

Annette Wieviorka. *The Era of the Witness.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. xv + 168 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-7316-6.



Reviewed by Monica Black

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The Holocaust, Annette Wieviorka observes in her new volume, has become paradigmatic for the construction of collective memory. She notes that historians working in a variety of periods and on manifold topics now use categories created after World War II, such as "genocide" and "crimes against humanity," to describe events that in some cases predate those concepts; more recent instances of genocide, in Bosnia and Rwanda, are often understood with reference to a lexicon created to define the Jewish genocide; and in popular culture, Auschwitz has come to symbolize unqualified evil. As these examples suggest, and as historians of collective memory have succeeded in making us aware, what is remembered at any given moment about the past has a great deal to do with the moment in which it is remembered. Although Holocaust survivor testimonies, which were collected even as the genocide transpired, tell irreducibly unique stories, they have always been shaped by the expectations and concerns of the time and place in which they were produced. This, as Wieviorka demonstrates, means that testimonies transcribed in Riga in 1941 differ in characteristic ways from those provided by witnesses

called during the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, which are in turn different from those given since the mid-1990s as a part of Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation project, which aims systematically and exhaustively to collect hundreds of thousands of survivor testimonies from around the world. It is the changing views of testimony itself and the impact of their shifting social meaning for the study of history that are at the heart of Wieviorka's concerns in this slim, stimulating little book.

Wieviorka identifies three historical phases in the social meaning of Holocaust testimony, which correspond with the book's three chapters. Chapter 1 deals with the period during and just after the genocide. A variety of forms of memory conservation were undertaken by those who witnessed the destruction first hand—from collective archival projects such as *Oneg Shabbat* (Joy of the Sabbath) in the Warsaw ghetto, to the efforts of individuals to record their own stories, to Yiddish poetry and the post-1945 compilation of *Yizker-bikher*, and memorial books. In the 1940s and 1950s, the memory of the genocide was almost ex-

clusively a private one and "very little of it, if anything at all, seeped out into the broader world and spread" (p. 51). Survivor organizations mostly confined their efforts to mutual aid, not to bringing their story to a larger audience. Only a few instances of public commemoration were attempted, and not all were successful. In 1953, a memorial was created in France, which was followed by the establishment of Yad Vashem in Israel. In the United States, by contrast, an effort undertaken to create a memorial for the Jewish victims in the late 1940s foundered for lack of funds (p. 49). Initial forms of testimony, such as memorial books, were often neglected, Wieviorka evocatively writes, like "cemeteries that no one ever visited" (p. 28).

This state of affairs began to change in 1961, with the Eichmann trial, when the genocide, as many historians have acknowledged, began to take on broader social resonance. Wieviorka argues that this transformation was rooted in changes in the meaning and purpose of Holocaust testimony. In the book's second chapter, "The Advent of the Witness," Wieviorka describes how Gideon Hausner, chief prosecutor in the case, embraced Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's view that the trial should serve as a "history lesson," and be imbued with social and moral purpose. In this pursuit, Hausner chose to have witnesses appear in court to tell their stories. It mattered little, for the purposes of the trial, that Eichmann himself could have had little direct or indirect influence over many of the events depicted by the witnesses. Indeed, Eichmann, "the man behind the glass," faded into shadow as the trial progressed. The stories of the witnesses, 111 in all, took his place. They "concretized" and made vivid the genocide in a way that the "cold," evidentiary documents employed in the Nuremberg trials had not (p. 69). For Wieviorka, the trial was important to the memory of the Holocaust because it memorialized the dead and their murder, but also because it reshaped the writing of history, by suggesting that "mere" documents could not compete

with testimony as the new *sine qua non* of historical evidence. Victims of the Holocaust now attained a new social identity as survivors and became "an embodiment of memory." In turn, perceptions of the genocide itself shifted. The Holocaust was transformed into a "succession of individual experiences with which the public was supposed to identify" (p. 88). Wieviorka argues that these new views of testimony had long-term effects on the study of the Holocaust and offers Daniel J. Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners* as evidence.[1] In Wieviorka's accounting, "Goldhagen's work pulverized the universally established criteria for the academic writing of history." She sees Goldhagen, in effect, as the heir of Hausner, because he eschewed "antiseptic descriptions" of killing (p. 90) in favor of a conception of history that privileged "sentiment and emotion" (p. 93).

