

JUL 1999

THE HOLOCAUST TO AMERICA

Novick's challenge to received wisdom

RECEIVED SEP 23 1999

6157

(2)

Hermann Goring never intended the death camps to act as classrooms, and people were not sanctified by gas chambers, they died in them. Not even racists like David Irving or David Duke would argue otherwise. But try proposing that the Holocaust offers no lessons at all, and that most Americans know more about this European event than the fact that the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Japan, for reasons that have as much to do with the Cold War as the Second World War. Then declare that many American Jews today use the Holocaust to win the gold medal in a 'victimization Olympics'. Now you've got fighting words.

Peter Novick, who makes those arguments in his new book, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Houghton Mifflin), insists he's not looking for trouble. 'I hate - hate - bad-tempered argument,' he says. 'Makes my stomach churn.' Novick swats the air as if discord were a fly he could shoo through the window. He scowls, grins, then takes a sip of Beaujolais. Bad-tempered argument seems to have flown off into the April sun outside Novick's office at the University of Chicago, where he is a professor of History. 'But I also hate the idea of being the kind of person who wouldn't say what he has to say because there are people who are going to give him shit.'

A broad-faced man with an expansive grin and unkempt, greying hair, he chain-smokes and slices the air to bits as he talks. He dismisses questions he considers foolish with good-natured curses and guffaws. 'Look,' he says, 'a young person who didn't have tenure could make excuses. But I'm here.' He gestures around the room, which he has personalized with a poster pantheon of icons: Marx, Marilyn, Kafka, Bogart, Einstein, Mickey Mouse, Billie Jean King. He has been at Chicago for 33 years, and in this office for the last 25. 'I don't have those excuses,' he says. And, he concedes, he is sometimes 'delighted to pursue disagreement'.

Novick admits he knew from the first day of his research that a book arguing that Americans pay too much attention to the Holocaust would make a lot of people angry. Not just survivors still haunted by the event, but also those for whom the Holocaust serves as an organizing tool. That's a big and diverse group: fundraisers for Jewish organizations who use the Holocaust as a scare tactic; Middle East hawks and Balkan bombers who claim it as a justification for contemporary policies toward Israel and Yugoslavia; Cold Warriors who defend questionable steps taken in the cause of anti-communism by equating the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany; exceptionalists who insist that attempts to compare the Holocaust to other events border on sacrilege; and universalists who use the Holocaust to call attention to issues as varied as abortion, big government, the death penalty, the right to bear arms, and animal rights. Novick has a warning for them all: the Holocaust makes a dangerous political football, and an even riskier moral cudgel. In fact, he seems to suggest, it is most similar to a boomerang, one that is likely to fly in the face of whoever throws it. 'The desire to find and teach lessons of the Holocaust has various sources,' he writes. 'Probably one of its principal sources is the hope of extracting from the Holocaust something that is, if not redemptive, at least useful.' But, he adds, 'I doubt it can be done.'

Given the number and diversity of enemies he is likely to make with *The Holocaust in American Life*, it might seem odd that a man who visibly cringes when described as provocative would write a book sure to inflame. 'I hate the idea that there's going to be unpleasant stuff when this comes out,' he says. 'But there's a difference between looking for a fight and not backing down from a fight.'

Novick was certainly not looking for one when he began research on the book ten years ago. He has spent most of his career and life uninvolved with the questions that raise hackles in the Jewish community. He does not even believe such a com-

Jeff Sharlet is a writer in Washington, DC. Portions of this article first appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

munity exists. American Jews, says Novick, have almost nothing in common. They do not share religious or political beliefs; their cultural traits are more determined by where they live than by their ancestry; active antisemitism has dwindled over the decades, almost to vanishing point; Zionism, once a unifying principle, is for the majority of them an abstract one at best. The only thing American Jews share, he writes, 'is the knowledge that, but for the immigration of near or distant ancestors,' they too would have suffered European Jewry's death sentence.

Novick is himself the product of the assimilated Jewish world chronicled by Philip Roth in books such as *Goodbye, Columbus* and *Portnoy's Complaint*. He grew up just down the road from Mr Roth's Newark, in Jersey City, where his family lived above his father's paint store. He was bar mitzvahed, but only so his grandfather wouldn't have a heart attack. And, for many years, that was Novick's last experience with organized Judaism.

