

BEYOND EICHMANN:
RETHINKING THE EMERGENCE OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

A HOLOCAUST CONTROVERSY: THE TREBLINKA AFFAIR IN POSTWAR FRANCE. By Samuel Moyn. Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005. Pp. xxii, 220.

In recent years scholars from Israel, Europe, and the United States have argued that the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem served as a turning point in the history of Holocaust memory. Anchored by the dramatic testimony of 111 survivors, the Eichmann trial brought the Nazi genocide of European Jews into the public sphere for the first time as a discrete event on an international scale. The trial was explicitly designed, in the words of Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, to present “[t]he Holocaust that the Nazis wreaked on the Jewish people . . . [as] a unique episode that has no equal . . . [and] as the only crime that has no parallel in human history.”¹ According to the Israeli journalist and historian Tom Segev, Ben-Gurion’s strategy was largely successful: “[t]he Eichmann trial marked the beginning of a dramatic shift in the way Israelis related to the Holocaust.”² The impact of the trial was by no means limited to Israel, however. Peter Novick, in his history of Holocaust memory in the United States, argues that “[t]he Eichmann trial, along with the controversies over [Hannah] Arendt’s book [*Eichmann in Jerusalem*] and [Rolf] Hochuth’s play [*The Deputy*], effectively broke fifteen years of near silence on the Holocaust in American public discourse. As part of this process, there emerged in American culture a distinct thing called ‘the Holocaust’—an event in its own right, not simply a subdivision of general Nazi barbarism.”³ And in an important history of the memory of the Shoah in France, Annette Wieviorka cites the trial as the moment at which previously private individual and family memories of the genocide came to “penetrate the social field.”⁴ According to all of these influential histories, the effects of bringing Eichmann to justice in Jerusalem have been long-lasting and widespread.⁵

The stakes of this dominant account are quite high, for in this widely accepted narrative the figure of the Holocaust survivor, the genre of Holocaust testimony,

1. Quoted in Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 329-330.

2. *Ibid.*, 361.

3. Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 144.

4. Annette Wieviorka, *L'ère du Témoin* ([Paris]: Plon, 1998), 79.

5. This paragraph draws on my discussion in Michael Rothberg, “The Work of Testimony in the Age of Decolonization: *Chronicle of a Summer*, Cinema Verité, and the Emergence of the Holocaust Survivor,” *PMLA* 119:5 (2004), 1231-1246. For other useful, recent discussions of the cultural significance of the Eichmann trial, see Jeffrey Shandler, *While America Watches: Televising the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Lawrence Douglas, *The Memory of Judgment: Making Law and History in the Trials of the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

and the public nature of Holocaust remembrance all turn on the Israeli state's deliberate staging of a trial meant to instruct the world (and, importantly, its own citizens) about the uniqueness of the Nazi genocide of Jews and the necessity for a Jewish homeland. However one judges those lessons, it cannot be denied that their long-term legacies remain today at the center of cultural and political conflict. But what if accounts that turn on the centrality of the Eichmann trial tell only part of the story? Might not a revised historical narrative also contribute to a rethinking of contemporary contestations of history and memory, responsibility and justice, trauma and collective identity? New work has begun to offer a more differentiated narrative that not only continues to pay close attention to national differences in the vicissitudes of Holocaust memory, but also looks with new eyes at the first decades after the liberation of the camps and the end of the war. In these new narratives the Eichmann trial does not recede from view entirely, but it begins to take its place alongside other events and forces distributed unevenly across varied national contexts. Such work has implications both for historical understanding and for conceptualizing the work of memory and the politics of the past in contemporary societies.

