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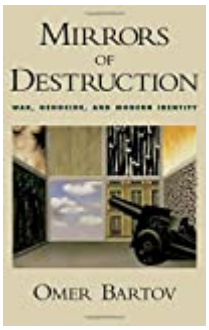


**Omer Bartov.** *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide and Modern Identity.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. viii + 302 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-507723-0.

**Omer Bartov.** *Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 302 pp.

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## The Holocaust and Genocide Redux

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Omer Bartov's *Mirrors of Destruction* is an admirable contribution to the expanding literature of identity and memory that has proliferated in German history in an effort to reevaluate the turbulent history of the twentieth-century in the heart of Europe. Bartov demonstrates convincingly that there is a strong interrelationship between war, genocide, and modern identity. His argument uses evidence from French, German, and Jewish discourses on the Holocaust. Each of these discourses places the Holocaust in the context of French, German, and Jewish identity before, during, and after World War Two. European society was fashioned and refashioned as a result of the ultra-violence of the trenches in 1914, the concentration camps of World War Two, and the ethnic cleansing of the former Yugoslav areas of Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo from 1991 to 1999. Identity became easily defined when using the markers of victim and perpetrator.

Bartov argues that in 1914, the discourse of modern identity began to refer to violence as a glorious means to achieving a higher goal (p. 6). This "spirit of 1914" held that war was heroic and yet profoundly destructive. Borrowing from his earlier study of the violence of World War One, having established a precedent of the industrial killing of millions of soldiers and civilians, here Bartov concludes that the glory of battle that was so celebrated in 1914 when the War began, remained elusive during the course of the war, and the reality the soldiers knew in the trenches was something entirely different. This reviewer was disappointed that Bartov did not choose to include Stanley Kubrick's incisive critique of the futility of trench warfare and the absurdity of modern authority in the 1957 film, *Paths of Glory*. Kirk Douglas' dogged refusal to send his men on a suicidal charge despite the implications for his own decorated career exposes the futility of war and violence as an effective means to achieve anything. Nonetheless, Bartov's first chapter does a great service to those readers seeking a concise assessment of

the implications of the postwar reactions in France and Germany during the 1920s and 1930s. His argument of a community of suffering extremely averse to a future apocalyptic war in France, versus a battle community in Germany hardened by warrior values, is helpful for those readers without the time to synthesize the massive historiography on interwar French and German history.

In the second chapter, Bartov explores some of what he identifies as the "grand illusions" of German, French, and Jewish accounts of their twentieth-century histories. For France, the myth of the resistance to the Nazis and the collaborationist Vichy government during World War Two denies the responsibility of the French for anti-Jewish measures they undertook on their own, and for the Vichy regime itself (p. 59). In Germany, for much of the postwar period, confusion resulted from the efforts to define who the victims of the Nazis really were. For nearly all Germans until the 1980s and 1990s, the Jews were not the principal victims of National Socialism (pp. 115-116). In Israel after the war, the Holocaust itself was not even confronted in open public debates until the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961. Bartov does include a sharp analysis of the controversial work of Hannah Arendt, and concludes that much of it is responsible scholarship. However, he warns that readers must be wary of some unfortunate omissions in her conclusions concerning the Holocaust, the Jews, the Nazis, and totalitarianism.

The final sections of Bartov's analysis explore the concept of utopia and why violence has been perceived as one of the best ways to achieve it over the past century. Indeed, modern genocide is founded on the premise that utopia in a given society can be realized only if the inferior, degenerate "Other" is eliminated. Bartov discerns a difference between the "higher" morality of genocidal regimes that aspire towards utopia, and ordinary morality. >From the utopians' perspective, ordinary morality must be destroyed along with those undesirable elements so that the "higher" morality of utopia can be achieved (p. 153). The Holocaust serves as the central example of just this type of enterprise. Bartov extends this part of his analysis into his conclusion, where he evaluates some unconventional and less well-known representations of the Holocaust. Bartov uses the controversial writings of Ka-Tzetnik to illustrate the human toll of the Holocaust (pp. 194, 204). Ka-Tzetnik was the pen name of Yehiel Dinur, a survivor of Auschwitz who wrote volumes of fiction based on his experience of the Holocaust that portray the reality of Auschwitz as coming from "another planet," where victims and killers reflect in each other more similarities than differences. This planet is both different and similar to our own, and it is the essential similarity to our own that is perhaps most disturbing about this work. Bartov also analyzes the recent novel *The Reader* (1995) by Bernhard Schlink as an additional example of how some Germans relate to the people involved in the machinery of the Holocaust.

The greatest strength in Bartov's study of modern identity, and how the Holocaust had affected its evolution, is allowing much of his evidence to effectively validate his thesis for him. What is perhaps most haunting about the Holocaust is how profoundly it resonates within us all (or at least those who are perceptive enough to admit it); and how much a part of humanity's identity it has become. Indeed, as Bartov urges, it is far more important to explore how important the Holocaust is for modern identity rather than debate whether or not it is "unique" as such. A weakness of his methodology, however, is his emphasis on literary representations of the Holocaust to prove his point. Fictional and nonfictional written texts differ slightly from films and documentaries. Briefly mentioning *Schindler's List* (1993) and Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1994), Bartov ignores some recent visual depictions of the Holocaust and the impact it had on humanity. Mentioning James Moll's *The Last Days* (1998), a fine documentary that explores the human dimension of the horror of the Holocaust, and the effects that remembering the expansion of the Nazi genocide to Hungary have on the survivors today, for example, could have enhanced further Bartov's study. Nonetheless, *Mirrors of Destruction* should stimulate additional debate about the Holocaust and help guide new inquiries into the ongoing discourse of how identity is impacted by genocide as well as nationalism. Bartov has given us a powerful reminder of the centrality of the Holocaust in twentieth-century Europe, and the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the study of genocide that treat its manifestation in new and hopefully more provocative ways.

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