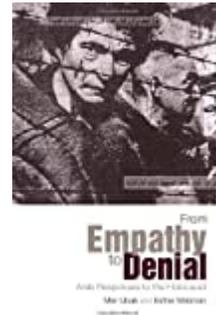




**Meir Litvak, Esther Webman.** *From Empathy to Denial: Arab Responses to the Holocaust.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. viii + 435 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-70074-0.



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## Complexity and Context for a Sensitive Topic

In recent years, scholars and others have devoted increasing attention to the relationship between Arab nationalism and Islamism and Nazi Germany's mass murder of the Jews of Europe during World War II. Developments in the Middle East and Central Asia over the past decade or so, including the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust, and calls for the destruction of Israel have generated interest in and considerable anxiety about an allegedly comparable, contemporary "Arab and/or Islamic fascism" and antisemitism. This sentiment, in turn, has prompted a reexamination of the relationship between the Third Reich and the Arabic-speaking world from 1933 to 1945. While some of that interest has been directed at Hitler's policies toward the Arab world between 1933 and 1945, much of the attention has centered on the nature of Arab and/or Islamic responses to German National Socialism and its persecution and mass murder of the Jews. The results of this renewed interest have often been problematic, however, not so much with regard to accounts and assessments of Nazi interests and

policy in North Africa and the Middle East, as in their conclusions about the Arab reception of National Socialism and the Holocaust. They have tended to assume a single, uniform "Arab and Muslim World," as if such a monolith actually existed, and have generally ignored the enormous mix of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups and traditions in that "world," which defies simple or clear categorization. Contemporary studies often fail to distinguish between urban and desert Arabs, western-educated and uneducated, religious and secular, communist and monarchist, Muslim and Christian, Sunni, Shi'a, and Alawite. Prior to the 1950s, were they Arabs from British-, French-, or Italian-controlled parts of the Arabic-speaking world? Moreover, their examples of Arab responses prior to 1945 are usually drawn from the words and deeds of Amin al-Husayni, the Mufti of Jerusalem, and the handful of Arab exiles in Berlin during World War II. On this basis, one might conclude erroneously that the mufti spoke and acted for all Arabs while he was in Berlin, and that he reflected a unified Arab public opinion on the issues of the day, in partic-

ular on the fates of the European Jews or those of their approximately one-and-a-half million brethren in North Africa and the Middle East.

Given the political, economic, social, cultural, and historical diversity in the Arabic-speaking world, any effort to understand and assess adequately the nature of Arab responses to National Socialism and the Holocaust must fulfill two requirements: familiarity with the historical and cultural context of the modern Middle East and research in appropriate Arabic-language sources. Meir Litvak and Esther Webman bring these components to bear on the tasks addressed in their excellent new book. Although not specifically a study of Arab attitudes and opinions toward Nazism and the Jews during the interwar and wartime periods, the book directs a useful lens at Arab responses to the Holocaust since World War II, answering questions for which previous studies have proven inadequate. Litvak and Webman examine post-Holocaust Arab responses to the Nazi mass murder of the Jews of Europe, but do so within the context of the recent history of the Arabic-speaking regions of North Africa and the Middle East, specifically the conflict between Jews and Arabs over the land of Israel/Palestine since the post-World War I mandate period. Moreover, they do not draw their conclusions solely on the basis of the mufti and a few other exiles or imply the existence of an "Arab world" that made a singular, uniform response to these events. Instead, they mine effectively a huge array of Arabic-language newspapers, periodicals, and other publications to assess the varied, complex, and often contradictory opinions of Arab journalists, politicians, academicians, and other intellectuals since 1945.

Litvak and Webman provide a penetrating, thorough analysis of the responses in the Arabic-speaking world, principally in Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and among the Palestinians, to the Holocaust as its horrific realities became evident to the entire world beginning in 1945. They seek to explain those responses, not to justify them. They are clear and unequivocal in their descriptions of the repugnant aspects of some Arab opinion in the postwar period on these topics. However, they place post-1945 Arab discourse on the Holocaust within the larger context of the Middle East conflict, specifically the Arabs' gradual loss of Palestine since World War I. This context has been a natural—if not always justifiable or helpful—one for Arabs, particularly in the years immediately following World War II. Some Arab writers and politicians never tired of pointing out that since Germans (and Christian Europeans generally) and not Arabs were responsible not only for the Holocaust, but for the cen-

