
Forum Essay: Responses
Two Regimes of Memory

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF POST-HOLOCAUST CULTURE is coming to be understood as a transition between two regimes of memory. An initial period of repression gave way, after twenty years or more, to one of obsession. Before he turns to a careful discussion of the second of these regimes in international context, Omer Bartov deals with the first only briefly and then in largely negative and summary terms.¹ In this short comment, I want to try to complicate this somewhat undifferentiated account of the first twenty years after the war. The period is critical, I suggest, because it may offer some important resources for escaping the vicious circle of enemies and victims that Bartov identifies.

In the immediate postwar years, Germans as well as Jews in Europe, the United States, and Israel rarely posed the Holocaust as a matter of explicit public reflection. Instead, they adopted what Bartov calls the “official state perceptions” in their respective lands, which often construed the war as “a site of near universal victimhood” and atrocities as “crimes against humanity” rather than culturally specific acts of violence. In the newer regime, dating from sometime in the 1960s, the events received the designation “Holocaust” and were reinterpreted as a more specifically Jewish tragedy. A number of contemporary writers tend to take a harshly critical view of the newer regime, largely reducing the canonization and quasi-pathological attention the Holocaust has received to political appropriation and instrumentalization.² It nonetheless remains more familiar and acceptable—especially by contrast to the older regime and apparent “inability to mourn” that together preceded it.

But is this hierarchy valid? The representational and ethical defects in the initial style of response in post-Holocaust culture are obvious. Most significantly, it did not adequately capture the extent to which Jews specifically had been victimized and to which Germans specifically were guilty as genocidal aggressors. As Bartov remarks, “the genocide of the Jews . . . was left largely unexplained for many years following

¹ Omer Bartov, “Defining Enemies, Making Victims: Germans, Jews, and the Holocaust,” *AHR* 103 (June 1998): 787–89, 800.

² See most notably Peter Novick, “Holocaust Memory in America,” in James E. Young, ed., *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History* (New York, 1994); and Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust*, Haim Watzman, trans. (New York, 1993). In addition to the other works Bartov cites at 801 n56, see Efraim Sicher, ed., *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz* (Urbana, Ill., 1998). For a challenging response to the one-dimensionality of Novick’s argument, see Mark J. Greif, “The American Transformation of the Holocaust, 1945–65” (AB thesis, Harvard University, 1997).

the Holocaust, whether by historiography, legal discourse, documentaries, or other forms of representation.”³ The motivations for the adoption of the first post-Holocaust regime are also readily apparent: it allowed a unity of democracies against Communism and fostered a reintegration of the Jews into national cultures in which their place had been challenged.

But it is not enough to leave the matter there. For while it had major and undeniable vices, the approach also had some noteworthy virtues. It implicitly or explicitly recognized that there had been “a mosaic of victims” (including leftists, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, the disabled, the mentally ill, the criminally deviant, and the elderly) during World War II.⁴ In addition, it may have succeeded, far better than the more divisive regime that followed, at including vast numbers of non-Jews in worldwide moral reflection and reform. Inasmuch as every regime of memory is equally a vision of the future, the construction of the war in this first style emphasized intercultural cooperation, rather than ethnic self-defense.

The most significant instantiation of this early style of response is perhaps the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, which, surprisingly enough, does not find a mention in Bartov’s reflections on genocide, even though it is (along with related conventions) the major international legal instrument available to combat the problem today. However easy it is to question the philosophical foundations of the document and the spotty record of the movement it spawned, they remain among the most striking and practical legacies of the first regime of post-Holocaust culture.⁵

This all-too-brief contrast between the two regimes of memory may seem to imply a difficult but necessary choice between two incompatible approaches to the Holocaust, each with characteristic advantages and shortcomings. It is as if the “deep structure” that A. D. Moses has recently discerned in scholarship on the event, which divides commentators into universalists and particularists based on their precritical ethical affiliations, not only conditioned response to the Holocaust generally in the past but must also govern it in the future.⁶ But I would reject this conclusion. A closer examination of the first regime of post-Holocaust culture may lead not so much to an inversion of the putative hierarchy between the two regimes as to a rejection altogether of the terms in which it is drawn.

The case of France and French Jewry may most usefully illustrate the complexity of the first regime of memory, demonstrating that it did not everywhere and always exclude recognition of the particularity of Jewish suffering, even though it did often

³ Bartov, “Defining Enemies, Making Victims,” 788.

⁴ For this phrase and on this topic, see Michael Berenbaum, ed., *A Mosaic of Victims: Non-Jews Persecuted and Murdered by the Nazis* (New York, 1990).

⁵ As Jacques Maritain, an important member of the original UNESCO committee in charge of formulating the project, famously remarked on the issue of foundations, “Yes, we agree about the rights, but on condition no one asks us why.” Quoted in Mary Ann Glendon, “Reflections on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *First Things*, no. 82 (April 1998): 24. A helpful recent introduction to an immense literature on the text (including important drafting history) and the movement appears in Henry J. Steiner and Philip Alston, eds., *International Human Rights in Context: Law, Politics, Morals* (Oxford, 1996). Technically, of course, the declaration is not a legal instrument, only a “standard of achievement.”

