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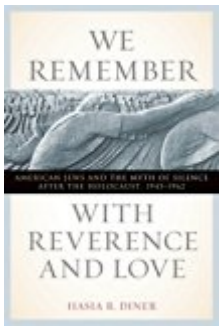

Hasia R. Diner. *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962.* New York: New York University Press, 2009. 528 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-1993-0.

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

The basic premise of Hasia Diner's book *We Remember with Reverence and Love* is that a great historical injustice has been committed against United States Jews who lived between the end of World War II and the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961-62. According to an oft-repeated scholarly "truth" stated by almost all of the post-World War II historians, literary scholars, and cultural critics who have written about American Jewry up until now, American Jews, who were at the time rushing to live the "good life" in suburbia, had no interest in thinking about, engaging with, and memorializing the Holocaust. There was a "conspiracy of silence" for multiple reasons: because they did not want to differ from other white, middle-class Americans; they feared victimhood and thought discussion might inspire more anti-Jewish activity; they felt deep shame and guilt at having been unable to save their families; in a period of intense U.S.-Soviet rivalry it was not suitable to draw attention to the misdeeds of America's new postwar friend the Federal Republic of Germany; the anticommunism of the era stifled debate; parents wanted to protect their children from the horror; survivors just wanted to get on with their lives. Thus there was a deliberate forgetfulness.

Supposedly the Holocaust did not erupt as a topic for public discussion until either the Eichmann trial or after Israel's lightning quick victory over Arab armies in the 1967 Six-Day War, when it appeared that a second Holocaust had been averted and the formerly helpless Jewish people emerged as triumphant. Before then, newly affluent American Jews cowered in their suburbs, afraid to say anything about it. Although the author cites numerous examples of this dominant historiography regarding postwar American Jews in her book, she draws particular attention to Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999) and Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry* (2000). Both made the theme of postwar American Jewish avoidance of the Holocaust central to their arguments. Novick and Finkelstein, in Diner's evaluation, both claimed that new and frequent invocations of the Holocaust after 1967

were an exploitation of the topic and "had little to do with the victims but everything to do with the nefarious politics of contemporary American Jewry, particularly its uncritical advocacy of Israel," a state they believed "did not deserve American support" (p. 8).

The author suggests in her conclusion that these angry charges of pre-1962 or pre-1967 Holocaust amnesia became accepted in part because the rebellious generation of the 1960s swallowed ideology rather than scholarly evidence. They took part in the decade's counterculture, loathed everything about their parents and the "Establishment," took part in an age-long tradition of Jewish self-criticism, and slammed their predecessors for not being more militant. These young people took those attitudes with them as they became academicians, rabbis, journalists, and communal leaders, both professional and lay. Hence the flawed paradigm.

Diner conclusively disproves American Jewish Holocaust amnesia before 1962 or 1967. The post-1967 material--what the author refers to as "the mammoth Holocaust culture of the late twentieth century"--indeed differs in quantity, quality, and funding, perhaps becoming as great as to make what happened before almost invisible to later generations, but that does not mean that previous to that time American Jews ignored the Holocaust (p. 390). In over five hundred pages of massively researched text and notes, including numerous illustrations, we see documented in great detail how American Jews not only remembered and memorialized the six million during those earlier years; they invoked them in almost everything they said and did as a community, particularly in the struggle for civil rights, where they drew from memories of Nazism a special hatred and fear for American racism, segregation, and bigotry.

According to ***We Remember With Reverence and Love,*** postwar American Jews constructed a giant commemorative culture, with no precedents or examples from other religious and ethnic groups to guide them, starting "from the ground up" (p. 9). Commemorating of the heroes of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943 and advocating for the State of Israel as a refuge, moral debt, and consolation for the Jewish people's losses were central to this enterprise. The standard Holocaust memorial service began developing even during the war itself. First there would be a speech telling of the German's horrific deeds, followed by a musical selection, the lighting of six candles, and the singing of canonical ghetto hymns such as ***Ani Ma'amin*** (I Believe) and the ***Partisaner Lied*** (The Partisan's Song). Often there would be a recitation of the ***kaddish.*** Local at first, by the mid-1950s these ceremonies became city-wide affairs, organized by bodies specifically designated for that purpose.Jewish holidays, especially Passover, became occasions to recall the dead and exhort American Jews to higher levels of education and observance to compensate for what had been lost. Special prayers and rituals were composed. In 1952 a national "Seder of Remembrance" text meant to be read at the Seder table was distributed which was reprinted in Jewish newspapers for many years. Hundreds of thousands of copies were distributed to community councils, youth clubs, synagogues, religious schools, and community centers. Organizations used them in their model Seders, they were reprinted in ***Haggadot,*** and rabbis used them on interfaith radio and TV shows. (This particular text provides the title of the book.)