His first book, a study of the purge of Vichy collaborators in liberated France, skimmed close to Jewish history but didn't make contact. His second, *That Noble Dream: The 'objectivity question' and the American historical profession* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), diagnosed the state of the scholarly community he had joined by choice. 'There was never any ambiguity about the fact that I'm Jewish,' he says. 'It just has never been a central defining factor.'

But around the time he was finishing *That Noble Dream*, he began to notice that the Holocaust had grown omnipresent in America, a situation he thought led to 'a circling of the wagons' among American Jews, 'a posture of moral superiority'.

It bothered him. 'For somebody who is not a victim to think of themselves as a victim in a culture in which, in a perverse way, that's a high-status position – that just seems to me grotesque,' he says. The questions Novick asked himself were 'Why now?' and 'Why here?'

For instance, he asks, why do many American politicians tell their constituents that watching *Schindler's List* is a kind of moral duty? Why do students oversubscribe courses on the Holocaust at colleges across the country while they neglect nearly every other episode of Jewish history? Why do Jewish adolescents report that they were never so proud to be Jews as during visits to Treblinka or Auschwitz? Nazi Germany's mass murder has become a 'collective memory', he says, a recollection of the past as much determined by the present as a reckoning of what actually happened. And collective memory, Novick writes, 'is in crucial sense ahistorical, even anti-historical'.

By detaching the Holocaust from history, he

argues, Americans think of it as an experience with immediate relevance for themselves rather than one lodged in a European past. At the same time, one can speak of it not only as unique, but as incomparable; even as sacred.

But to Novick, there is nothing sacred about mass murder. And the claim of uniqueness, much less incomparability, he writes, is vacuous: 'Every historical event, including the Holocaust, in some ways resembles events to which it might be compared and differs from them in some ways. These resemblances and differences are a perfectly proper subject for discussion.'

American collective memory holds that, following the end of the war, two major but contradictory attitudes toward Hitler's mass murder of European Jewry – which was not known as 'the Holocaust' until the early 1960s – came into play. First, the nations of the world, moved by guilt over their inaction during the war, helped Israel establish itself. Secondly, trauma led Americans to repress discussion of the atrocity. Neither of these widely held beliefs is true, argues Novick. He points out that the majority of the United Nation's votes in favour of partition came from Latin America, countries which, given their location and poverty, can hardly be faulted for not having done more to intervene in a European atrocity. The Soviet Union's support was more likely motivated by a desire to weaken British power in the Middle East than concern for the Jews. Great Britain, the Allied nation against which charges of complicity in the Holocaust have most often been brought (on the grounds of closing down immigration to Palestine before the War), did not support the resolution.

And just as guilt did not play as large a role in the foundation of Israel as commonly supposed, nor did it have as much to do with why American Jews remained silent, as many today might like to believe. Rather, writes Novick, the lack of attention paid to the Holocaust largely 'a consequence of revolutionary changes in world alignments'. From 1945, Germany became a key ally in a new fight – against the Soviet Union. The concept of totalitarianism, until then an infrequently used word, allowed the United States to blur the lines between the old enemy and the new by focusing exclusively on similarities between the Nazi and Soviet regimes. Essential to that process was playing down specific Nazi villainies in favour of the sin of an all-encompassing ideology – from which democracy had allegedly redeemed Germany. 'One will search in vain through the vast literature of totalitarianism for anything but the most glancing and casual mention of the Holocaust,' Novick writes. In the popular press, he notes, *Time* warned that the deaths of Hitler's victims 'would only be

