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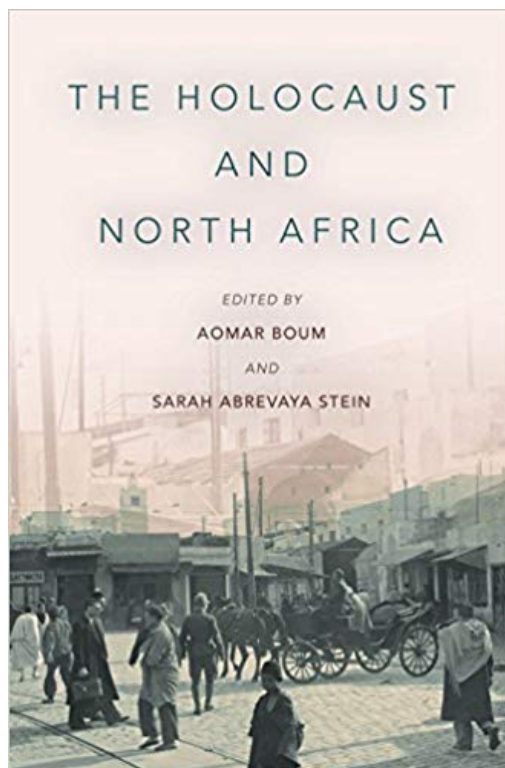
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**Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, editors**

## ***THE HOLOCAUST AND NORTH AFRICA***

**Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018, ISBN-13: 978-1503605435**

**Reviewed by Lucia Admiraal\***

### **The Entanglements of Colonialism and Fascism in North Africa**

The *Diario de Djelfa*, written in Spanish by the Mexican-Spanish Jewish writer Max Aub, born from French-German parents, is a collection of forty-seven poems written during his internment in the Djelfa camp in Algeria between November 1941 and May 1942. The poems were written on the front and back of an 8.5 cm by 13.4 cm note card. In the introduction to his poems, Aub recalls how he and his fellow prisoners would read them under the light of an oil lamp, sheltering in camping tents amidst the harsh landscape of the pre-Sahara, carefully hiding the writings from the eyes of the camp guards. The Djelfa camp was one of various labor and internment camps set up by the French in their North African colonies for the purpose of constructing the Mediterranean-Niger railway system, authorized in March 1941, by Vichy leader Petain, which gained the support of Nazi officers. The forced laborers in the camp were mostly 'undesirables', Jewish and non-Jewish refugees from metropolitan France, Spanish republicans, communists, Algerian Jews, and other prisoners of various nationalities.

Aub's literary works constitute one of the rare written accounts of Jewish and non-Jewish experiences in North Africa of World War II and the Holocaust. Aomar Boum, who in this volume offers a study of the works of Aub, and co-editor Sarah Abrevaya Stein, have given these experiences a central place in their interdisciplinary

volume *The Holocaust and North Africa*. This collection of essays is one of the first to explicitly link the events in North Africa during World War II with the concept of the Holocaust, and to attempt to break a silence that, the authors argue, has long prevailed on the topic. They explain this silence in several ways. First of all, they point to the prevailing Eurocentrism in the field of Holocaust studies and the consideration of North Africa as marginal to World War II and the Nazi genocide. Although nowhere in the volume is it claimed that the experiences of Jews in North Africa equal those of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe, least of all in scale, the case is made for the integration of Jewish experiences in North Africa into the larger history of the Holocaust.

A second explanation for the neglect of the topic is its political sensitivity and the competition of victimhood that surrounds it. Stein and Boum argue that the politicization of the Holocaust in Israel and North Africa “has rendered the topic historical taboo” (p. 8). In Israel, the Holocaust is part of Ashkenazi-Mizrahi identity politics and debates on victimhood, and the struggle of Jews from North African and Middle Eastern descent for representation. In North Africa, the authors argue, some scholars perceive the topic of the Holocaust as shifting attention away from colonial violence. A third explanation for the neglect is a lack of documentation. For example, the French authorities in North Africa have been very successful in destroying documentation on the camps and imprisonments across their North African colonies. Moreover, Jewish and non-Jewish accounts of the war are few, and remain largely silent on the Holocaust. The volume makes the argument that testimonies of refugees and internees in North Africa have been seen as secondary to those of Nazi victims in Europe, not only by the public and academia, but also by the survivors themselves. By addressing the question of why North African narratives have been “written out of Holocaust history and memory,” the volume explicates and examines the interaction between scholarship, literature, and memory.