This perceived emphasis on emotionalism has been augmented, Wieviorka argues in her book's final chapter, with the shift toward the systematic collection of survivor testimonies. By the 1970s, the Holocaust had achieved a strong presence in public life in France and the United States, but these societies, too, had changed. The democratization of public discourse, the rise of a therapeutic culture on both sides of the Atlantic, and the triumph of the ideology of human rights, which placed the individual at the center of political concern, all contributed to a shift in views of testimony and the Holocaust. Here, however, Wieviorka sees developments in the United States as crucial. The 1978 miniseries *Holocaust*, the proliferation of academic programs in universities dedicated to the study of the genocide, the 1980 creation of the Holocaust Memorial Council, and the establishment of video projects to record survivor testimonies, especially Spielberg's *Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation*, are all evidence, she finds, of what has been called "the Americanization of the Holocaust"--a phenomenon also discussed by Peter Novick in *The Holocaust in American Life*. [2] "Americanizing" the

genocide has implied decontextualizing it and unmooring it from the historical specificities in which it was carried out, but also placing it in the service of a relentlessly optimistic American "way of seeing the world" (p. 120). "Testimony given spontaneously," Wieviorka writes, "and testimony solicited by the needs of justice, have given way to the social imperative of memory" (p. 126). She links the hunger for testimony gathering--the Spielberg project intends ultimately to document the testimony of some 300,000 survivors--to a crisis of confidence in learned experts, including historians (p. 142). The witness satisfies an ostensible craving in the present for the authentic, the intimate, for something "more real" than can be conveyed on the printed page.

As Wieviorka's argument progresses, it becomes clear that this is indeed her chief concern: that the historian is being forced into a kind of competition with the witness, or that rigorous historical scholarship is being pitted against a sometimes sentimental, unreflective collective memorial project, one that may amount to a "historiographical revolution." She is leery of the implications, for history, of the Spielberg project, which she sees as an instance of the "substitution of testimonies, supposedly real history, for the history of historians" (p. 116). Another development of recent concern to the author was the trial of Vichy official Maurice Papon for crimes against humanity in 1997, which she discusses in her epilogue. During the trial, witnesses were called to testify who were children during the deportations Papon oversaw in the 1940s. Their testimony, she notes, while emotionally powerful, sometimes distorted the historical record, as when a witness stated that her parents had fled pogroms in Latvia for France in the 1920s. There were, Wieviorka notes, very few pogroms in Latvia in the 1920s, but "collective memory prefers the idea that the wave of migration in the 1920s was a flight from anti-Semitism" (p. 146). One gets the sense that the author is concerned that memory, now at a remove of more than sixty years from the events of the

genocide, is increasingly misrepresenting the historical record, and, at the same time, that its emotional resonance might empower it, ultimately, to supplant that record altogether.

But there is perhaps a tension here. When we speak of the history of professional historians, on the one hand, and the collective memory of the genocide and its meaning in the present for French or American society, on the other, are we not talking about two rather different things? Can the two in fact be rivals? If, as historians, we look at memory's distortions not so much as a corruption of history, but as a brilliant tool for revealing the sensibilities of the moment in which testimony is given--which Wieviorka in fact does for much of this study--the witnesses at Papon's trial can be seen as having engaged less in representing or misrepresenting the historical record than in contributing to the ongoing construction of Holocaust memory. After all, individual testimonies, in whatever context they are given, are almost necessarily an indissoluble combination of a unique experience, the accretions of received knowledge, and an expression of the "discourses valued by society at the moment the witnesses tell their stories" (p. xii), as Wieviorka herself notes in her introduction. Moreover, their proliferation is evidence, as she astutely points out, of a longing for intimacy, directness, and "real experience" that seems to pervade many contemporary societies. Changing attitudes toward testimony need not necessarily worry us for the "fate of history," as long as there are historians, like Wieviorka, to point out and historicize memory's distortions and to offer analyses of their origins and significance. Overall the volume makes its arguments subtly and compactly and with recourse to a variety of fascinating material. The tension remarked upon in this review could make it productive reading for discussion in graduate or advanced undergraduate seminars on collective memory or, more specifically, on the memory of the Holocaust.

Notes

[1]. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Knopf, 1996).

[2]. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

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