

Hanna Yablonka. *Survivors of the Holocaust: Israel after the War.* New York: New York University Press, 1999. Translated by Ora Cummings \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-9692-4.



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Published on H-Judaic (May, 2000)

This ambitious work analyzes the absorption of Holocaust survivors into the Yishuv/Israel from the end of the Second World War until the early 1950's. Using letters of immigrants, protocols of meetings, newspaper articles and surveys, as well as statistics from a variety of sources, Yablonka describes the absorption process from the perspective of the immigrants and those involved with their absorption. Although Israel is often understood to be (and explains itself as) the one place Jewish refugees can always call "home," many Israelis, especially in the era Yablonka describes, have often considered themselves to be "new" or fully-emancipated Jews.

As a result of these different understandings of the Jewish state, many sabras and immigrants who had lived in Eretz Yisrael for some time were not accepting of the survivors, especially as a group, even though Holocaust survivors were precisely the people many supporters of Zionism had in mind when calling for the formation of the Jewish state. The sabras and long-time immigrants' reluctance to accept the survivors stemmed from the belief that the Holocaust proved that Jews

could not survive outside of Eretz Yisrael. Moreover, the perception common among Israelis that most Holocaust victims died like "sheep being led to the slaughter" may be understood as being influenced by the Zionist understanding of the *galut* as inherently weak. The fact that many Holocaust survivors were understandably physically weak after their ordeals only contributed to the sense of superiority (albeit often mixed with genuine sympathy) exhibited by many Israelis. This attitude, and Yablonka's sharp rejoinder to it, is nicely encapsulated in title of the book's first chapter: "Really, 'Human Dust?'"

It must be noted that this book is written not as an indictment of Israeli culture, but rather as an examination of the complex emotional and physical complexities involved in Israel's attempts to absorb an extremely large amount of people as the country itself went through the difficult period from the UN partition vote (in 1947) to the declaration of the state (in 1948) and the ensuing War of Independence (through 1949). The ambivalence and complexity is shown in various debates discussed in the book: whether or not Holocaust sur-

vivors should be given special privileges on kibbutzim, how they should be treated in the Army, whether or not the Histadrut (the Israeli federation of labor unions) should offer them cultural activities in their native tongues, rather than just in Hebrew. On a more 'global' level, Yablonka offers the following quotation from Ben-Gurion: "[Holocaust survivors] only demand and rightly so. History has put them into a situation where they can only make demands, how can you ask anything of someone whose wife was killed, his children exterminated, his parents? If they come here and look upon us as suppliers and they as demanders, then we shall have to accept that." (70)

To analyze the immigrants' success in integrating themselves into the country and the country's ability to absorb the immigrants, as well as to analyze Israeli attitudes to the immigrants, Yablonka examines three areas: the immigrants' ability to be absorbed into kibbutzim, the immigrants' ability to be absorbed into the army, and the ability of the Histadrut to aid in immigrant absorption. Yablonka chooses the kibbutzim and army because they are "elite sectors of Israeli society" (2), arguing that the ability of Holocaust survivors to enter these institutions is a barometer of their ability to be integrated into Israeli society as a whole. Here we might ask why entrance into elite circles within in the first few years of immigration should be used as a measure of absorption into a country or society. By definition, we would expect most immigrants to be unable to immediately enter the realm of the elites of their new state or culture. A better indication of a group's strength might well be an examination of the second and third generations' ability to enter a culture's elite.

Yablonka begins the main body of her work with a survey of the Holocaust survivors, making some comparisons to sabras and to the later wave of immigrants from Asia and North Africa (e.g., the *edot ha-mizrah*, the Jews of Iraq, Yemen, Mo-

rocco, etc.). She finds the Holocaust survivors to be literate and employed, although having a lower level of formal education among youth than among sabra youth (whatever education might have been received in Displaced Persons camps could not, by itself, make up for the lack of education in the concentration camps). Yablonka also points out that many survivors found housing in abandoned Arab villages, towns, or areas of cities during Israel's War of Independence. While there was some debate about the propriety of this (31-2), the question of whether the survivors were able to turn the abandoned villages into agricultural areas was considered to have been of greater importance. Here it must be remembered that most of Israel's leadership was committed to a combination of statist and agrarian Zionism.

As Yablonka moves from her survey of survivor absorption in general to survivor absorption into the Israeli Defense Forces, the tensions between the immigrants and the natives becomes clearer. In the eyes of the sabras, particularly the youth, the most prestigious survivors were the partisans. While this was understandable in light of the fact that many survivors arrived at a moment when fighters were needed most, it also reflects the way the Holocaust was ideologically understood by many Israelis and Zionists in general.