⁶ A. D. Moses, “Structure and Agency in the Holocaust: Daniel J. Goldhagen and His Critics,” *History and Theory* 37, no. 2 (1998): 194–219. Moses himself argues that his categories are ideal types and that some figures straddled or challenged the boundary between them.

draw universalist consequences from that recognition, given the political, theological, or more generally humanistic commitments of important contributors to the discourse. This case helps show that universalizing abstraction from events is not always escapist or repressive, though it will always have a particularized background and motivation (the problem for the historian lies in determining what these are).⁷

It is certainly true that the immediate aftermath of the war in France featured an attempt, despite the upheavals of the prior two decades and the scores of testimonies offered by survivors, to revive the republican synthesis that distinguished French Jewry in modern times.⁸ Coupled with the so-called "Vichy syndrome," this consensus led to notably problematic consequences in the representation of the immediate past, extending from Jean-Paul Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* (translated as *Anti-Semite and Jew*), which understood Jewish identity essentially as hostile construction, to Alain Resnais' documentary *Night and Fog*, which, as Bartov notes, did not confront the fact of Jewish victimhood at all.⁹

But the story is more complicated than these examples suggest. France also tended to be the country that pioneered versions of this first regime of memory with a slightly different cast, frequently because of the contribution of Jews and other survivors, which were all the more remarkable because of the international silence that otherwise reigned on the topic. Despite recent allegations of a cultural *Sonderweg* when it comes to the rights tradition,¹⁰ for example, the French made an important contribution to the Universal Declaration not only through the efforts of intellectuals such as Jacques Maritain but also through the primary draftsmanship of the French-Jewish jurist and later Nobelist René Cassin. Far from ignoring Jewish suffering, Cassin and others in the movement had the sense that they were doing it honor.

At a more literary-cultural level, France enjoyed an early consensus on the necessity of interfaith dialogue about the meaning of the Holocaust; French-Jewish intellectuals and novelists cooperated in forging a philosophical reflection of the broader universalist regime of memory of which they were a part. Elie Wiesel, whose encounter with the Catholic writer François Mauriac proved critical in the origins of the official text of *Night*, is the most spectacular example, but there are many others.¹¹ While modern ears trained on the music of the newer regime of memory are often alert to the absences and dissonances in this literature, they are

⁷ For a critical earlier example, see Dale Van Kley, "From the Lessons of French History to Truths for All Times and All People: The Historical Origins of an Anti-Historical Declaration," in Van Kley, ed., *The French Idea of Freedom: The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789* (Stanford, Calif., 1994).

⁸ Annette Wieviorka's works explore these issues, especially her monumental study on testimonies, *Déportation et génocide: Entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris, 1992). Also, Maud S. Mandel, "The Strange Silence: France, French Jews, and the Return to Republican Order following World War II," Presentation, Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University, April 15, 1998. On the interwar background, Vicki Caron, *Uneasy Asylum: France and the Jewish Refugee Crisis, 1933–1942* (Stanford, Calif., forthcoming), will make an important new contribution.

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (Paris, 1946); English transl., *Anti-Semite and Jew*, George J. Becker, trans. (New York, 1948); for Resnais, see Bartov, "Defining Enemies, Making Victims," 788 n 31. But compare Andrew Hebard, "Disruptive Histories: Toward a Radical Politics of Remembrance in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*," *New German Criticism* no. 71 (Spring–Summer 1997): 87–114.

¹⁰ Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley, Calif., 1992).

¹¹ Elie Wiesel, *La nuit* (Paris, 1958); for a problematic account of Mauriac's role, see Naomi

insensible to some of their valuable harmonies and functional importance. For they were extremely influential, not least on the non-Jewish population, who were likely to have had their exposure to the Holocaust through these materials.

Early French post-Holocaust culture also proved significant in shaping elite reflection. To give just one example, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's comments regarding the universalist basis and implications of both Jewish identity and Jewish victimhood as well as his advocacy of a new humanism based on the figure of the other were far from incidental to his broadly influential treatment of current philosophical issues in general.¹² This first regime of memory is therefore critical for understanding at least one dimension of the ethical motivation in the origins of so-called postmodernism, most notably the early work of Jacques Derrida. Interestingly enough, the universalizing approach to the genocide informed the work of philosophers most renowned for their championship of difference. But this paradox is not merely a feature of these philosophers' work: it helped define a more embracing cultural project committed to thinking out the relationship between the universal and the particular anew in the post-Holocaust context.

These comments are highly introductory. But they do imply that a good deal of historicist caution is required to appreciate the complexity, significance, and legacy of initial responses to the horror of war and genocide. In particular, it is important to avoid the unexamined premise that reactions to events that antedate contemporary canons of interpretation were for that reason alone evasive, misguided, or simply wrong. Even those confident enough to assert a standard of response against which to measure all others should understand it less as a direct and obvious inference from events than as a painstaking, indirect, and mediated achievement.

The study of memory is a requirement because it allows distinction among rival strands in the history of interpreting an event for the purposes of comparison and more critical affiliation.¹³ I have argued that Bartov's "vicious circle of defining enemies and making victims," while powerful, did not wholly determine post-Holocaust culture. The "other ways to view reality" that he so admirably posits and advocates are not totally absent from the historical record.¹⁴ A closer examination of the first, international style in post-Holocaust culture, notably in France, may prove more rewarding than Bartov suggests, as intellectuals work toward a world in which enemies and victims finally become things of the past.

Seidman, "Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage," *Jewish Social Studies*, new ser., 3 (Fall 1996): 1–19.

¹² Emmanuel Levinas, "Etre juif," *Confluences* 7, nos. 15–17 (1947): 260; *L'humanisme de l'autre homme* (Montpellier, 1972); Samuel Moyn, "Judaism against Paganism: Emmanuel Levinas's Response to Heidegger and Nazism in the 1930s," *History and Memory* 10 (Spring 1998): 25–58.

¹³ While Jan Assmann asserts the possibility of separating "history" and "mnemohistory," Dominick LaCapra more plausibly suggests that the categories are neither fully identical nor fully distinct. See Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), esp. 14; and LaCapra, *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998), chap. 1. Earlier, see LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, 1994), 11–12n; and Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), chap. 1.

¹⁴ Bartov, "Defining Enemies, Making Victims," 772, 816.

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