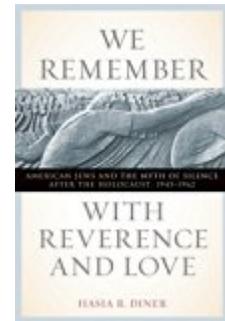


Hasia R. Diner. *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. 528 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1993-0.

Reviewed by Stephen Scala (United State Holocaust Memorial Museum)

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## Demolishing the “Myth of Silence”

In her work *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*, Hasia R. Diner sets out to explode the “myth” of American Jews’ (non-)engagement with the Holocaust in the two decades following the Second World War. Well into the 1960s, so the conventional narrative goes, American Jews studiously avoided substantive engagement with the systematic mass murder of approximately six million of their co-religionists in Europe—approximately two out of every three European Jews—by Nazi Germany and its allies. The Cold War saw the abrupt transformation of Germany from bitter foe to key U.S. ally and engendered a potent American anticommunism exceedingly wary of ambiguity in one’s identity and loyalties. In this context, American Jews were loathe to discuss the uniquely Jewish tragedy of the Holocaust so as not to alienate themselves from the predominantly white, Christian, middle-class American society into which they avidly sought inclusion in hopes of gaining a share of the greater affluence and elevated standing it promised. The drive for material gain and social advancement effectively precluded frank discussion of the Holocaust among American Jews until the capture, trial, and execution of Adolf Eichmann by Israeli authorities in 1960-62 and, even more decisively, Israel’s victory in the Six-Day War in 1967. These events reawakened a sense of Jewish identity in American Jews that transcended the narrow confines in which it had languished under the conformist mania for postwar integration. This new configuration of American Jewish identity, mixing feelings

of local Jewish pride with international Jewish solidarity, in turn brought the Holocaust to the forefront of American Jewish consciousness and initiated the subsequent process of Holocaust memorialization that has continued down to the present day in the United States.

In *We Remember*, Diner sets out to explode the so-called myth of silence, sketched out here. She argues that the conventional narrative of “American Jewry’s avoidance of the Holocaust” is patently false and she takes to task those historians and other scholars whose works have elevated the “myth of silence” to the status of an accepted truth: “They have built their arguments on a thin base of evidence, gleaned from few or no sources.... Offering sweeping and highly judgmental generalizations about a complicated and divided group of people from a limited number of documents, they created this widely believed but deeply flawed truth” (p. 9). Diner’s portrayal is ecumenical in its attribution of guilt: sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists are critiqued alongside their historian colleagues for helping establish “[t]he paradigm of an amnesiac American Jewry during the postwar era ... built on slipshod scholarship that put ideology over evidence” (p. 9). Peter Novick and Norman Finkelstein serve as the main historiographical antagonists in *We Remember*, whose works Diner identifies as having contributed more than all others to entrenchment of the thesis of American Jewish Holocaust avoidance.[1]

Diner pursues her critical investigation in six lengthy thematic chapters that cover, respectively, physical and metaphorical memorials to the Holocaust; presentation of the details of the genocide of European Jewry in scholarly and non-scholarly forms; addressing the Holocaust via engagement with those who survived it; American Jews' attitude toward postwar Germany (mainly the Federal Republic); connections drawn between the Holocaust and contemporary political and social issues in the United States and internationally; and wrestling with the "Jewish future" in a postwar environment where American Jews had become the world's largest functioning Jewish community. In examining how American Jews engaged with the Holocaust in these areas, Diner presents the reader with a wealth of both published and unpublished materials. An astounding array of prayers, monographs, articles, brochures, song sheets, discussion protocols, artistic creations, cemetery markers, and sermons conclusively demonstrates that American Jews were far from silent about the tragedy that had befallen their co-religionists in Europe. The far-reaching "memorial culture" limned by Diner cut clear across dividing lines of religious and political orientation to encompass all segments of a highly diverse American Jewry. Correspondingly, how and to which end, whether solemn or self-serving, intensely personal or self-consciously public, the various swathes of American Jewry engaged with the Holocaust in the first two postwar decades varied immensely. To cite one example, Diner shows how the Holocaust was invoked to justify one's position on the contentious issue of Jewish education, where "the schools that individual commentators considered best and most likely to compensate for the horrific losses reflected their own ideologies" (p. 352). An Orthodox rabbi thus substantiated his 1959 appeal for "proper Jewish" (i.e., Orthodox) education by alluding to the Nazi slaughter of European Jews while proponents of Yiddish instruction likewise grounded their position in reference to the Holocaust. They claimed that it was through learning Yiddish—the language spoken by the majority of Jews killed in the Holocaust—that the cultural legacy of murdered European Jewry could best be honored and perpetuated. On the basis of a truly massive number of examples touching upon myriad facets of American Jewish life, Diner's study unambiguously reveals that the Holocaust occupied an important place in postwar American Jewish discourse. Equally important, the memorialization of the Holocaust was inextricably interwoven with contemporaneous (and occasionally antithetical) concerns of the diverse postwar U.S. Jewish community (though this point often comes through more implicitly than explic-

itly).

