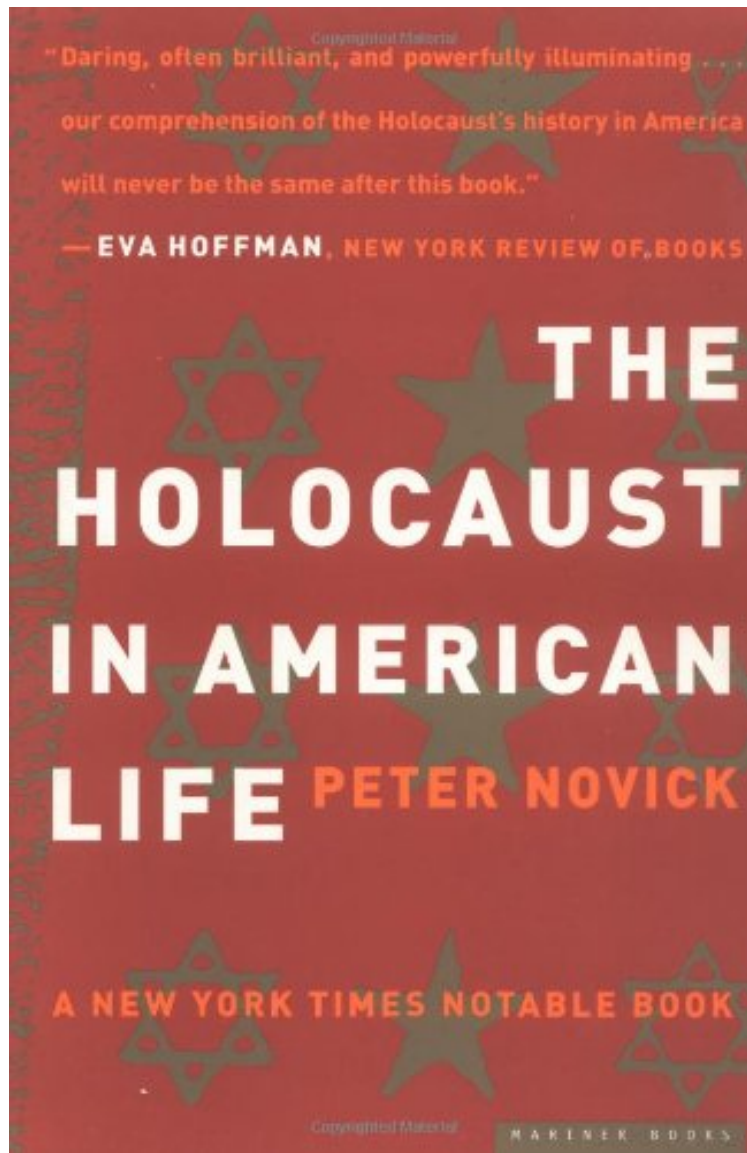


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The Holocaust in American Life

Peter Novick

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Peter Novick : The Holocaust in American Life before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Holocaust in American Life:

37 of 41 people found the following review helpful. A thought-provoking intellectual history, well presented by Richard E. Hegner. This is one of the most intellectually stimulating books I have ever encountered. While few people probably agree with everything the author has to say, he has written a thoughtful, thoroughly researched examination of how the idea of the Holocaust--and popular thinking about that tragedy among both Jewish and Gentile

Americans--has evolved over the 60 years since the outbreak of World War II. He also has the courage to challenge conventional thinking as well as the beliefs of generally revered leaders like David Ben Gurion and Elie Wiesel. The book does an excellent job of linking popular thinking about the Holocaust with concurrent historical trends and developments, including the more intense American focus on the Pacific as opposed to the European theatre for much of the war, the lack of appreciation during and immediately after the war for the immensity of the Jewish genocide, the emergence of the Cold War (together with the "discovery" of common totalitarian threads between Nazism and Stalinism), the "rehabilitation" of Germany after Stalin took over Eastern Europe, changing views about "victimization" in American popular culture, the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and Hannah Arendt's controversial analysis of it, the Arab-Israeli Wars of 1967 and 1973, as well as the decline in American anti-semitism in general at the same time that radical black activists were employing anti-Jewish rhetoric. One of the most important contributions of the book is its discussion of the alleged "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, which the author shows to be both historically inaccurate and dangerous in leading down the slippery slope where any other more recent catastrophes and disasters are minimized in comparison. Rich with example and documentation--the footnotes and endnotes should be read, too--the book is one I expect to return to in the future. Broad in its scope and well-written, it is generally quite persuasive in the arguments it advances. I would concur with those critics who fault the author's occasionally overly colloquial style, especially when he is discussing Holocaust deniers. His dismissal of them as "kooks" and "nut cases" detracts from the generally strong case he makes against them.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Read this one!!! By bob lewis Enlightening and well worth the effort. 30 of 39 people found the following review helpful. Will shake up your beliefs

By A Customer Before reading this book, some of the things I knew about the Holocaust were that (1) the Allied military ignored the pleas of Jewish groups to bomb Auschwitz... (2) Bombing the rail lines to Auschwitz would have saved Jewish lives... (3) American guilt about failure to rescue Jews was an important factor in US support for the State of Israel in 1948... (4) The very existence of Israel was in peril during the 1967 and 1973 wars... Novick argues (convincingly to me) that these, and a bunch of other things that I'd always assumed, are simply wrong. And I'm not just talking about the "soap factory" stories. The "political message" of the Holocaust (like most other things) often doesn't have much to do with "historical truth". An earlier reviewer comments on the issue of the uniqueness of the Holocaust: actually, Novick does discuss this issue at some length, arguing convincingly that the whole issue is quite vacuous... uniqueness is a rhetorical rather than a historical matter. I'm a little surprised that there hasn't been more of a media uproar over this book: it's a lot *more* controversial than Goldhagen's book of a few years ago (Hitler's Willing Executioners). Maybe the storm just hasn't broken yet?

