

## CHAPTER ONE

TO PURCHASE  
ONLINE  
barnesandnoble.comThe Holocaust in American  
LifeBy PETER NOVICK  
Houghton Mifflin Company■ [Read the Review](#)*"We Knew in a General Way"*

We begin at the beginning, with the response of American gentiles and Jews to the Holocaust while the killing was going on. Though we'll be concerned mostly with how the Holocaust was talked about after 1945, the wartime years are the appropriate starting point. They were the point of departure for subsequent framing and representing, centering or marginalizing, and using for various purposes the story of the destruction of European Jewry.

At the same time, America's wartime response to the Holocaust is what a great deal of later Holocaust discourse in the United States has been about. The most common version tells of the culpable, sometimes willed obliviousness of American gentiles to the murder of European Jews; the indifference to their brethren's fate by a timid and self-absorbed American Jewry; the "abandonment of the Jews" by the Roosevelt administration — a refusal to seize opportunities for rescue, which made the United States a passive accomplice in the crime.

By the 1970s and 1980s the Holocaust had become a shocking, massive, and distinctive *thing*: clearly marked off, qualitatively and quantitatively, from other Nazi atrocities and from previous Jewish persecutions, singular in its scope, its symbolism, and its world-historical significance. This way of looking at it is nowadays regarded as both proper and natural, the "normal human response." But this was not the response of most Americans, even of American Jews, while the Holocaust was being carried out. Not only did the Holocaust have nowhere near the centrality in consciousness that it had from the 1970s on, but for the overwhelming majority of Americans — and, once again, this included a great many Jews as well — it barely existed as a singular event in its own right. The

murderous actions of the Nazi regime, which killed between five and six million European Jews, were all too real. But "the Holocaust," as we speak of it today, was largely a retrospective construction, something that would not have been recognizable to most people at the time. To speak of "the Holocaust" as a distinct entity, which Americans responded to (or failed to respond to) in various ways, is to introduce an anachronism that stands in the way of understanding contemporary responses.

The sheer number of victims of the Holocaust continues to inspire awe: between five and six million. But the Holocaust took place — we know this, of course, but we don't often think of its implications — in the midst of a global war that eventually killed between fifty and sixty million people. There are those for whom any such contextualization is a trivializing of the Holocaust, a tacit denial of the special circumstances surrounding the destruction of European Jewry. Certainly such contextualization can be used for these purposes, as when the French rightist Jean-Marie Le Pen dismisses the Holocaust as a mere "detail" of the history of the Second World War. But it was the overall course of the war that dominated the minds of Americans in the early forties. Unless we keep that in mind, we will never understand how the Holocaust came to be swallowed up in the larger carnage surrounding it. By itself, the fact that during the war, and for some time thereafter, there was no agreed-upon word for the murder of Europe's Jews is not all that significant. What is perhaps of some importance is that insofar as the word "holocaust" (lowercase) was employed during the war, as it occasionally was, it was almost always applied to the totality of the destruction wrought by the Axis, not to the special fate of the Jews. This usage is emblematic of wartime perceptions of what we now single out as "the Holocaust."

There are many different dimensions to the wartime marginality of the Holocaust in the American mind: what one knew, and what one believed; how to frame what one knew or believed; devising an appropriate response. In principle these questions are separable; in practice they were inextricably entwined. In this chapter we'll look at the perceptions and responses of the American people as a whole; in Chapter 2, at American Jews; in Chapter 3, at the American government.

Although no one could imagine its end result, all Americans — Jews and gentiles alike — were well aware of Nazi anti-Semitism from the regime's beginning in 1933, if not earlier. Prewar Nazi actions against Jews, from early discriminatory measures to the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 and culminating in Kristallnacht in 1938, were widely reported in the American press and repeatedly denounced at all levels of American society. No one

doubted that Jews were high on the list of actual and potential victims of Nazism, but it was a long list, and Jews, by some measures, were not at the top. Despite Nazi attempts to keep secret what went on in concentration camps in the thirties, their horrors were known in the West, and were the main symbol of Nazi brutality. But until late 1938 there were few Jews, as Jews, among those imprisoned, tortured, and murdered in the camps. The victims were overwhelmingly Communists, socialists, trade unionists, and other political opponents of the Hitler regime. And it was to be another four years before the special fate that Hitler had reserved for the Jews of Europe became known in the West.

