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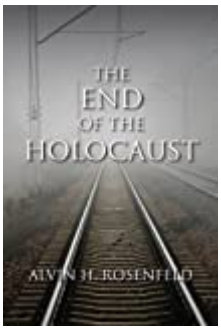

Alvin H. Rosenfeld. *The End of the Holocaust.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. x + 310 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-35643-7.

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The Burden of the Past and the Obligation of the Future

In spite of Alvin H. Rosenfeldâs curious disavowal, his new book, *The End of the Holocaust*, is a work of historical research and scholarship. It is certainly a major contribution to our understanding of the relationship of history to society, which is after all the historianâs task. *The End of the Holocaust* is an intelligently structured argument against current tendencies to relativize or negate the significance of the Nazi project of Jewish extermination. Rosenfeldâs thesis is that while âThe Holocaustâ as a tragic period in human history is losing its status as a unique and defining experience, Israel appears to face new existential threats.

The first part of the book focuses on the uses of âThe Holocaustâ as a specific historical moment in popular culture and the transformation of the Holocaust into an American âexperience.â Hollywoodâs relentless reworking and exploitation of the theme of war is the most potent example. The Holocaust has proven both profitable and ideologically effective. Hollywood has long been attracted to the Holocaust as a trope: drama, heroism, a starkly defined typology of good and evil, and the paradoxically fertile landscape of the concentration camp. The Holocaust mostly involved women, children, and elderly men, as well as disease and death. It depended on the brutal treatment of a helpless civilian population by controlling and punitive authorities. The Holocaust therefore has offered the film industry the perfect unholy trinity of the persecuted, the perpetrator, and the bystander.

The concentration camp has proven to be a particularly potent filmic setting, an effective way to describe the relentless brutality and solidarity among victims. As a genre, it has veered from cheap sentimentality to pornographic voyeurism, from farce to tragedy. The Holocaust film catalogue includes Lina WertmÃ¼llerâs *Seven Beauties* (1975), which belabors the sex and death motif, and Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* (1997), which offers a confected childâs fable to endure real world horrors. Lajos Koltaiâs film of Imre Kerteszâs novel *Fatelessness* (2002) offers a nuanced perspective of the collected fate of Budapestâs Jews through the prism of a young boyâs travails. Steven Spielbergâs *Schindlerâs List*

(1993) strives for veracity and didacticism. Most recently, Quentin Tarantino gave viewers the triumphalist fantasy of the Jews prevailing over the Nazis in *Inglourious Basterds* (2009). The subject of the Holocaust shows no sign of losing its cultural capital in the offices of Hollywood studios.

Do Generations X or Y make sense of the Holocaust through contemporary cinema? Does the long catalogue of more or less flawed fictional renditions of history actually assist viewers in understanding the consequences of dehumanization? Holocaust filmography struggles with a fundamental issue: What does it mean to ârecreateâ the hell of concentration camps? Is the director seeking to be factually accurate or suggestively metaphoric? Recreations are judged by their capacity to reproduce the real; metaphors require receptive and empathic audiences. Neither strategy ultimately matches the complexities and experiences of history as it was endured by the victims or prosecuted by their oppressors.

Spielbergâs *Schindlerâs List* is symptomatic of the conundrum. The director took great care to achieve verisimilitude in the representation of the liquidation of the ghetto and life in the concentration camp. The exemplary story of one âgoodâ German, Schindler, is a counterpoint. He also represents the American fetish for the individual–one man defending a blurred group of one thousand Jews. The film fails to pose a more important question–how many Schindlers were there in Nazi Germany? Did the protection of one thousand Jews represent an effective challenge to the planned murder of millions? Non-Jews certainly saved Jews; that fact is well documented and those individuals have been honored as properly deserved. It is equally well known that once the actions of such brave individuals became known to Nazi authorities most paid with their lives. However in spite of actions of some courageous individuals, this could never constitute a real challenge to the Nazi policy of extermination. Saving one Jew or one family or one thousand Jews in the context of the last dying days of millions can only ever be an individual virtuous act and symbolic of humanityâs best sense of itself.

Some thirty-five years prior to Spielbergâs blockbuster success, the television mini-series *The Holocaust* reached a massive American audience and even more in Germany at the time. But it was the Holocaust as soap opera/melodrama. Ask any camp survivor whether he recognized himself in that series and his response will be in the negative.

