

# H-Net Reviews

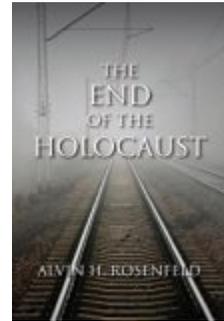
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alvin H. Rosenfeld. *The End of the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.  
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Reviewed by Ken Waltzer (Michigan State University)

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## Representing the Holocaust

The end of the Holocaust normally refers to the final events in the Nazi war against the Jews, including the liberation of the camps and the postwar encounter with survivors. For Alvin H. Rosenfeld, the Irving M. Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies and professor of English at Indiana University, it refers to something else—the end of the Holocaust as a clear event known and confronted in its specificity and full moral weight in public consciousness. In this important, thought-provoking collection of essays (some that appeared earlier and are updated, some that are new), Rosenfeld worries about and laments the dissipation of clarity taking place in contemporary culture about the Holocaust. He believes that a process is underway that, as the Holocaust is represented increasingly farther in time from the actual events, it becomes *transfigured*, losing its specificity. We then lose our sense of the Holocaust as a massive crime and trauma and as a special moral event in human history.

Rosenfeld argues that while the role of historians in relating the past remains important, the public actually learns about the Holocaust from numerous alternative forms of narrative, art, and film created by novelists, dramatists, TV writers, journalists, filmmakers, and museum professionals, as well as from the rhetoric of political life and the memory controversies that play out periodically before the public. As a response, Rosenfeld offers a sustained meditation on the cultural and political mediation of the Holocaust story, which he thinks has become “very much in flux,” and is now “a volatile area of contending images, interpretations, historical claims

and counter-claims” (p. 7). Today, Rosenfeld says, the horrific past is used as an entertainment about life being beautiful, and the word “Holocaust” and various Holocaust phrases and categories are appropriated as outsized metaphors applied to a multitude of victimizations. In sum, the Holocaust is trivialized, vulgarized, bent, expropriated, and stretched so that “a catastrophic history ... is lightened of its historical burden and gives up the sense of [special] scandal” that should attend it (p. 11). We then face a paradox: as more and more attention is focused on the Holocaust, at the same time we must worry increasingly about the “end” of the Holocaust.

Rosenfeld is not the first to worry about such matters. As he makes clear in a dedication, and in several essays comprising the heart of the book, numerous survivor-writers have voiced concern over the same issue. During his final years, Primo Levi worried about public awareness of the nature of “the offense”; Elie Wiesel worried both vocally and in print about “trivialization”; Jean Améry worried about historical “entropy,” the loss of heat, and energy about the Holocaust; and Imre Kertesz identified the paradox Rosenfeld restates: “The Holocaust appears to be ever more unintelligible the more people talk about it” (p. 12).[1] Rosenfeld channels these survivor-writers’ thoughts, picking selectively from their works, as he seeks to keep alive and powerful the memory of and the sense of moral outrage against the offense. Real encounter with the Holocaust, he writes, should be a wrenching experience, not entertainment or false metaphor. He thus stands strongly and rightly

against any and all tendencies to normalize, domesticate, blunt with happy endings, instrumentalize, and falsely analogize the Holocaust.

Among the numerous problems he highlights in Holocaust representation are the inflated rhetoric of victimization and the normalization of atrocity in contemporary culture. Another concern is the unhitching of the Nazi Holocaust from its historical moorings so that a wide range of people are called “Nazis” or accused of genocide—including, grotesquely, the descendants of Holocaust victims defending themselves in Israel. Yet another problem is what Rosenfeld, like Hilene Flanzbaum, calls the “Americanization of the Holocaust”: the need to package Holocaust tales with uplifting or redemptive endings, to be inclusive regarding the targeted victims, or to emphasize the basic goodness of human beings and the saving power of individual moral conduct. American Holocaust stories turn upward at the end rather than allowing a sense of tragedy to linger. In a famous example, Steven Spielberg’s movie *Schindler’s List* (1993) moves a marginal rescuer to center stage and offers a typically American way of presenting a tragic history. Finally, another concern stems from the increasing globalization of the Holocaust, where it becomes a sign or a marker of universal evil shorn of any deep or specific understanding. As historian Yehuda Bauer has summarized in an oft-quoted phrase, “In the public mind the term Holocaust has become flattened,” so “any evil that befalls anyone everywhere becomes a Holocaust.”[2]

Yet this writer wants to suggest that there is also something tendentious, even unidirectional, in Rosenfeld’s analysis in *The End of the Holocaust*. Rosenfeld piles on examples of the type mentioned above, from Bitburg to recent flaps about Israel, but also leaves out anything that might suggest a more complicated cultural or political picture. New works in Holocaust scholarship are appearing thanks to the opening of new sources in Germany and the former Soviet Union; the Holocaust story is expanding constructively to contemplate long neglected events in Ukraine as well as North Africa. In the past generation, several major museums that effectively exhibit and represent aspects of the Holocaust have opened or been refurbished in Washington DC, Jerusalem, and London; and there are occasional artistic and documentary narratives and films that significantly add to our knowledge and our emotional sense of the hugeness of the event. As Samuel G. Freedman remarks in a recent review of *The End of the Holocaust*, Rosenfeld’s kind of “purity” is “clarifying,” and offers “an ethical and aesthetic compass to navigate through Holocaust art and history.”