The case studies herein prove that despite the perceived ‘silences’, there is enough rich material to be explored. The volume consists of four parts that focus on the meeting of Fascism and Colonialism; experiences of occupation, internment, and race laws; personal narratives; and a section of commentary and reflections by prominent scholars working in different fields: Omer Bartov, Susan Rubin Suleiman, Susan Gilson Miller, Haim Saadoun, Michael Rothberg, and Todd Pressner.

The dialogue between the themes and questions that are brought together in *The Holocaust and North Africa* reflect, in my observation, various recent scholarly developments. Included are non-Eurocentric approaches to the Holocaust and the increasing attention for micro- and marginal histories in Holocaust studies and the integration of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish experiences into the wider field of Jewish history. The mixing of Jewish history into general histories of North Africa and the Middle East, views on Jewish history through the prism of colonialism, and responses to Fascism, Nazism, and anti-Semitism in the Middle East and North Africa are also evident.

Should we understand the events in North Africa as part of the history of the Holocaust? The authors have chosen the title of the volume despite, or rather because of, the different taboos that surround the connection of the Holocaust to North Africa. The “and” in the title, rather than “in,” might seem at first glance to make a distinction between the geography and scale of the Holocaust in Europe and its reverberations in North Africa. But the editors explain in the introduction that “and” merely serves to emphasize the inability to provide a complete account of the Holocaust in North Africa, also that part of the book focuses on the impact of the Holocaust on Muslims and Jews in the post-war period (p. 12). Despite these remarks, “in” is used repeatedly in the introduction and essays. This ambivalence brings up the question that runs through all the contributions in the book. How suitable is the rubric “Holocaust” for the various cases presented in this volume? Or rather, in the words of the editors in their introduction, what is at stake when studying the Holocaust in North Africa?

Before the outbreak of World War II, half a million Jews resided in North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia). In Morocco and Tunisia, Jews and Muslims alike were colonial subjects. In Algeria, Jews, in contrast to the Muslim population, held French citizenship according to the 1870 Crémieux Decree (CD), which was abrogated during Vichy rule. In Libya, the Italian Fascists gained full control over the country in the 1930s. The Libyan Jewish community subsequently faced Fascist attacks and subjugation to Italian racial laws until the British occupation in 1943.

The North African ‘dimension’ to the Holocaust comprises varying experiences of persecution. The measures taken by the colonial and Fascist powers included Jewish subjugation to French and Italian racial laws, the expropriation of Jewish property, economic disenfranchisement, forced labor, and in some cases, most importantly in Tunisia, the only North African country under Nazi occupation, deportation to death camps. The volume highlights the multiplicity of experiences and memories of the Holocaust. Jews in Moroccan rural

communities learned about the exterminations in Europe as late as the 1950s, while some of Tunisia's Jews were deported to death camps in Europe. But, the authors emphasize, none of North Africa's half a million Jews were exempted from the effects of the war under the double occupation of colonialism and Fascism.

The essays that are concerned with Vichy race laws and internments in the French colonies in particular highlight that, in accordance with recent scholarship, the status of Jews and Muslims in North Africa should be studied in a comparative framework. Daniel Schroeter provides an important contextualization in this regard in his essay on the abrogation of the Crémieux Decree (CD) in Algeria and the implementation of Vichy racial laws. He shows how these should not be seen merely as anti-Semitic measures, but as part of the colonial politics of modernity by which Jews and Muslims in Algeria were jointly affected. The abrogation of the CD, which left Algerian Jews stateless, and the implementation of the anti-Jewish *Statut de Juifs* were aimed to satisfy pro-Vichy settlers, and to appease the Muslim population, who were perceived by the French to have resentment against the Jews, and to reduce their anti-French sentiments. After the Allied takeover of Morocco and Algeria, all Vichy laws and statutes were annulled, and a debate emerged whether the CD should be reinstated. This ended in the "re-abrogation" of the Crémieux Decree, presented as a measure against racial distinction. It was part of the attempt to maintain the French empire and the privileged position of French settlers, and to block the political rights of Muslims.

Above all, the volume underscores that the persecution of the Jews in North Africa cannot be dissociated from colonialism and its racial policies. What distinguishes the experiences of Jews in North Africa from Jews in the European 'heartlands' of the Holocaust is, therefore, less a question of center versus periphery, but rather the French-Italian colonial context. An alternative, yet less thought provoking, title of the volume could have been *The Entanglements of Colonialism and Fascism*.