So is the Holocaust genre simply a rich vein for the film industry. Or is it an instructional tool, a means by which the past offers us lessons for the future? Or both? For Rosenfeld, popular culture simplifies and reduces a complex history to banal, predigested narratives.

The second section of Rosenfeldâs book examines the literary legacy of the Holocaust. Such writers such Primo Levi, Jean Amery, Elie Weisel, and Kertesz provided the basis for the proposition that we have arrived at the end of the Holocaust. As these survivors and their testimonies, fictionalized or not, fade from view, what status will their texts be accorded? For Rosenfeld, this is an urgent question: popular culture distorts and mangles the history of the destruction of European Jewry. So too the exigencies of American real politics have exploited the Holocaust within modern geopolitical international relations. From Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama, the destruction of European Jewry has served a variety of American political interests.

Rosenfeldâs problem is that with the inevitable passage of time the âcontestabilityâ of history becomes a challenge to those who share his view of the uniqueness of the Holocaust. He is motivated by a legitimate anxiety that the Holocaust will be forgotten, that irrefutable facts will be vulnerable to revisionism, and that the Holocaustâs status as unique will be displaced by competing present-day horrors. The uniqueness of the Holocaust is now challenged by the new deeply rooted and intractable injustice that victims claim as comparable and equally devastating. Rosenfeld urges vigilance against the appropriation of the terminology and rhetoric of the Nazi genocide for todayâs mass political and social tragedies. He calls for precision regarding the language of genocide. The Holocaust was the extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis between 1940 and 1945. Post-Second World War mass murders have been catastrophic, but the former is distinctive and unique by virtue of the explicit intention to eradicate an entire community.

In the third section, Rosenfeld examines the influence of Holocaust relativists and negationists in the digital age. The proliferation and dissemination of racist theories is now immediate, often contested, and unregulated. How will the next generation recognize the facts amid the ravings of the alienated and disenfranchised who find in the digital age a powerful vehicle for their ideas? The facts about the Holocaust have long been beyond dispute within the history profession but the digital era has encouraged a veritable tsunami of distortions and misrepresentations. So now, Rosenfeld argues, refutation and insistence on facts has once again become vitally impor-

tant.

The status of the Holocaust in the collective unconscious is profoundly different in Europe and the United States. Rosenfeld is understandably focused on the American perspective but the comparison is illuminating. The institutional memorialization of the Holocaust differs significantly. In Europe, there remains, at least for the moment, a collective memory of occupation that renders the reception of organized remembrance (in museums) direct and confronting. In the United States, necessarily at a remove from the lived experience of the Second World War and the Holocaust, the task of remembering is more complex. The limited exposure of Americans to the Holocaust, exempted as they were from the ordeal of Nazi persecution, challenges the historian intent on asserting the Holocaustâs importance. American exceptionality and rugged individualism is tested by the generalized collective fate of European Jewry.

Rosenfeld refers briefly to the American museological response to the Holocaust but this warrants a more detailed analysis. The distinctions between the educational strategies adopted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Simon Wiesenthal Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles are instructive. From its inception in 1977, the Simon Wiesenthal Museum has formulated its task as proselytizing for tolerance among American people to ensure the Holocaust remained a unique event. In contextualizing the Holocaust in the history of the Second World War, the museum has accepted Wiesenthalâs view that Nazism caused eleven million deaths, including six million Jews. The museum is not relativizing the place of the Holocaust in the Nazi regimeâs mass killings, but rather arguing for the connection between this event and a shared communal obligation to honor the dead and ensure that history is not repeated.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum focuses on the destruction of European Jewry. The strategy is to personalize the experience; individual identity cards offered to visitors humanize a crime of such enormity and scale that comprehension is difficult. The museum insistently offers the visitor the Holocaust as an experience, for example, passing through a rail car to âfeelâ the claustrophobia, the crowdedness, and fear of the victims. It is a relentlessly didactic and tendentious experience. Paradoxically, this museum also functions as a prayer for the dead, sanctifying and sacralizing the murdered victims. So on the one had the museum is a teaching tool insisting that one can make sense of the Holocaust, and on the other it asserts the incomprehensibility of this history.