Samuel Moyn's important new book, *A Holocaust Controversy*, is part of this new work and, among other things, offers a revision of Wieviorka's canonical narrative of French Holocaust consciousness. Moyn resurrects an all but forgotten incident—the controversy over Jean-François Steiner's documentary novel *Treblinka*—and argues convincingly that it helped shape the emergence of Holocaust memory in 1960s France. Published in 1966 by the twenty-eight-year-old son of a Holocaust victim, *Treblinka* was a bestseller in France and abroad (including the United States). While mindful that the novel is rarely read today, Moyn nevertheless makes a compelling case that the controversy not only condenses many of the most important issues that continue to bedevil response to the Holocaust, but that it also served as the initial occasion for many of those debates in France. In the spring and summer of 1966, the controversy filled the pages of French journals and magazines and drew in some of France's most important intellectuals of the past century, including Simone de Beauvoir, Emmanuel Levinas, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet. With both subtlety and a sense of the dramatic potential of intellectual dispute, Moyn reveals that at the core of the *Treblinka* controversy were impassioned and antithetical understandings of central moral and historical problems: the relationship between victimization and resistance, the parameters of Jewish identity, and—perhaps most crucially—the conceptual framework through which Nazi crimes should be understood. Moyn successfully makes the case for *Treblinka*'s centrality to French Holocaust discourse in the 1960s, but at the same time he also inadvertently reveals another strand of history and memory that fits neither his narrative nor the one he is displacing: the partially overlapping history of decolonization and particularly of the French–Algerian War. Many of the intellectual figures who helped bring a notion of the Nazi genocide's specificity into the public sphere did so because of the ways that contemporary wars of decolonization were forcing a renewed confrontation with the recent, traumatic past.

A Holocaust Controversy is significant both for the particular arguments it advances about the historical vicissitudes of Holocaust consciousness and for the methodology it employs. Moyn's most important thesis is that the debate over Steiner's book was the first public airing in France of the now historically central distinction between concentration camps and extermination camps. In focusing on Treblinka, a camp that, unlike Auschwitz, had no purpose but the genocide of Jews, Steiner had set out to distinguish what would later be known as the Shoah or Holocaust from the treatment of other groups found in the Nazi camps, such as, most important for this controversy, political prisoners. While such a distinction now seems obvious, Steiner was setting himself against the dominant, universalizing strain of understanding in France—a nation whose memory of the Nazi period was, at the time, predominantly ruled by a notion of the homogeneity of the “concentrationary universe” and the treatment of different victim groups. Indeed, one of Steiner's main opponents in the debates that immediately greeted his book was David Rousset, the political prisoner whose early testimony *L'univers concentrationnaire* (1946) contributed both a catchphrase for referring to the world of the camps and a framework that stressed the unity of that world. While Rousset himself is rarely referenced today in English-language scholarship, his catchphrase lives on as does his influence, which has traveled, sometimes via Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, into the work of contemporary figures such as Giorgio Agamben and Tzvetan Todorov (as Moyn documents in his final chapter). Although Steiner met with a great deal of opposition from a somewhat surprising array of forces—including many members of the Jewish deportee community—the argument he advanced would soon become hegemonic. The position he spoke from—that of the aggrieved son of a victim—would also become widely recognized in the proliferating discussions of the “second generation.”

In approaching the Treblinka affair, Moyn practices a version of microhistory or “*histoire totale*.” Although *A Holocaust Controversy* situates Steiner's book in a variety of diachronic contexts, the heart of the book is a detailed analysis of the scandal provoked by publication of *Treblinka*, a scandal he tracks through a number of print publics. Moyn's intensive focus on this one controversy pays off and the short book is compulsively readable. The book is organized to move outward from Steiner's biography and text toward the surrounding “general” and Jewish publics, and the reader is pulled along almost as if reading detective fiction—Moyn creates a narrative tension through which one is eager to find out how and why the controversy unfolded and what its implications are. After a brief chapter in which Moyn attends to the somewhat sensationalist publicity that accompanied the appearance of *Treblinka*, he steps back and provides a fascinating biographical sketch of Steiner and his family and a capsule account of the novel itself. He places considerable emphasis on Steiner's Polish-Jewish father, Kadmi Cohen, a writer and activist close to the right-wing Zionist Revisionism of Vladimir Jabotinsky. (Oddly, given the “totalizing” impulse of the book, there is no discussion of Steiner's French convert mother.) Cohen wrote a number of books expressing a virulent nationalism and even began to organize a Jewish resistance movement while being held by the Nazis in camps in France, but eventually he was deported

to his death in the Auschwitz sub-camp Gleiwitz. Moyn wisely stresses that this personal background can in no way be understood as all-determining—indeed, Moyn argues convincingly in more general terms that the past, whether personal or collective, is always open to multiple interpretations and instrumentalizing appropriations. But in raising the question of Jewish nationalism and resistance through the case of Steiner’s father, Moyn sets up one of the key issues that animated the controversy—the question of Jewish “passivity” in the camps. Steiner’s frequently misunderstood—and somewhat bizarre—argument about the genesis of a specifically Jewish, violent resistance out of the complete abjection of Jewish passivity in Treblinka became the central point of the debates at the time (although not its longest-lasting contribution to understandings of the genocide).