The point should be underlined: from early 1933 to late 1942 — more than three quarters of the twelve years of Hitler's Thousand-Year Reich — Jews were, quite reasonably, seen as among but by no means as the singled-out victims of the Nazi regime. This was the all-but-universal perception of American gentiles; it was the perception of many American Jews as well. By the time the news of the mass murder of Jews emerged in the middle of the war, those who had been following the crimes of the Nazis for ten years readily and naturally assimilated it to the already-existing framework.

Only in the aftermath of Kristallnacht were large numbers of Jews added to the camp populations, and even then for the most part briefly, as part of a German policy of pressuring Jews to emigrate. Up to that point, German Jewish deaths were a tiny fraction of those inflicted on Jews by murderous bands of Ukrainian anti-Soviet forces twenty years earlier. Though American Jews responded with deeper dismay and horror to prewar Nazi anti-Semitism than did gentile Americans, their reaction was not unmixed with a certain weary fatalism: such periods had recurred over the centuries; they would pass; in the meantime one did what one could and waited for better days.

In the West, the onset of the war resulted in less rather than more attention being paid to the fate of the Jews. The beginning of the military struggle — and dramatic dispatches from the battlefronts — drove Jewish persecution from the front pages and from public consciousness. Kristallnacht, in which dozens of Jews were killed, had been on the front page of the *New York Times* for more than a week; as the wartime Jewish death toll passed through thousands and into millions, it was never again featured so prominently.

From the autumn of 1939 to the autumn of 1941 everyone's attention was riveted on military events: the war at sea, the fall of France, the Battle of Britain, the German invasion of the Soviet Union. As Americans confronted what appeared to be the imminent prospect of unchallenged Nazi dominion over the entire European continent, it was hardly surprising that except for some Jews, few paid much attention to what was happening to Europe's Jewish

population under Nazi rule. That the ghettoization of Polish Jewry and the deportation of German and Austrian Jews to Polish ghettos had brought enormous suffering no one doubted. Beyond this, little was known with any certainty, and the fragmentary reports reaching the West were often contradictory. Thus in December 1939 a press agency first estimated that a quarter of a million Jews had been killed; two weeks later the agency reported that losses were about one tenth that number. (Similar wildly differing estimates recurred throughout the war, no doubt leading many to suspend judgment on the facts and suspect exaggeration. In March 1943 *The Nation* wrote of seven thousand Jews being massacred each week, while *The New Republic* used the same figure as a conservative daily estimate.)

In the course of 1940, 1941, and 1942 reports of atrocities against Jews began to accumulate. But these, like the numbers cited, were often contradictory. In the nature of the situation, there were no firsthand reports from Western journalists. Rather, they came from a handful of Jews who had escaped, from underground sources, from anonymous German informants, and, perhaps most unreliable of all, from the Soviet government. If, as many suspected, the Soviets were lying about the Katyn Forest massacre, why not preserve a healthy skepticism when they spoke of Nazi atrocities against Soviet Jews? Thus, after the Soviet recapture of Kiev, the *New York Times* correspondent traveling with the Red Army underlined that while Soviet officials claimed that tens of thousands of Jews had been killed at Babi Yar, "no witnesses to the shooting ... talked with the correspondents"; "it is impossible for this correspondent to judge the truth or falsity of the story told to us"; "there is little evidence in the ravine to prove or disprove the story."

The most important single report on the Holocaust that reached the West came from a then-anonymous German businessman, and was passed on in mid-1942 by Gerhard Riegner, representative of the World Jewish Congress in Switzerland. But Riegner forwarded the report "with due reserve" concerning its truth. Though the main outlines of the mass-murder campaign reported by Riegner were all too true, his informant also claimed to have "personal knowledge" of the rendering of Jewish corpses into soap — a grisly symbol of Nazi atrocity now dismissed as without foundation by historians of the Holocaust. By the fall of 1943, more than a year after Riegner's information was transmitted, an internal U.S. State Department memorandum concluded that the reports were "essentially correct." But it was hard to quarrel with the accompanying observation that the 1942 reports were "at times confused and contradictory" and that they "incorporated stories which were obviously left over from the horror tales of the last war."

