way by many other writers who dealt with the Holocaust after him. He paved the way for such authors as Saul Bellow, William Styron, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Cynthia Ozick, and last but not least Art Spiegelman. *The Pawnbroker* can undoubtedly be regarded, as Lillian S. Kremer says, “a prototypical American Holocaust novel, establishing what have since become the standard devices of American Holocaust fiction” (Kremer 63).

In 1963 Hannah Arendt caused a stir with her controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. This book provoked much criticism because of its unconventional, non-conformist depiction of the essence of evil. In contradiction with the established image of perpetrators as beasts or demonic monsters, she presented Eichmann as an ordinary man, a bureaucrat obediently carrying out orders from above. Today her concept of evil would not be so provocative (many scholars, for example the historian Christopher Browning in his book *Ordinary Men*, published in 1993, take a similar universalist approach to the nature of perpetrators) but in the early 1960s Arendt’s book was received with much anger, partly stemming from misunderstanding of her independent thought. This aversion was particularly strong among Jews, who treated her almost as a traitor to her nation. They also blamed her for showing the passivity of Jews and the collaboration of the Jewish Council, known as the *Judenrat*, with the Nazis (more than 15 years later the Jewish American writer Leslie Epstein did not hesitate to point out this dark part of Jewish history in his novel *King of the Jews* /1979/, based on the real historical figure of the Lodz Jewish ghetto leader Chaim Rumkowski).

However, the real upsurge of interest in the Holocaust was still to come. It happened in the 1980s and 1990s and was in stark contrast to the previous decades. Especially NBC’s broadcast of a TV miniseries called simply *Holocaust* in 1978 is generally regarded as the turning point in the change of Americans’ attitudes to this traumatic event (Greenspan 45), and this growing interest culminated in the nineties with the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. in 1993, and with the showing of Stephen Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List* in the same year. But that would be a topic for another essay.

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