This paradox is Rosenfeldâs too. He recognizes that as time passes, the Holocaust as a unique event will lose its preeminence, and yet his book is intent on denying that inevitable reality. Rosenfeld also addresses shifts within academia in the study of the Holocaust. He details the shift in the 1980s when universities, which originally funded Holocaust courses, introduced significant modifications. Many universities began to include peace studies, genocide studies, and the history of prejudice and tolerance. The uniqueness and primacy of âThe Holocaustâ was challenged and then transformed into a branch of the study of history in general.

Such courses are derided by the Washington museum, which argues that any attempt to compare the Nazi policies with other crimes against humanity diminishes the moral import of the Jewish experience. But the politics of victimhood has a lengthy lineage in America. Victims abound and holocausts are a dime a dozen. This is not just a case of slipping standards of English vocabulary but rather the appropriation of the moral high ground to a myriad of causes. The Catholic Churchâs attitude to abortion is an obvious example. The church routinely describes abortion as mass murder. According to the church, the right to an abortion constitutes state-sanctioned genocide. The use by anti-abortionists of the language of Nazism and the invocation of a holocaust has proven effective in some sections of the community. However, the appropriation of the terminology demeans the horror and immorality of mass murder. Rosenfeld argues strenuously for more rigor and vigilance in the uses of the terms that historian ascribe quite precisely to the destruction of European Jewry.

Rosenfeld offers other instances of the debasement and misappropriation of âThe Holocaust.â The African American Leader Louis Farrakhan claimed that black slaves had been victims of genocide. He declared that of the three hundred million slaves brought to America one hundred million died aboard ships. In his view, this catastrophe outweighed the Jewish experience and has been unfairly diminished. Farrakhan is perfectly correct in highlighting the horrors and injustice of slavery. However, the distinction between kidnapped slaves bitterly and savagely exploited for commercial ends and the meticulously planned eradication of European Jewry is vitally important. To elide the two horrors is to fail to acknowledge the precise inhumanity of each history.

In the final chapters of *The End of the Holocaust*, Rosenfeld turns to the future, the post-Holocaust era. He chronicles the rise of anti-Semitic propaganda, attacks

on Jews and Jewish institutions, anti-Israeli propaganda from Islamic countries, the growth of ultra-nationalistic Islamic organizations, and the threat that Iran poses to Israel. The routine calls for Israelâs destruction leads Rosenfeld to conclude that a second holocaust is not beyond the possible. No wonder he is pessimistic about the future.

The task of the historian is to bring perspective to the analysis of the past. In thinking about the future of Israel and the place of the Jewish citizens of the Diaspora, balance and reason are equally important. Fear mongering and exaggeration does nothing to assist in ensuring that society remains civil. Anti-Semitism has escalated in some European communities, but deducing from defaced synagogues a dramatically increased threat to Jews is excessive.

When Jewish cemeteries are vandalized or when a random lunatic attacks and murders a Toulouse rabbi and his family, the Jewish community naturally fears the worst. But it is the task of the historian and the politician to assess legitimate anxieties against actual threats. The latter are not statistically increasing. French Jewry, sensibly, did not flee after the most recent attacks. Israelâs prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, attended the familyâs funeral, but his blunt gesture was merely a political message that the only safe place for French Jews was Israel. But is it?

Rosenfeldâs concern for the future of Israel and Jews in the Diaspora is conventional–Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, is under siege from Islamic fundamentalists, and is necessarily dependent on the United States and Diasporic Jewsâ understanding that Israel is their safe haven. Rosenfeld is largely silent about the elephant in the room–the plight of the Palestinians and their just plea for self-determination. He is also silent on the inexorable and expansionist policies of successive Israeli governments. His concern for the prospect of a second holocaust would certainly be ameliorated by creating the conditions for security and peace for both Israeli and Palestinian citizens. It may even require negotiation with such foes as Hamas. The price of peace will be hefty for all concerned but surely less than the costs of a sixty-five-year war. Rosenfeldâs preoccupation with the radicalization of the Arab world and the concomitant rise in anti-Zionist sentiment blinds him to the imperatives for peace. In imagining the prospects of a second holocaust, Rosenfeld sees both Jewish history and the Jewish future as a long continuum of survival under threat; his message is that the lesson of the Holocaust is eternal vigilance.

As a historian and participant in the Jewish resistance in France I would hope that Rosenfeldâs next book title would conclude with a question mark: *âThe End of the Holocaust?â*

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