

A So-Called Silence

American Jews and the Memory of the Holocaust

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The American historian Hasia Diner sets out to dispel a “myth:” it is mistaken, she argues, to claim that American Jews showed little interest in the Holocaust before the 1970s. This so-called silence, which a number of authors have denounced in recent years, ignores the wide variety of memorial practices that American Jews followed in the postwar years.

Reviewed: Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love. American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*, New York-London, New York University Press, 2009, 23 \$.

Hasia R. Diner’s latest book, *We Remember with Reverence and Love. American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945-1962*, was born out of unease—the unease that Diner, a professor of history at New York University, recalls feeling when reading critiques of American Jews for their alleged indifference, during the postwar years, to the genocide of their European brethren. This frustration led her to write her lengthy new book, which seeks to dispel what Diner without reservations calls a “myth,” in the term’s most common sense (i.e., a falsehood). This is not the first time that Diner has taken an interest in Jewish memory in the United States: while also authoring works in keeping with the multidisciplinary spirit of Jewish studies, which ties Jewish history to ethnic studies¹ as well as women’s studies,² she explored, in 2000, the representation and uses of the mythic New

¹ Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915-1935*, Baltimore-London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995 (first edition: 1977).

² Diner and Beryl Lieff Benderly, *Her Works Praise Her: A History of Jewish Women in America from Colonial Times to the Present*, New York, Basic Books, 2002.

York City neighborhood of the Lower East Side in the Jewish American imagination.³ Yet it is to a far more sensitive myth that her new book is devoted.

The “Myth of Silence”

Diner’s thesis in her most recent book is anything if not clear: she argues, contrary to what has been written previously, that American Jews, in the years following the Second World War, placed the Holocaust at the heart of their concerns, conversations, and communal culture. In making the genocide central to their collective identity, they did not wait for the Eichmann trial (1961-1962) or the Six Day War (1967), the two traditional turning-points in the story of the emergence, in the United States and elsewhere, of a public memory of the Holocaust that clearly distinguished it from other atrocities committed during the war. Her position is a frontal challenge to the conventional wisdom on the post-1945 relationship between American Judaism and the destruction of Europe’s Jews and on the stages that cleared the way for a Jewish-American understanding of the event.

In this respect, Peter Novick was certainly—for the American as well as the French public—the intellectual who contributed the most to forging the prevailing interpretation. If *The Holocaust in American Life*,⁴ a book that was unanimously praised for its intellectual seriousness even as it was hotly debated, addresses American society as a whole, it also makes many references to the Jewish community, which Diner often cites with critical intent. According to Novick, who devotes three chapters to the period addressed by Diner—1945-1962—the genocide was not particularly important to the communal agenda, public debates, or even the private discussions of American Jews until the 1960s. He offers several explanations of this silence. First, American Jews downplayed anti-Semitic persecution and even the genocide itself lest they interfere with the rehabilitation of West Germany, which had become an essential American ally in the struggle with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, they feared encouraging the equation of “Jew” with “communist,” which might result if they too openly denounced the distinctive character of Nazi anti-Semitism, rather than comparing Nazism to Soviet totalitarianism. Furthermore, the assimilationist ethos of the 1950s encouraged American Jews to melt into the white middle class, profit from the country’s economic growth, and take advantage of the opportunities for social mobility that the United

³ Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America*, Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2000.

⁴ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, New York, Houghton-Mifflin, 2000.

States' increasingly non-anti-Semitic society had to offer. In the prevailing optimistic and universalistic climate, which had little inclination to dwell on the genocide, American Jews were dissuaded from emphasizing the specificity of the Jewish experience during the Second World War and of claiming their status as victims—a status that, at the time, lacked any recognized social value. To this was added the concern with covering up American Jewish institutions' inability during the war to save their European brethren.

Diner is wrong to place Norman Finkelstein's book⁵ on the same level as Novick's (p. 8), as the former simply recycled the latter's arguments in his diatribe against the "Shoah business."⁶ She is, however, absolutely right to point out that the reception of both books focused on their critique of the more recent uses of "Holocaust" by American and international Jewish institutions. But their conclusions concerning the immediate postwar era has been overlooked. For Diner, this oversight is one proof among others that there exists a "communal myth" (p. 8) that American Jews refused to confront the genocide of their European brothers during the two decades following the end of the Second World War.

Explaining a Widespread View

In challenging the dominant interpretation, Diner does not seek merely to propose an alternative argument. She also wants to explain the appearance and pervasiveness of the prevailing paradigm. In doing so, she opts for a strictly political approach that has not met with unanimous approval in the United States.

Beginning in the second half of the 1960s and especially in the 1970s, at the same time that various social groups—ethnic minorities, women, or gays—began to demand respect for their identity, recognition for their suffering, and a visible presence in the public sphere, young American Jews, born for the most part in the United States after the war and populating the countries' university campuses, launched a vigorous critique of their own communities' establishments, which they reproached for embracing an excessively consensual conception of Judaism and of emphasizing assimilation rather than an affirmation of Jewish identity. In her conclusion, Diner submits that part of the explanation for the "myth of silence" lies in this rebellion within the Jewish community: young Jewish activists, breaking with their elders,

⁵ Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, New York and London, Verso, 2000.