Yet for all the copious evidence she marshals, Diner's analysis does not fully bear out the claim that the Holocaust "infused every sector of American Jewry" (p. 3) and thereby possessed central importance in American Jewish life in the two decades following the Second World War. A main reason for this is that the question of quantity versus quality in respect to evidence is too often answered in favor of the former. A significant number of sources are treated in a rather cursory manner, where a statement about the Holocaust found in a given source is presented, but more thoroughgoing examination of the text in question (and the specific context in which it was formulated) remains absent. The sheer volume of evidence presented by Diner leaves no doubt that American Jews engaged with the Holocaust during the time period in question, yet, given the curt treatment and lack of context surrounding a fair number of sources, it becomes difficult to establish whether such attempts to grapple with the Jewish genocide were central or peripheral for a given community, group, or individual. It would seem that, in her single-minded drive to dispel "the myth of silence," Diner let slip a wonderful opportunity to pose a set of even more pointed analytical questions. To wit: How did remembrance of the Holocaust both reflect and shape the broader political and cultural life of the various, diverse, and frequently antagonistic swathes of American society more broadly as well as Jews' views of and relations with non-Jewish segments of the population? Diner does not entirely avoid such questions, particularly in chapter 5, where Jews' support for liberalism, circumspection toward anticommunism, and advocacy for civil rights figure prominently. Still, these discussions serve as a matter of ancillary concern, subordinated to the larger, less ambitious goal of establishing, contra Novick, Finkelstein, and the rest, that American Jews did not shrink from frank and substantive engagement with the Holocaust.

The critical reader is particularly struck by one other element of *We Remember*: the near-complete absence of meaningful reflection upon the theoretical and methodological issues attendant to the study of memory and memorialization. Given the subject of her study, and considering the amount of scholarly work conducted in the past two decades on memory in general and the Holocaust and the Second World War in particular—arguably the most studied topics in the field—Diner's failure to engage with the mountain of relevant literature is highly problematic. The issue is not simply one of abstract theory disconnected from and irrelevant to historical practice as greater attention to theoretical and methodologi-

cal problems surely would have had a salutary effect on the analytical component of Diner's study by prompting greater consideration of the how and why of American Jews' postwar remembrance of the Holocaust alongside the question of "whether." Despite the particularly thorny methodological and evidentiary issues inherent to her topic, one also wonders what the outcome would have been had Diner taken advantage of the opportunity to conduct oral history interviews and how the results might have enriched and/or problematized her analysis and conclusions.

These points of critique notwithstanding, *We Remember* is a highly informative, well-written, and engrossing study based upon a prodigious amount of primary-source research. Diner ultimately succeeds in cutting the "myth of silence" down to size, demonstrating that the much-invoked thesis of Jewish avoidance of the Holocaust in the two decades following the Second World War is unsustainable in light of the mass of evidence she has unearthed, which is undoubtedly one of the outstanding achievements of the study. To be sure, Diner's account may occasionally overstate the degree to which Holocaust remembrance pervaded postwar Jewish culture in the United States. Additionally, she sometimes leaves further-reaching analytical questions unaddressed. Yet, these features are understandable given the weight of the historiography against which she is arguing. In her con-

clusion, Diner, in an interesting turn, makes an attempt to diagnose why the thesis of Holocaust avoidance has attained paradigmatic status, arguing that support for the "myth of silence" has had much less to do with sound scholarship than with the politics (and political prejudices) of its proponents. Having come of age in the post-1968 era, she argues, they have mistaken difference in Holocaust remembrance for evidence of its absence altogether. Diner's provocative reflections on this point, which she acknowledges cannot be more than preliminary and speculative, certainly require further substantiation, but they underscore the character of her study as a first shot deliberately intended to shake up the field. She does not pretend to have the final word on American Jewish Holocaust remembrance in the first two postwar decades. In this respect, *We Remember* excels and represents an extremely valuable contribution, sure to prompt fruitful debate and significant revision of inherited views on the topic as well as to stimulate further scholarly investigation into several important issues tantalizingly brought to light if not comprehensively analyzed in the work.

#### Note

[1]. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); and Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (London: Verso, 2000).

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