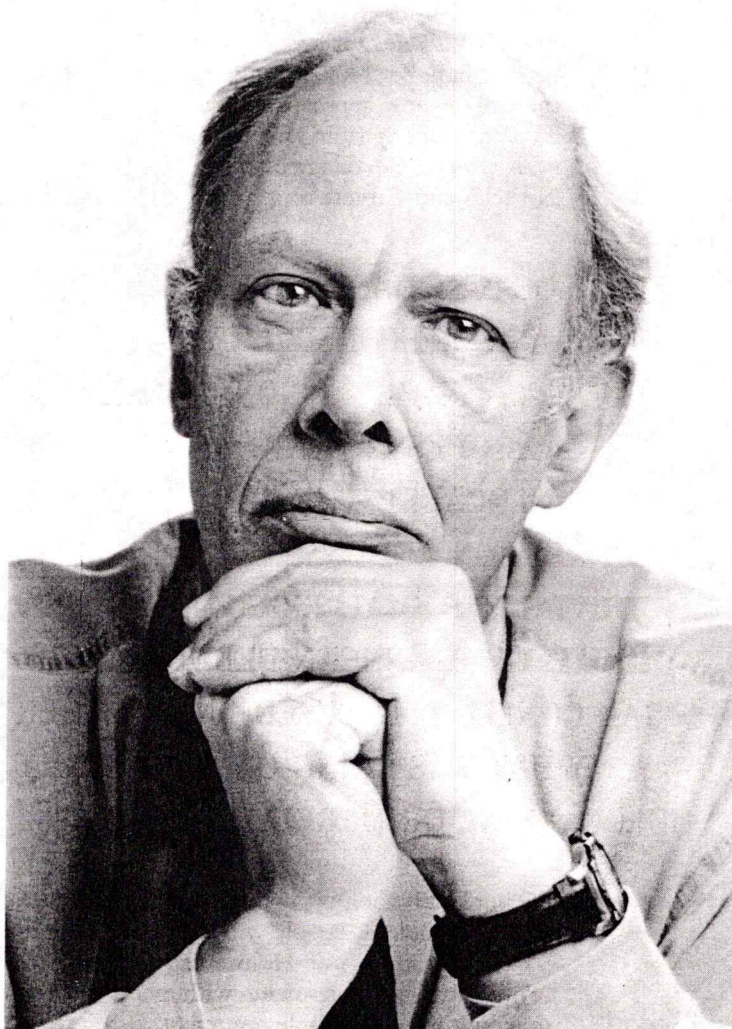
meaningful if we drew the appropriate anti-Soviet moral'. American Jewish organizations, dedicated to differentiating themselves from the victims of Europe, largely pursued a course of silence. No mainstream organization gathered oral histories of survivors; none sponsored academic scholarship; almost no one spoke out when the United States quietly dropped its de-Nazification efforts in West Germany. The Holocaust was in the past, and so, hoped American Jews, was antisemitism based on identification of them with foreign causes; ahead lay assimilation.

It was not until 1960 and the Israeli trial of war criminal Adolf Eichmann that the massacre of European Jewry captured America's attention. Even then nothing close to a consensus on how to understand it existed. Mainstream publications such as *The Wall Street Journal* editorialized that prosecution of Nazis would benefit communism by provoking anti-German feeling and distracting from anti-Soviet sentiment; the paper smeared the effort as an instance of 'Old Testament retribution'. Then came the Six Day War of 1967. Novick argues that, although the war put Israel in no real danger, it evoked fears of a second Holocaust that made contemplation of the first seem like an imperative for Jews and gentiles alike. When the 1973 war turned much of world opinion against Israel, the Holocaust became crucial for Jewish organizations. Those groups, Novick writes, turned to the Holocaust as 'an agenda for action'. Israel was increasingly divorced from Jewish-American life, but the Holocaust could be presented as everyone's concern. And yet it set Jews apart – which, after years of successful assimilation, suddenly seemed necessary lest Jews disappear into the American mix altogether. By the late 1970s, Novick writes, most Jewish groups had settled on a focus on mass murder as the surest way to rally Jews to the community. 'The Holocaust,' noted one of the philanthropists who started the Simon Wiesenthal Center, in California, 'works every time.'

And apparently it is useful for everyone, not just Jews. Since the 1970s, Novick writes, the Holocaust has been viewed as 'not just a Jewish memory, but an American memory'. The turning point in that transformation, he argues, was the 1978 television mini series *Holocaust*, viewed by 100 million people. The Holocaust made good television: several more specials followed, all with high ratings among gentile viewers. Movies, Broadway musicals and novels came tumbling after, along with an all-American pantheon of morally pure survivor-heroes. The Holocaust had been transformed by the mass media from a terrifyingly complex historical moment of rare evil into a universal lesson about the unquenchable human spirit.

Novick isn't buying. 'Along with most historians,' he writes, 'I'm sceptical about the so-called "lessons of history"'. I'm especially sceptical about the sort of pithy lessons that fit on a bumper sticker.'

The problem, as he sees it, is that by establishing the Holocaust as a moral standard, specific lessons, such as the need for international responses to genocide, can be nullified by the Holocaust's very



Peter Novick

extremity. One million killed in Rwanda? That's ten million short of the Holocaust. (That is, if one uses the widely cited figure of 11 million murdered Jews and gentiles – a number that owes more to contemporary politics than to historical fact. Novick points out that the actual number was a few million lower or many millions higher, depending on how one counts the victims.)