In the three chapters following his introduction of the controversy and biographical sketch of Steiner, Moyn investigates in detail the reception of the novel in different spheres. The first of these chapters follows the most public features of the debate and argues for its salience in establishing the distinction between concentration and extermination camps. Besides Beauvoir, who wrote a preface to *Treblinka* that seemed utterly to misunderstand Steiner’s novel claim for Jewish particularity in victimization and resistance, the major protagonists of this chapter are Rousset and Vidal-Naquet. While Rousset vocally defended his universalizing position on the camps (a position that, unlike many members of the French left, led him to a principled anti-Stalinism), the classics scholar Vidal-Naquet, whose parents had been murdered by the Nazis, was led to recognize for the first time the specificity of the genocide of the Jews. Vidal-Naquet would later moderate his position on this question (and begin to stress once again the similarities, as well as the differences, between the various sectors of the “concentrationary universe”), but Moyn shows how the Steiner affair catalyzed Vidal-Naquet’s scholarly work on the Holocaust, work that in subsequent decades would become crucial to historiography of the Holocaust and, especially, of Holocaust denial.

The following chapter looks at the specifically Jewish response to *Treblinka*—especially in venues that never reached a large audience. Especially noteworthy is Moyn’s attention to Yiddish-language sources, an under-studied resource in most accounts of Holocaust memory. Here Moyn highlights some of the generational conflicts that were beginning to mark postwar French Jewish life—with the younger generation, represented by Steiner, in search of a new ground for Jewish identity, and the older generation remaining within the universalist republicanism of the general deportee community. This chapter also includes an extended discussion of one of the philosopher and religious thinker Levinas’s first and most substantial responses to the Holocaust—a text that responds to the Steiner controversy and that led Moyn, a Levinas scholar, to the affair in the first place. Whereas Steiner had explored Jewish passivity in order to construct an existential counter-narrative of aggressive Jewish resistance, Levinas found the essence of Jewishness in that very passivity and the universalizing moral vision of nonviolence it implied. Moyn’s point, however, is not only the unsurprising difference between Steiner and Levinas, but also the fact that they shared a desire to establish an essence to Jewish identity and found in the Holocaust “a privileged occasion for the revelation of Judaism’s most fundamental existential core” (119).

Dedicated as he is to unearthing of the multiplicity of positions that defined the Jewish community during the post-Holocaust years (a multiplicity that existed, of course, before the Holocaust as well), Moyn is understandably skeptical about both of these essentialist visions. In the final chapter on the controversy itself, Moyn turns to attempts by some of the Treblinka survivors and archivists whose accounts Steiner had used to distance themselves from the book. Moyn documents how “the revolt of the witnesses,” which largely concerned Steiner’s fictionalizing interpretations of their testimonies, had little impact on the public debate, although they did force Steiner and his publishers to make certain alterations to future editions of the novel.

The conclusion of *A Holocaust Controversy* takes the Steiner affair up to the present—not by arguing that the novel itself has remained a touchstone of controversy, but rather by suggesting correctly that many of the issues it raised remain central. Among the most central of these issues are questions pertaining to generational response to the Holocaust, tensions between testimony and historical or artistic narrative, the relation between the Holocaust and the overall nature of Nazi criminality, and the implications of the Holocaust for collective identity. In this chapter, Moyn takes on some of the most important figures in recent scholarly dispute about the Nazi genocide, including Dominick LaCapra, Giorgio Agamben, and Tzvetan Todorov. His judgment of the latter two is particularly sharp: in both Agamben and Todorov Moyn finds a return to the universalist position on the camps that downplays the specificity of the Nazi genocide. While Moyn recognizes the moral imperatives that led such figures toward universalist positions, he is dubious about the intrinsic connection between a generalized condemnation of crimes against humanity and the possibilities for action in the present. As opposed to those, such as Agamben and Todorov, who read the present and the past as part of a continuum, Moyn concludes by stressing discontinuity: “it is possible that the memory of the past should, very often, lead to the conclusion that humanity must see itself, in the present, on its own, faced with new and difficult choices it has never faced before. Sometimes, the present needs to be haunted only by its own novelty” (167).