turies of anti-Jewish persecution that led up to it, Arabs should not have to atone for the crimes of others by giving up Palestine. The authors demonstrate the ways in which Arab responses have used the Holocaust to call attention to Arab issues rather than to the details of the Holocaust itself. In the Arabic-speaking world, the discourse on the Holocaust after World War II was usually conditioned by secular nationalist and Islamic rejection of Zionism and the existence of Israel, within the additional context of resentment of and resistance to western imperialism in the region since the nineteenth century. Thus, a significant part of Arab Holocaust denial has sought to minimize the Jewish Holocaust by comparing it to the Arabs' own perceived struggles with and victimization by Zionism and the state of Israel.

The book is organized into two parts, with the first providing four detailed "case studies" that the authors view as driving the evolution of the Holocaust discourse among Arabs during the two decades following World War II. The first covers the three years from the end of the war to the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, during which Arab opinion for the most part acknowledged the horrors of Nazi persecution and mass murder of the Jews in Europe, but argued that the Arabs should not have to pay the price for these events through the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine.

The second case study is the furor over the German-Israeli reparations agreement of 1952 in Arab Holocaust discourse. The agreement was for the most part dismissed as Jewish exploitation of the Holocaust—the occurrence of which most Arabs still recognized—for the economic and political benefit of the Jewish state. Some Arab writers and politicians argued that individual Jews might indeed have deserved German reparations, but the state of Israel did not, and that the Palestinian people were equally deserving of reparations for having been expelled from their homeland in 1948-49.

The third case study treats the impact of the Adolf Eichmann trial in the early 1960s, in which much Arab opinion viewed with alarm the accompanying resurrection of images of Jewish suffering, which opinion-makers feared would only reinforce sympathy and support around the world for the state of Israel. The authors point out that while little underlying sympathy for Eichmann's actual wartime deeds was apparent in Arab discourses about the trial, a degree of sympathy for him as a person in his particular situation did develop, perhaps as an antidote to the sympathy for Israel that they feared the trial would generate.

Finally, the changing position of the Catholic Church toward the Jews after centuries of Christian persecution, culminating in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), is offered as the fourth key factor in the evolution of the Arab discourse on the Holocaust after 1945. Here, too, Arab writers no doubt feared more positive benefits for Israel and negative ramifications for their own case against Israel in the court of world opinion. In each of these cases, of course, for Arab opinion in general the particular situation of the Arabs, especially in the conflict with Israel over Palestine, and not so much the horrific realities of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, drove the Holocaust discourse. Still, charges in some of the Arab media of a “Zionist conspiracy” behind these four issues did resurrect the ugly myths of “Jewish conspiracy” so prevalent in the centuries-long litany of European antisemitism.

The chapters in the second part of this study present a thematic analysis of Arab Holocaust discourse, which taken together amply demonstrates its complexity and variations since 1945. In particular, the authors analyze Arab Holocaust denial as consisting of much more than the clear and outright rejection by some that the mass murder of the Jews in Europe during World War II ever occurred. Because of the importance of Arab authors’ own perceived victimhood in this discourse, Holocaust “denial” among Arab writers also included expressions justifying the Holocaust; statements equating Zion-

ism with Nazism and racism; assertions that Palestinians were victims of Zionist dispossession, and that the Palestinian “Nakhba” was the equivalent of the Jewish Holocaust in Europe; allegations of Zionist-Nazi collusion in the murder of European Jews; and accusations that World War II was a conflict between two equally evil imperialist camps intent on conquering Arab lands. Some of these contentions were based quite obviously on the premise that some sort of Jewish catastrophe did indeed occur in Europe during World War II.

Litvak and Webman have produced an outstanding and timely piece of scholarship on this very sensitive and vitally important topic. Their understanding of the historical context of Arab responses to the Jewish Holocaust in Europe during World War II, their recognition that the variations in that response reflect the historical and cultural complexities of the Arabic-speaking world, and their ability to consult a vast store of Arabic-language sources enable this book to fill a void that has existed for too long. The organization of the book, with its two main sections, does create a certain amount of unnecessary overlap and repetition, and thus a text that is probably a little longer than it needs to be. But their exhaustive scholarly research, methodology, and analysis offer the reader a detailed and compelling explanation—not a justification—of Arab responses to the Holocaust since 1945.

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