Yet a reader might also be tempted to ask “whether any middle ground exists between the handful of writers and filmmakers Rosenfeld extols and virtually everyone and everything else who has the temerity to address or represent the Holocaust.”[3]

Rosenfeld also places something of a misplaced faith in history and historians as the better guardians of the kind of historical truth and moral emphasis desired. The history of the Holocaust has been affected by some of the same currents of elision and revision found in the other forms of representation Rosenfeld cites. In recent years, a colonialist school has sought to put the Nazi Holocaust in the larger frame of imperial genocides that commenced abroad and were then brought home to the European continent. There has also been a comparative genocide variant that, focused on Europe alone, has seen the Nazi Holocaust as one among many genocides occurring on a dark continent during the twentieth century, a genocide not stimulated by plan or idea but emerging from the Nazi imperialist confrontation with the Soviet Union. Timothy Snyder’s *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), although a serious and in many ways quite original book, fits with this latter orientation; by emphasizing the Holocaust as one of many “genocides” during the 1930s and 1940s carried out in the bloody borderlands between Nazi and Stalinist tyrannies, he produces the same sort of flattening effect as found in other comparative studies.

Finally, Rosenfeld mentions yet another paradox in representations of the Holocaust. In some cases, he says, through cultural mediation the deceased victims of the Nazis seem to return from their graves and to take on new life, as in the case of Anne Frank, while other survivors—Améry, Levi, Wiesel, or Kertesz—continue a tormented or anguished existence lived alongside death, and some “even succumb to the view that they really belong among those who perished” (p. 164). This reader wonders about such dichotomization and also about the effects of such narrow canonization. As Rosenfeld himself acknowledges, many survivors have also embraced new life, integrated old and new lives, and lived happily and successfully. Many have also addressed the Holocaust past responsibly and acted as effective narrative witnesses.

Still, Rosenfeld’s exploration in chapters 4-6 of the writings of key survivor-witnesses who worry openly that they have failed or will fail as agents of memory and moral conscience, and who provide models of authentic wrestling with difficult experience, stimulates new thought and consideration. Rosenfeld skips past impor-

tant differences between such writers as Levi and Wiesel, who varied in the ways they used universal or specific categories and the kinds of voices they deployed to address Holocaust experience. Instead, Rosenfeld emphasizes that all such notable survivor-writers as Améry, Levi, Wiesel, and Kertesz describe at the center of their experience loss, dehumanization, and destruction of human dignity in the camps—what philosophers Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin call the unique combination of “destruction” and “humiliation” of the Holocaust.[4] All also enlighten their readers about the ongoing pain, guilt, shame, and self-accusation that ensues long after the Holocaust. For survivors, the past is never past; and the real challenge in representing the Holocaust is that soon there will be no more survivor-writers.

Rosenfeld’s *The End of the Holocaust* is an illuminating exploration that offers a worried look at Holocaust representation in contemporary culture and politics, reminding us that the great works focus on the distinctive tragedy of extermination, killing, radical dehumanization, and continuing trauma. Such works affirm a certain representational shape and moral weight to the events. They are countercultural, in the sense that the culture works to reshape and soften the story; they speak from the heart of darkness and also are clear and accurate about the targeted victims. In an extraordinarily anxious final two chapters, Rosenfeld goes on to worry that contemporary efforts to diminish and generalize the Holocaust slide over toward erasure and inversion and are

part of a larger gathering reality that threatens it can all happen once again. With a clearly resurgent global anti-Semitism and the Middle East a new flash point of global crisis, Rosenfeld worries openly that an end to the Holocaust can actually play into a second Holocaust. Whether one agrees or disagrees with this conclusion, *The End of the Holocaust* clearly offers much material to think about and is a key foundation for any future discussion.

#### Notes

[1]. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Summit Books, 1988); Elie Wiesel, “Art and the Holocaust: Trivializing Memory,” *New York Times*, June 11, 1989; Jean Améry, *Radical Humanism: Selected Essays* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 64-65; and Imre Kertesz, “Language in Exile” (unpublished English translation of a Hungarian essay).

[2]. Originally quoted in Alvin H. Rosenfeld, “The Americanization of the Holocaust,” *Commentary* 99, no. 6 (June 1995): 35.

[3]. Samuel G. Freedman, “The ‘Wrong’ Way to Remember,” review of *The End of the Holocaust*, by Alvin H. Rosenfeld, *Moment Magazine* (May-June 2011), [http://www.momentmag.com/Exclusive/2011/06/book\\_holocaust.html](http://www.momentmag.com/Exclusive/2011/06/book_holocaust.html).

[4]. Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin, “The Uniqueness of the Holocaust,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 66.

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