Perhaps because of the strong colonial angle that runs through the book, some essays include sentences that aim to fit, here and there somewhat forcefully, the North African experiences and narratives into the broader Holocaust frame. In the essay on Judeo-Tunisian narratives of occupation, Lia Bozgal argues that the accounts are characterized by restraint, resulting from the writers' awareness of, and ethical concerns on, the marginality of their experiences compared to the lot of European Jews. Although the essay painfully lays bare the emerging sensitivities and rivalries of victimhood in the postwar period, it seems that it too quickly passes over the possibility that the writers' "restraint" is indeed the result of them simply not feeling like Holocaust survivors.

Michael Rothberg's chapter in the commentary section provides the most reflective take on the contributions in the book, and truly comes back to the central question "What is at stake when studying the Holocaust in North Africa." He writes that the essays in the volume are at their best "when they do not simply try to write their way into the Holocaust narrative but also ask us to reconsider what other, less hegemonic frames might be available for thinking about North Africa during World War II" (p. 243).

The debate on the suitability of the rubric "Holocaust" also brings up the question of responsibility for the persecutions in North Africa, these being clearly not solely a Nazi-affair. This is not only an issue of historiographical relevance, but also, as shown in the volume, one that has had direct consequences for North African Jews after the war. For example, from the essay by Jens Hoppe focusing on the persecutions of the Jews in Italian Fascist Libya, readers learn that Hoppe calls the question of responsibility for these measures a complex Italian-German-Libyan affair, crucial for German compensation in the post-war period. Ultimately, 2,000 Jews in Libya have received compensation because of West German recognition of German instigation of Italian actions.

Despite the clear aim of the volume to go against Eurocentrism, it cannot entirely escape the Eurocentric biases that emerge from some cited sources. Hoppe's discussion of Muslim violence against Jews in Libya following the Italian Fascist period, is largely explained by the anti-British anti-imperialism of Arab nationalists as well as economic grievances. This point is illustrated by a quote from an "American lieutenant commander working in naval intelligence" commenting on anti-Jewish actions in Egypt and the Middle East. Such an account explaining anti-Jewish sentiments amongst Arabs and Muslims demands a critical approach, and should at least address the question of who speaks for whom.

Hoppe refers several times to Jeffrey Herf's study *Nazi Propaganda for the Arab World With a New Preface* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010) which focused primarily on the content and aims behind the Nazi propaganda, rather than its reception amongst the Arab public. While Hoppe quotes David Motadel stating that German propaganda was a failure as the majority of the Muslim population showed no reaction, in his

discussion of anti-Jewish sentiments amongst Muslims he also uses Herf's statement that Muslim apathy toward the Jews has been a longstanding component of Islam [sic] traditions. Such an ahistorical statement is particularly strange in a volume in which context is key. Moreover, a range of scholarly works which have directed the attention to a broad spectrum of contemporary responses to Fascism and anti-Semitism in the Arab world have been published in the wake of Herf's study.

Finally, the photos included in the volume, mostly derived from archives in Germany, the United States, and Israel, visualize the integration of the North African events into Holocaust history, as they connect the familiar and the unfamiliar. Readers see a train of Libyan survivors from Bergen Belsen return to Tripoli, a Tunisian forced laborer wearing the yellow badge, a bare-chested German Jewish prisoner pushing a cart full of stones in a Moroccan labor camp. Considering the long 'silence' on North Africa's stories of the Holocaust that is mentioned throughout the book, the question of how the "politics of the archives." when, where, and how the textual and visual materials have been kept and categorized, have contributed to this neglect, would make a story in its own right.

While the question whether the "Holocaust" is the right rubric under which to interpret events in North Africa during World War II receives no definitive answer, the various case studies presented in the volume succeed in expanding the geographic, temporal, and thematic horizons of Holocaust studies. The volume's true contribution is that its relevance extends way beyond the (ever-diversifying) field of Holocaust studies, and should be of interest for a broad range of scholars working on North Africa and the Middle East, World War II, the entanglements of colonialism and (transnational) Fascism, and Muslim-Jewish relations under the impact of colonialism. It is hoped that this volume will inspire more trans-regional research that connects the thriving scholarship on North Africa and the Middle East during World War II, that compares the intellectual, cultural, and political debates on Fascism and anti-Semitism in different colonial contexts and that includes more scholars from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) working in these fields.

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