Despite ending with the admonition to think the novelty of the present, Moyn’s stimulating book succeeds in reanimating the past and in rendering it relevant to contemporary debates and ethical dilemmas. His microhistorical method brings back a fascinating moment of transition in Holocaust consciousness, but a few methodological and substantive questions remain. To this literary critic, it was striking that Moyn’s *histoire totale* of the Treblinka controversy spent very little time on one of the central aspects of the affair: the text itself. While, as Moyn shows, much of the response to the novel had little to do with Steiner’s actual positions (as is no doubt true in all such controversies), it is difficult to say with certainty what the shaping force of the novel might have been because Moyn pays relatively little attention to questions of literary form. I would have liked to hear more about how, for instance, Steiner’s choices of genre and narrative perspective, among other textual factors, may have shaped the controversy. Within the interdisciplinary matrix of Holocaust studies, the literature/history divide remains in place, despite exemplary studies such as this one.

In terms of its substantive thesis, Moyn's genealogy of the emergence of the Holocaust as a specific object is largely convincing. His focus on *Treblinka* should, for instance, lead to some rethinking (at least in the French context) of the centrality of the controversy surrounding Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. While, as I've indicated, the 1961 Eichmann trial and the subsequent firestorm over Arendt's 1963 book are often mentioned as turning points in Holocaust consciousness, Moyn reveals that the Arendt controversy only arrived in France shortly *after* the *Treblinka* affair and was generally received as another version of the same issues about Jewish passivity and complicity. The case for the singular influence of Steiner's book may, however, be somewhat overstated. As Moyn recognizes, no one intellectual dispute can single-handedly produce a sea change in collective consciousness; it must build on previous social forces and transformations.

In the case of France, there is reason to believe that the emergence of the Holocaust into public consciousness occurred against the backdrop of the decolonization of France's colonial empire and particularly in relationship to the Algerian War of Independence. Although Moyn does not follow this particular genealogy, there is evidence to be found for such a view in *A Holocaust Controversy*. As Moyn points out, Jean-François Steiner served with an airborne unit in Algeria during the war and his first literary publication, in *Les Temps modernes*, recounted his experiences there and was called "Fabrication d'un parachutiste." Additionally, in the years preceding *Treblinka*, Steiner published a series of articles on post-independence Algeria in a Gaullist magazine that would later significantly contribute to the publicity for his novel. Among the key protagonists of the dispute over *Treblinka*, Pierre Vidal-Naquet's connection to the French-Algerian War is also profound.⁶ An important figure in metropolitan anticolonial resistance in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Vidal-Naquet, writes Moyn, "likened his discovery of the Jewish specificity supposedly at work in the Treblinka revolt to his startling realization that Arab nationalism rather than Enlightenment universalism had driven the anticolonial insurrection he had famously advocated a few years before" (108). As Vidal-Naquet makes clear, the particular forms that resistance took during the French-Algerian War are one source of connection between decolonization and memory of World War II. Vidal Naquet was by no means alone in this realization, a realization that extends beyond the confines of the figures discussed by Moyn. For instance, André Mandouze, one of the founders of *Témoignage chrétien*, a group that helped save Jewish children during the occupation and took part in resistance to the colonial war, would look back on his involvement fighting the Nazi occupation and his later work opposing French colonialism as part of the same narrative; he would title his memoirs, *D'une résistance à l'autre* [*From One Resistance to Another*].⁷ Charlotte Delbo, who had been deported as part

6. Vidal-Naquet's double involvement was not unique. Simone de Beauvoir's engagement in both the *Treblinka* affair and the French-Algerian conflict was also significant and is evidenced by the fact that before she wrote the preface to Steiner's book, she produced a book publicizing the case of Djamilia Boupacha, an Algerian woman whose report of her own torture was a significant scandal in 1960.