By ignoring the Holocaust's historical complexities, its 'universal lessons' for the public are reduced either to the obvious (hate is bad) or the political – abortion is akin to Nazism, for instance. 'One of the latent functions of Holocaust discourse is to allow not-very-bright people to get listened

to respectfully when they utter pseudo-profound banalities,' Novick says.

But some critics of his work think that is exactly why scholars need to increase their focus on the Holocaust, not weaken it. 'It's not that there's too much discussion of the Holocaust,' says David G. Roskies, a professor of Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary. 'It's that it's the wrong discussion.' Roskies, whose new book, *The Jewish Search for a Usable Past* (Indiana University Press), examines efforts to forge a nuanced Jewish identity out of a wide variety of historical sources, says his best hope for Novick's book is that it will 'clear the air' for new approaches to the Holocaust. He says 'the time is right' for a book like Novick's, even though he disagrees with what he sees as Novick's anti-Zionist bias, and considers many of

tured by Holocaust denial'.

'Yes, I think the Holocaust unique,' Lipstadt counters. 'Does that mean there are no comparisons? Of course not.'

But, she adds, she does believe that the Holocaust was more severe than other events with which it has been compared, such as massacres and starvation in Cambodia and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. And the fact that the latter crisis is not worse than it is, she argues, is proof that Novick is wrong in saying there are no lessons to be learned from the Holocaust. 'We've acted late, but we've acted,' she says. 'No, we haven't learned enough – but we have learned something.'

In fact, the Holocaust has helped the West evade moral responsibility in places such as Rwanda and Yugoslavia, argues Novick. Making the Holocaust 'the benchmark of oppression and atrocity,' he says, trivializes smaller-scale crimes. He points out that much of American debate on the Bosnian conflict 'focused on whether what was going on was "truly holocaustal or merely genocidal"', an argument he describes as 'truly disgusting and not merely distasteful', but inevitable 'when the Holocaust becomes the touchstone of moral and political discourse'.

Knocking the Holocaust off its pedestal can be a dangerous business, but Novick's work has already found allies among scholars glad to see popular Holocaust narratives challenged. Ismar Schorsch, chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, calls *The Holocaust in American Life* 'long overdue', and Jonathan D. Sarna, a professor of History at Brandeis University, suggests that 'it may be the most brilliant, iconoclastic, and controversial Holocaust study since Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*'.

But Novick does not want to be a philosopher. 'I'm not interested in questions of capital-G Good and capital-E Evil,' he says. 'What do you want? I'm for the former and against the latter.'

Instead, he finds his model in medieval England. 'There was an office called the Remembrancer,' he says. 'What the Remembrancer was supposed to do was remember things everybody else had forgotten.' Novick thinks historians should be Remembrancers, 'telling people things they've forgotten, or didn't want to know, or didn't want to look at'. What Americans seem afraid to look at, according to Novick, is not the Holocaust itself – which he thinks we've stared at too long – but the question of how that darkest of events, a half-century past, came to shine so brightly that it blinds us even now. ♦

Peter Novick's book will be published in Great Britain by Bloomsbury as The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American experience in February 2000 at a price of £18.99.

THE HOLOCAUST HAS HELPED THE WEST
EVADE MORAL RESPONSIBILITY IN PLACES
SUCH AS RWANDA AND YUGOSLAVIA,
ARGUES NOVICK. MAKING THE
HOLOCAUST 'THE BENCHMARK OF
OPPRESSION AND ATROCITY,' HE SAYS,
TRIVIALIZES SMALLER-SCALE CRIMES.
MUCH OF AMERICAN DEBATE ON THE
BOSNIAN CONFLICT 'FOCUSED ON WHETHER
WHAT WAS GOING ON WAS "TRULY
HOLOCAUSTAL OR MERELY GENOCIDAL"'

the book's best points to be ground already covered by other scholars. 'People will accept anything that lays the demon of the Holocaust to rest,' he says. 'The book won't resonate with people because they buy into the whole argument, or realize the Holocaust has been abused for political ends. It'll be because people are tired of the Holocaust, and they're going to listen to the first person who blows the whistle and says, "Too much".'

But Roskies notes that the book is also finding admirers among a more discriminating audience, that of historians. He finds that dismaying, given what he sees as Novick's dismissal of numerous respected scholars. Deborah E. Lipstadt, a professor of Religion at Emory University, is one Novick singles out for criticism. He cites her work as evidence of what he sees as the sanctification of the Holocaust. Lipstadt, he notes, writes that denial of the uniqueness of the Holocaust is 'far more insidious than outright denial. It nurtures and is nur-