

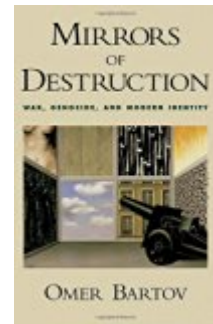
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Omer Bartov. *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide and Modern Identity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. viii + 302 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-507723-0.

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Modern Mass Violence and the Holocaust

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This is a penetrating, wide and subtle study of twentieth century mass violence, centered on the Holocaust (Shoah). There is a concentration on French, German and Israeli experiences. The book can be viewed as a set of four not unrelated essays, together with a conclusion.

In his introduction, the author writes: “It is my assertion ... that the project of remaking humanity and defining identity has been at the core of this [twentieth] century, and that much of this project was characterized by a tremendous destructive urge followed by a long and as yet uncompleted process of coming to terms with the disasters it has produced and is still producing in many parts of the world. In other words, while this book is devoted primarily to German, French, and Jewish discourses on war, genocide, and identity, this should in no way be seen as an attempt to diminish the importance of other genocides ... [yet] however much we learn about other instances of inhumanity, we cannot avoid the fact that this genocide [the Holocaust], in the heart of our [Western] civilization, perpetrated by one its most important nations (with the collaboration or complicity of many others), can never be relegated to a secondary place.

The first chapter (or essay), “Fields of Glory,” is about the glorification of war which was endemic in the West during the earlier years of the twentieth century. The author indicates that such glorification has diminished in the West, but has continued in some parts of the non-Western world, and to some extent in conflicts between

the Western and non-Western worlds.

The second chapter, “Grand Illusions,” is about the disillusion brought about by the two world wars. A comparison is made between what happened in Germany in this regard and what happened in France. In Germany, the disillusion after World War I may be said to have been instrumental in a renewed glorification of war, the rise of the Nazi regime, and to World War II. In France, on the other hand, the disillusion led to a kind of pacifism and eventually to a kind of collaboration with the Germans during the Vichy regime.

The third chapter, “Elusive Enemies”, concentrates on the pervasive tendencies in Germany, France and Israel for one group to designate itself as consisting of victims of another group, designated as enemies, whereas the latter group designates itself as victims of the former group, whom the latter group regards as enemies. The kind of thinking and feeling involved in these turnabouts is analyzed by the author in terms of “enemies within” and “enemies without”. Comparisons are made between thoughts and feelings about “enemies within” and “enemies without”, especially as found in France and Germany, and among Jews. The “elusiveness” of enemies refers to the tendency of enemies to be considered as somehow hidden and lurking, especially in the case of Jews in Germany where Jews were demonized in ways that did not correspond to behavior of actual persons. The author says (p. 91): “At the end of the twentieth century, we need to ask whether we have succeeded in

breaking out of the vicious circle of defining enemies and making victims, which has characterized a great deal of the last hundred years and has been at the root of so much violence and bloodshed.”

Chapter 4, “Apocalyptic Visions” begins with a meditation on the destructiveness which has been brought on by attempts to realize utopian plans for reorganizing societies and governments. However, the author also has sections in which he discusses what lessons might be learned from the Holocaust, effects the Holocaust has had on religion and morality, how the Holocaust might function in education, and other topics related to the Holocaust. The chapter concludes with a long and powerful description and analysis of the writings of Ka-tzetnik 135633 (Yehiel Dinur, formerly Feiner; the pseudonym is derived from the German word Konzentrationslager, customarily abbreviated KZ), the effects that these writings have had in Israel, and effects they might have elsewhere in the world if the writings were to become more widely known and appreciated.

Bartov remarks that some of the writings of Ka-Tzetnik, especially the one known as *House of Dolls* in English translation, were read as pornography by young people in Israel during the first couple of decades of the existence of that nation. He says, though, that when he returned to Ka-Tzetnik’s writings, and studied them completely, he was struck by their obsession with violence and perversity. He characterizes Ka-Tzetnik’s work as not great writing, and quite adolescent in their approach. Nevertheless, he ranks them in importance with writings of Jean Amery, Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel for gaining insight into the Holocaust, and contrasts the writings of Amery and Levi with those of Wiesel and Ka-Tzetnik. According to Bartov, the sextet of novels by Ka-Tzetnik known as *Salamandra* (salamander) exhibits a development by Ka-Tzetnik over a period of some 40 years from regarding Auschwitz, the camp of which Ka-Tzetnik is a survivor, as “another planet” to regarding Auschwitz as inherent in our own planet.

Bartov says (p. 202-3): “A few years ago the Israeli ministry of education ... decided to collaborate in a reissue of Ka-Tzetnik’s sextet and to deliver thousands of these volumes to Israeli high schools as recommended reading on the Holocaust. ... In the 1950s and 1960s Israeli youngsters read Ka-Tzetnik because he was the only legitimate source of sexually titillating and sadistic literature in a still puritanical and closed society, with the result that the Holocaust somehow became enmeshed in their minds with both repelling and fasci-

nating pornographic images. Similarly, by now the complete sextet may well have the opposite effect from that expected by the Israeli educational establishment. For ultimately, when read from beginning to end, Ka-Tzetnik casts doubt on both the Zionist venture and on the possibility of dividing humanity and history into different planets. His ‘recovery’ from schizophrenia and depression is not achieved by ‘coming to terms’ with the past, but by accepting that the past and present are one and the same, and that the victim of yesterday may turn out to be today’s executioner. Most radically, he concludes that yesterday’s victim was potentially also the killer and that the killer could easily have been the victim. In a mystical scene pregnant with kabbalistic symbolism, Dinur finally ‘resolves’ the mystery and unites with his other self by bringing the evil of Auschwitz into our own world.

Bartov says of Ka-Tzetnik’s writings (p. 211): “Those who wish, and are able, to read hundreds of pages of thick descriptions on the *anus mundi* that was Auschwitz must add this sextet to their lists, perhaps even put it on top of everything else. And those who are unhappy with simplistic and banal interpretations of the Holocaust must make the effort to plunge into these harrowing, uneven, at times frustrating, even outrageous, but ultimately extraordinary volumes.”

In his conclusion, Bartov discusses three recent examples of “troubling attempts to come to terms with the devastating legacy of our century”. One of these events is the controversy which arose when the novelist Martin Walser stated in a speech in 1988 that he was growing impatient with what he called the “instrumentalization of the Holocaust” as “a routine threat, a tool of intimidation, a moral cudgel or just a compulsory exercise.” (quoted by Bartov). “For this,” Bartov says (p. 214), he was accused by the leader of the Jewish community in Germany, Ignatz Bubis, a Holocaust survivor, of “mental arson.” The resulting quarrel became associated with the Holocaust memorial which was proposed to be constructed in Berlin. The second event discussed by Bartov is centered on a novel by Bernhard Schlink, known in English as *The Reader*, which Bartov characterizes (p. 223, 224) as “both a kind of coming to terms with the past, and an apology, depending on where our sympathies lie, and whether we see Michael [a central character] as expressing Schlink’s views or as the author’s attempt to create a figure that would manifest how the second generation in Germany became warped by the crimes and complicity of their parents”, so that *The Reader*, then, is about Germany as victim. The third event discussed by Bartov is the notorious publication of Binjamin Wilkomirski’s

Fragments, which was taken to start with as a kind of memoir, and is now widely taken as a kind of fiction. work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

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