⁶ For an analysis of both books, see Anne Grynberg, "Une mémoire saturée?," *Les Cahiers de la Shoah* 6 (2002): 123-160.

accused them of having handled the genocide superficially and timidly. Proclaiming themselves the faithful guardians of “Holocaust memory,” they rejected the leaders of Jewish institutions, accusing them of having done too little to save their brethren when there was still time, while also reproaching them for being too timorous in managing this painful legacy.

Yet according to Diner, this finger-pointing led some Jews to overlook the efforts on the part of their parents’ generation to incorporate the Holocaust into the texture of their group’s identity. Endorsed by various intellectuals, who occasionally participated personally in this protest movement (like Alain Mintz), this discourse was ultimately able to impose itself as the truth, resulting in what the author calls “an injustice to the past.” (p. 390) The extent of the collective commemoration of the genocide beginning in the 1970—which Diner herself calls a “a mammoth Holocaust output” (p. 372) overshadowed everything that had been done in this domain by postwar American Jews, even if this initial collective investment served as a foundation for the latest developments in “Holocaust Studies.” This accusation, leveled against a generation that today at the helm of American Jewish institutions may have been sufficient to guarantee that this book would create a stir. Fortunately, however, *We Remember’s* real interest lies not only its polemical conclusion, but also in its primary argument and supporting evidence.

The Jewish Community’s Protean “Memorial Culture”

Indeed, Hasia Diner spares no effort in making amends for the “injustice” of which the postwar generation was a victim. Over more than five hundred pages, she presents an impressive array of documentary evidence and a wide variety of examples that clearly attest to the attention that American Jews gave to the Holocaust and even to its centrality to Jewish public life in the United States. In light of this proof—the listing of which does not always make the book easy to read and which at times is offered in lieu of explanation—it is hard not to reconsider the thesis advanced by Novick and his supporters.

The organization of the book’s six chapters around three temporal axes—the past, the present, and the future—in view of which the Holocaust is evoked provides Diner with an intelligent framework for making her argument. The properly memorial (building monuments, establishing a commemorative calendar and liturgy, works of art, etc.) and historical enterprise (early research, the gathering of documents, exhibits, teaching, etc.) is matched on the one hand by the use of the event for contemporary causes (helping survivors, fighting for

African-American civil rights, vigilance towards Germany resurgence, denunciation of anti-Semitism in the Soviet bloc) and, on the other, by the impact of the destruction of Europe's Jews on the way in which American Judaism envisages its future, including the new responsibilities it takes on, beginning in 1945, vis-à-vis the global Jewish community

Her topic allows Dinner to trace the contours of the American Jewish community in all its geographic, political, and cultural diversity. Through the pages we discover a flourishing Jewish world: from the *Landsmanschaften*⁷ to survivors' associations, from major national organizations to the scores of community centers spread across the country. The enumeration of these actors does, however, indicate one of the analysis' limits: in studying the Jewish world, Diner neglects the familial sphere and the "kitchen table" conversations that Novick mentions.⁸ Moreover, given the wide variety of the actors she studies, and despite the fact that Diner reminds us on several occasions that different segments of the American Jewish community did not always agree on how the Holocaust should be viewed, it is a shame that she did not take a closer look at the debates and conflicts on this matter occurring within the Jewish community. This might have offered an image of American Jewish life that was somewhat less irenic.

More problematic is her concept of "memorial culture" (p. 9), which she uses to give an overall coherence to the wide variety of references to the genocide that she finds in her sources, ranging from private collections, the archives of numerous Jewish organizations, the Jewish press, and published sources of various kinds (essays, historical studies, novels, etc.). In each of these references, Diner appears to see an additional brick of an immaterial and protean memorial edifice. Yet the latter's reality remains elusive and her use of the term "memorial culture" is not entirely persuasive. Part of the problem is that Diner never clearly defines her conception of "memory"—a term with multiple meanings if ever there was one. Nor does she mention previous authors and schools of thought that, like her, have tried to grapple with it. The result is an overly expansive conception of memory, which ends up encompassing more or less every reference to the event, from explicit mentions to the most allusive of subtexts. This imprecise starting point makes it difficult for her to distinguish

⁷ A Yiddish term, *Landsmanschaften* refers to mutual aid societies organized on the basis of geographic origin by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.

⁸ Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life*, 53.

between different levels at which the past is evoked and to analyze the ways in which they overlap.

That said, *We Remember* is a book that will prove unavoidable in the history of Holocaust memory as well as of American Jews in the second half of the twentieth century. In asking us to reconsider the thesis of a supposed collective repression of the Holocaust in the postwar years and by supporting her argument with great precision, Hasia Diner's work makes an important contribution to the debate, even if it was not absolute necessary, in doing so, to assume the somewhat exaggerated role of the debunker.

First published in laviedesidees.fr. Translated from French by **Michael C. Behrent** with the support of the **Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah**.

Published in booksandideas.net 4 May 2012.

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