Such embellishments as the soap story furthered a will to disbelieve that was common among Jews and gentiles — an understandable attitude. Who, after all, would *want* to think that

such things were true? Who would not welcome an opportunity to believe that while terrible things were happening, their scale was being exaggerated; that much of what was being said was war propaganda that the prudent reader should discount? One British diplomat, skeptical of the Soviet story about Babi Yar, observed that "we ourselves put out rumours of atrocities and horrors for various purposes, and I have no doubt this game is widely played." Indeed, officials of both the U.S. Office of War Information and the British Ministry of Information ultimately concluded that though the facts of the Holocaust appeared to be confirmed, they were so likely to be *thought* exaggerated that the agencies would lose credibility by disseminating them.

If American newspapers published relatively little about the ongoing Holocaust, it was in part because there was little hard news about it to present — only secondhand and thirdhand reports of problematic authenticity. News is event-, not process-oriented: bombing raids, invasions, and naval battles are the stuff of news, not delayed, often hearsay accounts of the wheels of the murder machine grinding relentlessly on. And for senior news editors the experience of having been bamboozled by propaganda during the First World War was not something they'd read about in history books; they had themselves been made to appear foolish by gullibly swallowing fake atrocity stories, and they weren't going to let it happen again.

Perhaps another reason for limited press attention to the continuing murder of European Jewry was that, in a sense, it didn't seem interesting. This is not a decadent aestheticism but is in the very nature of "the interesting": something that violates our expectations. We are interested in the televangelist caught with the bimbo, the gangster who is devout in his religious observance: vice where we expect virtue, virtue where we expect vice; that which shatters our preconceptions. To a generation that was not witness to the apparently limitless depravity of the Nazi regime, the Holocaust may tell us something about what mankind is capable of. But Americans in the early forties took it for granted that Nazism was the embodiment of absolute evil, even if the sheer scale of its crimes was not appreciated. The repetition of examples was not, as a result, "interesting." (For some dedicated anti-Communists, including a number of Jewish intellectuals writing for *Partisan Review* and *The New Leader*, it was Soviet iniquity, played down in the press during the wartime Russian-American honeymoon, that was more interesting, and more in need of exposure.)

Throughout the war few Americans were aware of the scale of the European Jewish catastrophe. By late 1944 three quarters of the American population believed that the Germans had "murdered many people in concentration camps," but of those willing to estimate how many had been killed, most thought it was 100,000 or

fewer. By May 1945, at the end of the war in Europe, most people guessed that about a million (including, it should be noted, both Jews and non-Jews) had been killed in the camps. That the man in the street was ill informed about the Holocaust, as about so much else, is hardly shocking. But lack of awareness was common among the highly placed and generally knowledgeable as well: only at the very end of the war did ignorance dissipate. William Casey, later the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, was head of secret intelligence in the European theater for the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor of the CIA.

The most devastating experience of the war for most of us was the first visit to a concentration camp.... We knew in a general way that Jews were being persecuted, that they were being rounded up ... and that brutality and murder took place at these camps. But few if any comprehended the appalling magnitude of it. It wasn't sufficiently real to stand out from the general brutality and slaughter which is war.

William L. Shirer, the best-selling author of *Berlin Diary*, who during the war was a European correspondent for CBS, reported that it was only at the end of 1945 that he learned "for sure" about the Holocaust; the news burst upon him "like a thunderbolt."

How many Americans had knowledge of the Holocaust while it was going on is as much a semantic as a quantitative question. It calls for distinctions among varieties of awareness, consciousness, belief, attention. There was an inclination on the part of many to avert their eyes from things too painful to contemplate. *Life* magazine, in 1945, printed a letter from a distressed reader:

Why, oh why, did you have to print that picture? The truth of the atrocity is there and can never be erased from the minds of the American people, but why can't we be spared some of it? The stories are awful enough but I think the picture should be retained for records and not shown to the public.