7. See the discussion of Mandouze in David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 260-262. See also the interview with him in Philippe Mesnard, *Consciences de la Shoah: Critiques des discours et des représentations* (Paris: Editions Klimé, 2000).

of the Communist French resistance and is now well known for her searing trilogy, *Auschwitz and After*, published her first book in 1961: *Les belles lettres*, a contribution to anticolonial resistance in which many echoes of the Nazi past can be heard together with a growing sense of the specificity of the extermination camps.

The resonance between decolonization and the Nazi past was not limited to questions of resistance, but turned especially on the perception of similarities in the forms of violence practiced by two otherwise very different imperial states. Vidal-Naquet and Mandouze were among the leftist intellectuals who set out to reveal the widespread torture practiced by the French state during the Algerian War. Torture was one of the forms of colonial violence that, rightly or wrongly, brought up memories of the Nazi occupation for many survivors of the camps (Jewish and non-Jewish). For example, in submitting his resignation in 1957, the secretary general of the police in Algiers, Paul Teitgen, a former deportee, wrote that he recognized in Algeria “profound traces . . . of the torture that fourteen years ago I personally suffered in the basements of the Gestapo in Nancy.”⁸ And when, in the mid-1960s, the Austrian-Jewish Holocaust survivor Jean Améry came to write his well-known essay “Torture” about his experiences at the hands of the Nazis, he made reference to the “numerous” books on torture in Algeria that appeared in France “around 1960.”⁹ In this context, it is not at all surprising that France’s leading leftist intellectual journal, *Les Temps modernes*, should have included in the same 1961 issue Fanon’s essay “De la violence” and excerpts from Primo Levi’s Auschwitz memoir, published as “J’étais un homme.” Later in the year, another issue of the journal juxtaposed reports on the Eichmann trial and accounts of the October 17 police massacre of Algerians in Paris (an event presided over by former Vichy police prefect Maurice Papon). The December issue included a long essay on the Algerian crisis by Claude Lanzmann, who would later become famous for his cinematic masterpiece *Shoah*, and a review of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin’s film *Chronique d’un été* [*Chronicle of a Summer*].¹⁰ This cinema verité classic may be read as a stylistic precursor to Lanzmann’s film; it features a Holocaust survivor at its center and was the only film released between 1954 and 1962 that treated the French–Algerian War in critical fashion.¹¹

The degree to which the extreme violence of decolonization contributed to the emergence of Holocaust consciousness in France cannot be calculated any more precisely than the impact of the *Treblinka* affair, of course. But the series of connections between decolonization and Holocaust memory, both in proximity to *Treblinka* and at a greater distance from it, suggests something important about

8. Teitgen’s letter is reproduced in Charlotte Delbo, *Les Belles Lettres* ([Paris]: Éditions de Minuit, 1961), 81. It is also quoted in Benjamin Stora, *La Gangrène et l’oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie*, Cahiers Libres. Essais (Paris: La Découverte, 1991), 32.

9. Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 23.

10. For Levi and Fanon, see *Les Temps modernes* 181 (May 1961); for Eichmann and the massacre, see *Les Temps modernes* 186 (November 1961); for Lanzmann and *Chronique d’un été*, see *Les Temps modernes* 187 (1961).

11. For a discussion of Rouch and Morin’s film that pursues the connections hinted at here in greater detail, see Rothberg, “Work of Testimony.” I have reproduced several sentences from this essay in my discussion of Moyn’s book.

the dynamics of collective memory that complements Moyn's approach. Moyn's methodology draws attention in eye-opening ways to the heterogeneity of the various collectives in France that have had a stake in the fortunes of the historical memory of the Second World War and Nazi occupation. The Algerian connection suggests the need to continue to open up assumptions about how such memory is constituted—about the transnational forces that often lie behind it and about the seemingly unrelated histories that intersect with it, often in unexpected fashion. The presence of conflicting and heterogeneous pasts continues to haunt nations around the globe. This is especially, if not uniquely, true of France, as the social unrest in the suburbs in fall 2005 attests. Against this backdrop, the need for new ways of thinking about collective memory in intercultural contexts must be recognized as matters of life and death. Among the many strengths of Moyn's book is that it will provoke readers to think further and in new ways about how collective memories emerge and are transformed and about the critical, ethical stakes of thinking about the past.

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