Further complicating the survivors' integration into the army and the country as a whole were both the logistics of the process and their interactions with other Israelis. Many survivors' first encounters with Israelis came in the Displaced Persons camps of Europe and Cyprus. There they met with representatives of the Yishuv or State who made a personal connection with them and often raised their expectations of what awaited them in their new country. Many survivors, however, entered the country during the War of Independence and were drafted right away. Not only that, they were often thrown in with sabras and others who had no idea what the survivors had been through or what they were ex-

pecting. Here, too, of course, the sabras's sense of superiority also interfered with the survivors' absorption process (134). Moreover, Holocaust survivors were portrayed as cowardly soldiers in works such as the play *On the Plains of the Negev* (147, 151). Yablonka refutes such charges of cowardice by citing testimony of soldiers and citing material from Z. Gilad's *The Book of the Palmah* (148, 150).

As noted at the beginning of this review, Yablonka states that she wishes to examine the absorption of Holocaust survivors into "elite sectors of Israeli society." Here we might ask to what extent the Israeli army as a whole saw itself as elite vis-a-vis other Israelis. Although units such as the Palmah may be said to have had such an attitude, it is my impression that the army was no more elitist than the rest of the country. In reading accounts of the early years of the state, one generally finds most Israelis were willing to serve in the defense forces, which indicates that army service per se is not an indication of elite status. To be fair, Yablonka does show clearly the difficulties surrounding the absorption of Holocaust survivors into the Israeli army. Given that many sabras and long-time immigrants were skeptical, to say the least, of the ability of survivors' ability to fight, the survivors' successes in absorption into the Israeli Defense Force are certainly worth noting.

Yablonka's discussion of survivor absorption into the kibbutz movement is one of the book's strongest points. At the time of the mass immigration of Holocaust survivors, the kibbutzim were facing a severe labor shortage, with many members in military service. On one hand, the survivors seemed to be an ideal source of new members, but on the other hand, many recruits had trouble being absorbed onto the kibbutz, due to great differences between themselves and veteran residents of the kibbutzim. One issue was the question of education: how much time off work should young survivors get to make up for the ed-

ucation they were deprived of in Europe? Another issue was that of material goods: how long should the new volunteers/members have to wait for items like cupboards, etc.? Of course, the terrible hardships of the Holocaust also had their effects: some survivors were not in good health and many had trouble blending into a larger group which had not experienced the concentration camps, especially when that larger group consciously saw itself as rejecting the Jewish existence the survivors knew before, and, particularly, during the Holocaust. Yablonka points out that for some survivors, the very organization of kibbutz life was reminiscent of the camps. As survivors had trouble adjusting to kibbutz life, veterans only felt more distant from them, a dynamic that increased as many survivors 'dropped out' of the kibbutzim. Yablonka documents the survivors' successful integration into Kibbutz Yagur and, of course, Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot (the Ghetto Fighters' kibbutz), whose original members were trained at Kibbutz Yagur.

The third institution that Yablonka examines is the Histadrut, which in many ways appears to have been the most effective institution in absorbing Holocaust survivors. Yablonka shows that with the birth of the state, the Histadrut became involved with immigrant absorption as well as functioning as the main force in Israel's heavily organized labor union (There was, as Yablonka shows, an inherent conflict of interest between the various roles of the Histadrut, especially because only Histadrut members could use the Histadrut's sick fund). Despite some paternalistic behavior, Yablonka's work shows that of the three institutions Yablonka examines in this book, the Histadrut was the most open to allowing Holocaust survivors autonomy. The Histadrut sick funds were aware of at least some of the special needs of survivors, offering tattoo removal (p. 257). As with the other institutions Yablonka surveys, the Histadrut was better at dealing with a limited number of immigrants rather than the mass immigration that came with the birth of the

state; nonetheless, the Histadrut comes across fairly well in this account.

The book concludes by assessing both the survivors' expectations of veteran Israelis as well as the impact of the mass immigration of the survivors on Israeli society. It is clear that the survivors expected veteran Israelis to help them but that this was not always done, for many reasons, chief among them being the lack of real planning by Israeli authorities about how to deal with mass immigration as well as the attitudes that many Israelis had about Diaspora Jews and survivors, in particular. Although the survivors were more successful in integrating into Israeli society than some of their contemporaries expected, Yablonka argues that their successes were also less noticed than deserved. Here it must be remembered that this book originally was written not only in Hebrew, but also as part of the intra-Israeli debate on the early years of the state, in general, and the issues surrounding the immigration of Holocaust survivors in particular. (Unfortunately, the choice of a new title for the English translation *Survivors of the Holocaust: Israel after the War*, rather than *Foreign Brethren: Holocaust Survivors in the State of Israel, 1948-1952* obscures both the chronological scope of the book as well as its sociological-historical thrust).

This is an essential book for anyone concerned with the study of Holocaust survivors or the early years of the state of Israel. It is a well-researched work that discusses both the major issues and the nuances of the subject. Given the continuous reinterpretations of the Holocaust and the State of Israel -- an issue Yablonka points to on page 9 -- it may be said that this book not only contains a well-written discussion of the struggles of Holocaust survivors in Israel, but also examines intra-Israeli conflicts that occurred fifty years ago which, to a large extent, have yet to be resolved.

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Citation: Richard Hoch. Review of Yablonka, Hanna. *Survivors of the Holocaust: Israel after the War*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2000.

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