



**Michael E. Staub, ed..** *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook*. Waltham: University Press of New England, 2004. xxiii + 371 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-58465-417-9.



**Reviewed by** David Settje

**Published on** H-1960s (September, 2006)

In *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook*, Michael E. Staub, professor of English and American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, provides an anthology of primary documents that illuminate Jewish thought during the 1960s. The selections contribute a sampling of responses to topics from the 1960s that will interest a broad range of academics and students alike. Many of the sources consider racial issues, such as the civil rights movement and black identity, or demonstrate how the Jewish community discussed and debated their ethnic heritage, including deliberations about the meaning of the Holocaust, the state of Judaism in America, and a global conversation about war, Israel, and Jewish identity. Little here adds to historiographical debates or academic studies of the decade. Rather, these primary sources reveal a cross-section of opinions from that era that give a general overview and begin a conversation about the American Jewish community during this decade. Topics include the civil rights movement, race relations, American Jewish identity, the Holocaust, the various wars of the 1960s, the counterculture, the sexual revolution, and the women's rights move-

ment. The articles and reviews contained in these categories were pulled from such periodicals as *American Judaism*, *Dissent*, *Jewish Press*, court cases, and Jewish newspapers. And many were written by such luminaries as Betty Friedan, Allen Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, Elie Wiesel, and the American Jewish Congress, to name a few.

Staub gives considerable space to articles and commentary about the Jewish responses to the civil rights movement and issues of black identity. Much of this literature examines the way in which Jewish people supported the movement, and why. As a selection by Seymour Siegel explains, the historic struggle against prejudice faced by Jewish people led to a natural sympathy for any people confronting discrimination. This further led Jews to dialogue about the relationship they had with African Americans. Joachim Prinz, president of the American Jewish Congress, stated the following at the March on Washington on 28 August 1963: "As Jews we bring to this great demonstration, in which thousands of us proudly participate, a twofold experience--one of the spirit and one of our history" (p. 90). Yet other entries

reveal the dissension within Judaism about this civil rights involvement. Rabbi Bernard Wiener exemplified this point of view, warning that "northern liberal Jews" put at risk southern Jews who faced hostility from white southerners because of their northern counterparts. Most of the selections about Jewish responses to the civil rights movement and black relations lean toward acceptance and activism against prejudice, demonstrating the important role that this community played in race relations during the 1960s.

Jewish concerns about race and ethnicity, of course, led them to discuss what it meant to be Jewish in America. Here again, a debate took place within the community that Staub's sampling brings to the reader. For example, some of the entries lament a lost Jewish identity, claiming that the process of Americanization had imperiled their heritage and risked the loss of their uniqueness. Other commentators disagreed by pointing out the centuries of Jewish adaptation to new cultures and environments around the world without the abandonment of religious and ethnic heritage. Much of this discussion included the continued struggle to understand the Holocaust and especially to commemorate and grapple with it going into the future. Abraham Joshua Heschel summarized this dilemma when he attempted to understand Auschwitz: "[T]o try to answer is to commit a supreme blasphemy. Israel enables us to bear the agony of Auschwitz without radical despair, to sense a ray God's radiance in the jungles of history" (p. 80).

As Heschel did in mentioning Israel as a response to the Holocaust, Jewish commentators often discussed the 1960s international context and its relationship to American Judaism. The threat posed by the Soviet Union toward its Jewish citizens alarmed many in the United States and prompted a debate about what, if anything, American Jews could and/or should do to protect them. The Soviet Union's "ban on the baking of matzoh bread for Passover" and the possibility of Soviet

officials scapegoating Jews for the nation's economic problems in the early 1960s presented real dangers (p. 121). The selections about the USSR address this dialogue and the fear of many that American Jews remained too apathetic toward their fellow Jews in Russia. Another debate over international affairs erupted with the outbreak of the Six-Day War. The American Jewish community divided over whether or not they agreed with the Israeli response, yet most came to accept the war as necessary. The entries ably demonstrate the tension that existed especially for leftist Jews, between their liberal ideology and Zionist backing in the midst of this conflict. More than any other section, this deliberation about the Six-Day War showed the depth and complexity of Jewish responses to the varied events of the 1960s.

Other selections address a broad range of issues from the 1960s that affected American Jews without specifically concerning their ethnic heritage or religious identity. As with the rest of the nation, the Jewish community debated the Vietnam War. Interestingly, according to the sample articles in this volume, Jews faced the same dilemma as many in the civil rights movement during the Johnson administration: while they came to question the war, they feared alienating a president who supported other causes important to them. Unlike many in the civil rights movement, however, this concern continued into the Nixon administration because of his support for Israel. Other sections in this anthology outline Jewish reactions to such major issues as Radical Judaism, the counterculture, and the sexual revolution.

Despite contributing a needed and interesting volume with solid essays and good chapter introductions, some aspects of this anthology may frustrate the reader. The book introduction and the introductions to each section suggests that the sampling of articles presented represents a cross-section of Jewish opinion. Yet several sections seem to give a one-sided point of view. For example, the selections on the Vietnam War offer only

one pro-war entry, the gay and lesbian movement receives only support in the selected essays, and Jewish debate concerning the civil rights movement is characterized with a majority of positive viewpoints. Perhaps this leftward slant truly represents Jewish thought in the 1960s, but allusions within the essays and other secondary literature suggest a more complex worldview. Most maddening, however, is the placement of author biographies and the citations for the source in which each piece originally appeared. Biographical information is hidden in the introductory essays to each section and original publication information is found at the end of the anthology. Whether a publishing or editorial decision, it would have enhanced this volume greatly had a brief biography, even just a sentence or two, appeared before each entry, along with the original source citation from the 1960s.

Nonetheless, this volume provides a good source for those interested in a sampling of Jewish opinions on a variety of topics from the 1960s. As an overview for scholars unfamiliar with the Jewish context of the decade or as a sourcebook for undergraduates, the selections and contextual placement of them will prove accurate, helpful, and thought-provoking.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

**Citation:** David Settje. Review of Staub, Michael E., ed. *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. September, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12276>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.