Prize-winning historian Peter Novick illuminates the reasons Americans ignored the Holocaust for so long -- how dwelling on German crimes interfered with Cold War mobilization; how American Jews, not wanting to be thought of as victims, avoided the subject. He explores in absorbing detail the decisions that later moved the Holocaust to the center of American life: Jewish leaders invoking its memory to muster support for Israel and to come out on top in a sordid competition over what group had suffered most; politicians using it to score points with Jewish voters. With insight and sensitivity, Novick raises searching questions about these developments. Have American Jews, by making the Holocaust the emblematic Jewish experience, given Hitler a posthumous victory, tacitly endorsing his definition of Jews as despised pariahs? Does the Holocaust really teach useful lessons and sensitize us to atrocities, or, by making the Holocaust the measure, does it make lesser crimes seem "not so bad"? What are we to make of the fact that while Americans spend hundreds of millions of dollars for museums recording a European crime, there is no museum of American slavery?

.com In the first decades following World War II, Americans rarely discussed the Holocaust. Now, remembering the Holocaust has become a fundamental part of Jewish identity; gentiles, too, view the Holocaust as a touchstone of moral solemnity. In *The Holocaust and American Life*, Peter Novick asks why, and his answers are both sensible and shocking. He explains the immediate postwar silence about the Holocaust by reviewing the basics of cold war politics: just after the liberation of the concentration camps, Americans were called upon to sympathize with "gallant Berliners" who resisted the Soviets and built a wall against Communism--an "enormous shift from one set of alignments to another," Novick notes. Novick then leads readers through the series of events that brought the Holocaust to the forefront of American consciousness--the trial of Adolph Eichmann, the Six-Day War, the Carter administration's Israel policy, and the construction of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. Among Novick's most controversial ideas is his assertion that American Jews spoke softly of the Holocaust at first because they didn't want to be seen as victims; later, Jews decided that victim status would work in their best political interest. Or, as Novick puts it, "Jews were intent on permanent possession of the gold medal in the Victimization Olympics." *The Holocaust in American Life* is as carefully researched and argued as it is polemical and probing. Novick does not suffer Holocaust deniers lightly, and he is empathic toward victims and survivors, but he has no tolerance for false sentiment. One wishes that more people would ask, as Novick does, what kind of a country would spend millions of dollars on a museum honoring European Jewish Holocaust victims instead of a monument to its own shameful history of black slavery. --

Michael Joseph Gross
From Booklist
Why has the Holocaust, five decades after its conclusion, remained such a burning issue in the consciousness of Americans, both Jews and Gentiles? After all, most historical events fade from memory with the passage of time and the deaths of those who directly experienced the events. Yet, despite the occurrence of more recent and certainly quite horrific mass atrocities, from Cambodia to Rwanda, the Holocaust continues to play a central role in American public discourse. In this unsettling and fascinating work, Novick, a Jew and a professor of history at the University of Chicago, examines how a variety of domestic and foreign events have moved Holocaust consciousness to the center of American life and kept it there. The author unhesitatingly probes touchy subjects, including the role of Holocaust consciousness in cold war politics, the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, and even the supposed "obsession" of American Jews (few of whom are Holocaust survivors) with the Holocaust. This is an important work that is bound to irritate, even outrage, many readers.

Jay Freeman
From Kirkus
An exceptionally interesting, prodigiously researched study of how the Holocaust has been understood and the uses to which it has been put, in American particularly American Jewish political, communal, and intellectual affairs. Novick (History/Univ. of Chicago; *The Resistance Versus Vichy*, not reviewed) notes that until about 1965, the Holocaust was marginalized in American life, subsumed under the Cold Wars political dynamics, as well as its cultural and pedagogic agenda. A wide variety of forces, from the Eichmann trial to the rise of identity politics and concomitant focus on victimization, led to the Holocaust becoming centered in American life. In the 1980s and particularly the 90s, with Holocaust education made compulsory in the high schools of several states, the erection of Holocaust memorials, and the opening of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., it came to have transcendent status as the bearer of eternal truths or lessons that could be derived from contemplating it. American Jewish leaders were instrumental in furthering this process, both to garner support for Israel and as part of their effort to deter assimilation. The Holocaust has achieved, in one of Novick's more polemically charged phrases, a perverse sacralization. Yet parts of his book seem to argue against this thesis, or at least to demonstrate that Holocaust-centeredness may be an ephemeral phenomenon. Novick notes how superficial, and sometimes opportunistic or manipulative, allusions to the Holocaust from both ends of the political spectrum have been; he wonders how long it will be before Holocaust memorials become part of the tuned-out urban background; and he maintains that the memory of the Shoah has had a negligible influence on Washington's response to genocide in places like Biafra and Cambodia. Concerning America's hesitant response to Serb atrocities in Bosnia, for example, he asserts that the lessons of Vietnam . . . easily trumped the lessons of Holocaust. Inconsistent in its approach, occasionally characterized by rhetorically overcharged prose, this well-written, richly layered, pathbreaking work nonetheless deserves a wide readership. -- Copyright 1999, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.