There were no large marble edifices on American soil yet, but synagogues and clubs put up small plaques in memory of what the Nazis had done, created memorial niches, displayed names of family members of congregants who had died, and honored Torah scrolls and ritual objects salvaged by the U.S. Army from destroyed Jewish communities. Torahs that were unusable were buried in public ceremonies. Markers in cemeteries commemorating specific towns were erected, sometimes with ashes from the crematoria. Amer-

ican Jews funded the planting of trees in memory of the victims, creating the Martyr's Forest in Israel with its symbolic six million trees. Hundreds of *yizkor bikher,* memorial volumes in Yiddish of various towns, appeared in the United States as well as all over the world.

American Jews produced a huge variety of programs, documentary films, liturgies, sermons, performances, music, art, and dance devoted to Holocaust topics well before 1962 or 1967. A vast literature developed through the 1940s and 1950s--books, magazines, newspaper articles, memoirs, poetry, fiction and nonfiction of a scholarly and popular nature. The head of the Jewish Division at the New York Public Library noted the publication of scores of books relating to the Holocaust in a report entitled "The Literature of Martyrdom" for 1948-49. In 1960-61, according to the *Jewish Book Annual* of that year, one-third of all the Jewish books published were about the Holocaust (p. 103). The subject fairly saturated Jewish periodicals, several of which--*Commentary, Midstream,* and *Tradition* among them--cited the catastrophe as one of the reasons for their founding. There were public lectures and adult education classes about it across the country. Numerous references to the catastrophe appeared in the records, sermons, and speeches of the 1954 American Jewish tercentennial programming, where writers emphasized that American Jews were the largest community of Jews left. Educators constantly discussed their responsibility to replace the lost spiritual and cultural centers of Europe and how best to put the Holocaust into the curriculum of Hebrew schools.

American Jews, Diner writes, also used the Holocaust as context and justification for political action. They spoke of it when they advocated for the 1.4 million Jewish survivors left alive after the war, when they agitated against British policies in Palestine and called for U.S. support for opening the gates of Palestine to Jewish immigration, and when they helped to create and then advocated support for a Jewish state. They spoke of it when they fought immigration restrictions based on race and ethnicity that kept all but a relatively small number of Jewish survivors from reaching the United States after the war (approximately 150,000). They spoke of it when they voiced their hatred for postwar Germany and doubted the efficacy of the denazification process during the Cold War even when it was not politically expedient to do so. Partisans of different denominations and Jewish communal streams, from right to left, invoked it as justification for their particular approach to American Jewish life. Those who participated in the fight for civil rights in the postwar United States referred to it, as they fought to overturn America's system of racial segregation. As Diner writes, "At public programs, at the annual meetings of Jewish communal and religious organizations and in publications, American Jews talked about these two matters--the Holocaust and civil rights--one after the other.... Activists saw an organic connection between the two. The two issues clearly existed in tandem with each other in the minds of American Jews" (p. 296).

In her conclusion, the author begins to give some reasons for the perceived disparity in postwar Holocaust memory before and after 1962 or 1967, although she writes that another book would be necessary to fully answer that question. One theory she suggests, as noted above, is that the student radicals of the 1960s took their militancy and revulsion for the older generation living in American suburbs with them when they entered the academy and professional life in the years afterward and this was reflected in their world views and scholarship. Additional factors beyond the scope of *We Remember with Reverence and Love* might include the impact of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which was not as successful as the conflict of 1967. Also, the revelation that President Franklin D. Roosevelt and members of the U..S government not only did nothing to rescue Europe's Jews, but were complicit in actively opposing any attempts at rescue until nearly the

end of the war added a sense of rage and betrayal to the already potent mix of emotions regarding the Holocaust. This knowledge did not surface until early in 1968, when Arthur Morse's book ***While Six Million Died: A Chronicle of American Apathy*** first appeared.

Another legislative factor which can be added to the discussion was the passage in 1972 of the Ethnic Heritage Studies Act, which provided federal funds to train teachers, develop programs, and disseminate information to all Americans about the nation's ethnic minorities. American Jewish representatives chose to insert the history of the Holocaust into the curriculum.[1] Study of the subject became mandatory in public educational institutions across the country. The passage of the Ethnic Heritage Act encouraged the entrance of ethnic studies in general and the Holocaust in particular into mainstream American culture. It set the precedent for government support for Holocaust projects, culminating in the opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC in 1993. Aside from the myriad benefits that public Holocaust education for non-Jews was thought to provide, the subject well intersected the history of European Jews with the history of the United States and its role in fighting against Hitler during World War II. It also had the advantage of being a topic about Jews that could be presented in a non-religious way, thus not breaching the barrier between church and state.

We Remember with Reverence and Love shows us at least that remembrance of the Holocaust became central and not peripheral in American Jews' inner communal life much sooner than previously thought, and leaves us to ponder whether remembrance of it will remain such a central part of American Jewish communal life and political activity in the future.

Note

[1]. On the role of the Ethnic Heritage Studies Act and the choice of American Jewish groups to I am grateful to Prof. Leonard Dinnerstein of the University of Arizona who shared with me a chapter from an unpublished book manuscript on the Holocaust in American life, "Riding the Ethnic Wave," 252-253.

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