The picture in question was not of Jewish bodies stacked like cordwood at a liberated concentration camp, but of a captured American airman on his knees, being beheaded by a Japanese officer. (Inundated as we have been in recent decades by images of

violence — oceans of blood, in vivid color, brought by television into our living rooms — it is easy to forget how much less hardened sensibilities were in the forties.) War doesn't put concern for civilians — especially civilians who are not one's own citizens — anywhere on the agenda. War is about killing the enemy, and in World War II this included killing unprecedented numbers of enemy civilians. War isn't about softening one's heart, but about hardening it. A much-decorated veteran of the Eighth Air Force:

You drop a load of bombs and, if you're cursed with any imagination at all you have at least one quick horrid glimpse of a child lying in bed with a whole ton of masonry tumbling down on top of him; or a three-year-old girl wailing for *Mutter ... Mutter ...* because she has been burned. Then you have to turn away from the picture if you intend to retain your sanity. And also if you intend to keep on doing the work your Nation expects of you.

It has often been said that when the full story of the ongoing Holocaust reached the West, beginning in 1942, it was disbelieved because the sheer magnitude of the Nazi plan of mass murder made it, literally, incredible — beyond belief. There is surely a good deal to this, but perhaps at least as often, the gradually emerging and gradually worsening news from Europe produced a kind of immunity to shock. A final point on disbelief. Accounts of the persecution of Jews between the fall of 1939 and the summer of 1941 often spoke of "extermination" and "annihilation." This was not prescience but hyperbole, and prudent listeners took it as such. By the following years, when such words were all too accurate, they had been somewhat debased by premature invocation.

Probably more important than "knowledge" in the narrow sense is how knowledge is framed. We have already seen how prewar experience — indeed, experience down through 1942 — placed Jews among but not as the singled-out victims of Nazism. (As of the spring of 1942, the Germans had murdered more Soviet prisoners of war than Jews.) This kind of preexisting framework lasted for most Americans through the remainder of the war. But there were other reasons why the particularly savage and systematic program of murdering European Jewry tended to be lost amid the overall carnage of war.

For most Americans, the Pacific conflict was a matter of much greater concern than the war in Europe. Working fourteen hours a

day in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, the future playwright Arthur Miller observed "the near absence among the men I worked with ... of any comprehension of what Nazism meant — we were fighting Germany essentially because she had allied herself with the Japanese who had attacked us at Pearl Harbor." American soldiers and sailors were continuously engaged in combat with the Japanese from the beginning to the end of the war — first retreating, then advancing across the islands of the Pacific. It was not until the last year of the war, after the Normandy invasion, that there was equal attention given to the European theater. Certainly in popular representations of the war, especially in the movies, it was the Japanese who were America's leading enemy. "Axis atrocities" summoned up images of American victims of the Bataan Death March — not of Europeans, Jewish or gentile, under the Nazi heel.

When wartime attention did turn to Nazi barbarism, there were many reasons for not highlighting Jewish suffering. One was sheer ignorance — the lack of awareness until late 1942 of the special fate of Jews in Hitler's Europe. The Nazi concentration camp was the most common symbol of the enemy regime, and its archetypal inmate was usually represented as a political oppositionist or member of the resistance. Probably one of the reasons for this was that the seemingly natural framework for the war was one of actively contending forces: the dramatically satisfying victim of Nazism was the heroic and principled oppositionist. By contrast, Jews killed by the Nazis were widely perceived, less inspirationally, as passive victims, though sometimes they were portrayed as opponents of Nazism to fit the script. Thus the editor of the *Detroit Free Press* explained that the Nazi prisoners he saw liberated had been in the camps because "they refused to accept the political philosophy of the Nazi party.... First Jews and anti-Nazi Germans, then other brave souls who refused to conform."

In the Hollywood version of the camps, which perhaps reached more Americans than any other, it was the dissident or *résistant* who was the exemplary victim. One of the few wartime Hollywood films that depicted Jewish victimhood *and* resistance was *None Shall Escape*, which concludes with a rabbi exhorting his people to resist the Nazis — which they do, "dying on their feet" and taking some German troops with them. The rabbi's speech included a line about "tak[ing] our place along with all other oppressed peoples," and the rebellion ended beneath a cruciform signpost on a railroad platform, the rabbi and his people dying at the foot of a cross.

If some of the reasons for deemphasizing special Jewish victimhood were more or less spontaneous, others were calculated. In the case of Germany — unlike Japan — there was no offense against Americans to be avenged, no equivalent of "Remember Pearl Harbor." The task of American wartime propagandists was to portray Nazi Germany as the mortal enemy of "free men



everywhere." That the Nazis were the enemy of the Jews was well known; there was no rhetorical advantage in continuing to underline the fact. The challenge was to show that they were *everyone's* enemy, to broaden rather than narrow the range of Nazi victims. In meeting this challenge, the Office of War Information resisted suggestions for a focus on Jewish victimhood. Leo Rosten, head of the OWI's "Nature of the Enemy" department and a popular Jewish writer, responding to a suggestion that atrocities against Jews be highlighted, said that "according to [our] experience, the impression on the average American is much stronger if the question is not exclusively Jewish." Indeed, it was stronger among one segment of the population engaged in fighting the Nazis. In November 1944 the army magazine *Yank* decided not to run a story of Nazi atrocities against Jews on the grounds — as related to the man who wrote the story — that "because of latent anti-Semitism in the Army, he ought, if possible, to get something with a less Semitic slant."

There was another reason for not emphasizing Hitler's "war against the Jews": to sidestep the claim that America's struggle with Germany was a war *for* the Jews. The claim that American Jews were dragging the country into a war on behalf of their brethren in Europe was a staple of prewar isolationist discourse. The *America First Bulletin* had spoken of "numerous groups which fight for America's entry into the war — foreign and racial groups which have special and just grievances against Hitler." This view was endorsed by Charles Lindbergh in a notorious speech. Public assertions of this kind ceased with Pearl Harbor, but they had a lively underground existence thereafter. In 1943 former ambassador William Bullitt was telling people that "the Roosevelt administration's emphasis on the European war as opposed to the Asian one was the result of Jewish influence."

The charge of Jewish warmongering had often focused on Hollywood. Shortly before Pearl Harbor, Senator Gerald Nye of North Dakota held hearings on the subject, summoning for interrogation those with "Jewish-sounding" names. The Nye hearings were called off after the war began, but there was continued sensitivity on this score in Hollywood. And it was reinforced by Washington. A June 1942 *Government Information Manual for the Motion Pictures* feared that "there are still groups in this country who are thinking only in terms of their particular group. Some citizens have not been aware of the fact that this is a people's war, not a group war." Hollywood executives probably didn't need prodding on this score. Responding to a 1943 suggestion that a film be made about Hitler's treatment of the Jews, studio heads who were polled replied that it would be better to consider a film "covering various groups that have been subject to the Nazi treatment [which] of course would take in the Jews."

Along with the minimizing of particular Jewish victimhood was

the development of formulas stressing Nazi "godlessness," which exaggerated Nazi animus toward Christian denominations. Wartime discourse was filled with references to the "Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish" victims of Nazism. (It was during the Hitler years that American philo-Semites invented the "Judeo-Christian tradition" to combat innocent, or not so innocent, language that spoke of a totalitarian assault on "Christian civilization.") A variant of this theme acknowledged the present Jewish priority in victimhood but held that, once finished with Jews, Hitler would turn on others.

For all of these reasons, in all media and in almost all public pronouncements, there was throughout the war not much awareness of the special fate of the Jews of Europe. Sometimes this was simply due to a lack of information, sometimes the result of spontaneous and "well-meaning" categories of thought and speech. When downplaying Jewish victimhood was conscious and deliberate, the purposes were hardly vicious: to emphasize that the Nazis were the enemy of all mankind, in order both to broaden support for the anti-Nazi struggle and to combat the charge that World War II was a war fought for the Jews. Among those who minimized special Jewish suffering there were surely some with less high-minded motives, but there is little reason to believe they had much influence. In any event, the result was that for the overwhelming majority of Americans, throughout the war (and, as we will see, for some time thereafter) what we now call the Holocaust was neither a distinct entity nor particularly salient. The murder of European Jewry, insofar as it was understood or acknowledged, was just one among the countless dimensions of a conflict that was consuming the lives of tens of millions around the globe. It was not "the Holocaust"; it was simply the (underestimated) Jewish fraction of the holocaust then engulfing the world.

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