



The Holocaust in American Life

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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?

The Holocaust in American Life Details

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From Reader Review The Holocaust in American Life for online ebook

David says

This is a well-written and well-researched book on the reception of the Holocaust as a cultural and political object in America. I'm glad Novick and not I wrote this book, because I could never be so genial about the issue, or the deep corruption with which it is manipulated by professional Jews in general and Zionists and neocons in particular.

American Jews are diverse and in their majority secular and assimilationist. Religion divides them rather than unites them. Holocaust talk is almost impossible to challenge and is the last, desperate ploy used by professional Jews to herd their constituency. It is also used by Zionists in an effort to blackmail the US emotionally into supporting Israeli policy.

Novick is much nicer and good-humored about this than I am above. But it's there in the book.

Heather says

How did the Holocaust move from being a topic rarely discussed in the decades after World War II to being a moral touchstone in American discourse nearly five decades later? Who profits from the Holocaust remembrance industry, either politically or financially? What are the powerful motivations behind collective memory and narrative?

Peter Novick, a professor of history at the University of Chicago, examines how a variety of events have moved Holocaust consciousness to the center of American life and kept it there. Novick provocatively touches on several delicate subjects, including the role of Holocaust awareness and discourse in cold war politics, the "uniqueness" of the Holocaust, and even the supposed "obsession" of American Jews with the Holocaust. The author traces a path of increasing American consciousness that brought the Holocaust to the forefront, including the Eichmann trial, the Israeli Six-Day War, the policies of the Carter administration on Israel, and the construction of the US Holocaust Museum.

One of his most controversial ideas is the assertion that American Jews initially spoke quietly of the Holocaust because they did not want to be cast as victims, but later decided that victim status would work in their political interest. Novick bluntly asserts that "Jews were intent on permanent possession of the gold medal in the Victimization Olympics."

Novick continues to probe the reasons for the large place that the Holocaust holds in American life, asking why this country would spend millions of dollars to erect a museum and memorials honoring European Jewish Holocaust victims instead of monuments and reparations to events in its own shameful history. In this line of questions regarding collective memory, perhaps Novick has struck gold.

Randi Kennedy says

A provocative exploration of why a European tragedy looms so large in American consciousness. Novick isn't afraid of asking the big questions: why is there a museum on the Mall for the Holocaust and American slavery or another American tragedy; why do some get offended when the word "genocide" is applied to other tragedies; what about the non-Jewish victims of Nazism? The questions to these queries are often ugly, showing how humans are willing to exploit great pain and suffering for political, economic, or moral gains. Recommended for those interested in Cultural Studies, World War II History, Jewish Studies, and Holocaust Studies.

Sarah says

Novick has some compelling ideas that he supports with some mostly convincing arguments. There is a lot of good stuff in this book. I would recommend it to anyone with an interest in the historiography of the Holocaust or with an interest in American conceptions of the Holocaust. That said, there were a few things that seriously annoyed me in *The Holocaust in American Life*.

First and foremost: Novick is cautious to the point of cowardliness about his own arguments. It seemed to me that he knew his thesis was controversial, so to mitigate political and academic backlash/criticism, he studiously blanketed his arguments in the most wishy-washy appeasing language possible. He constantly used phrases like "it might be remarked that" (52), "to some unknowable extent, the myth is probably sustained, like many myths, because of its utility" (74), "we have to ask...whether it's likely..." (107), "it seems plausible that..." (107), "it seems to me..." (13), "in my view..." (13), "I think, and as I'll try to show..." (10). Maybe this is just part of Novick's writing style, but it came off to me as annoying and wholly unnecessary. Don't write "it must be remarked," just remark it. Don't write "in my view" a thousand times; it's your damn book, I *know* it's your view. Don't qualify your arguments with constant "it is plausible," "I think it likely," "to some unknowable extent," because they don't add anything except to make it seem like you're covering your own ass and trying to make your own analyses seem moderate and tentative. But if you believe in your own thesis--and I think Novick does--just *write it*. Be brave, write with conviction, or else go back to the drawing board and come up with a thesis you *can* defend with some assurance.

Secondly, I found it really strange that Novick seriously neglected, in his section on Holocaust studies, the work of Raul Hilberg. First of all, how do you *not* mention, in a book on the Holocaust in American life, the *first and most important* academic study of the Holocaust published in the US? Especially since the book itself supports Novick's thesis that the Holocaust did not figure prominently in American life in the 1950s and 1960s, since Hilberg had a terrible time both in writing the dissertation and in getting it published as the result of disinterest--and even hostility--regarding Holocaust history. In fact, the only significant reference to Hilberg manages to *misrepresent* his work by making *The Destruction of the European Jews* seem like a polemical rail against Jewish failure to resist (139) rather than the seminal academic study of the Holocaust that it was (and still is). Perhaps I'm nitpicking too much, but it just seemed like such a strange way to both omit and misrepresent Hilberg's influence and work.

Finally, I think Novick comes off as a bit of a crusty old curmudgeon in the last half of the book, whining about how the youth of today don't retain or transmit collective memories. It ended up feeling like sort of a

lame academic *those-darn-youths-and-their-technology* thing. These seemed to me to be more the fussings of an old man than a useful scholarly analysis. But whatever.

So yeah. An interesting book, with a compelling thesis and some pretty convincing evidence, but it could have been so much better than it was.

Matt says

Novick writes a very interesting re-examination of the role of the Holocaust in the United States. He doesn't seek to downplay the importance of the Holocaust, but he does take a very hard look at why it has become such a huge factor in American culture. It is very interesting to see how the importance of the Holocaust in American life has grown since the end of the war, and the reasons behind that growth. Novick handles a delicate topic with the utmost respect and lays the groundwork for further discussion about the meaning of the Holocaust, and by extension, other tragedies and genocides.

Susie says

I'm trying to be more conservative in how I rate books so that I only give a five to ones that are amazing.

To put it simply:

I was born to read this book.

Am I being dramatic? A tiny bit. But it was like sitting in a college class taught by an amazing professor where every word out of his mouth is fascinating.

And pretty much only I would feel this way about the book.

He talks about how the Holocaust has evolved in America from when no one talked about it right after the war because it wasn't a positive thing for Jews to be victims because they wanted to be accepted like everyone else. Then he went on to the rise of the Holocaust in Jewish conscience and how it coincided with society's elevation of the victim (between blacks, gays, hispanics, women, and Jews). Everyone wanted to be the biggest victim and Jews and Blacks got annoyed with each other that each was trying to outdo the other.

The Holocaust Museum on the mall in Washington shows that the Jews won as the biggest victims. So what I thought was just an homage to those who suffered on another continent was actually all political, beginning with Jimmy Carter who needed to please his Jewish constituents when he was being too even-handed in the Arab-Israeli conflict so he thought up the idea about the museum. Blacks were trying to get one through at the same time about the black experience in America and lost because they didn't have the political power or money.

It was wonderful. I'm refraining from retelling the whole book. But you'll only like it if you're totally into all that stuff.

Robert Davis says

An extremely interesting (and controversial) look into the development of the Holocaust as a central point of importance to the American Jewish community.

Ushan says

During World War II, neither Americans in general nor American Jews in particular singled out the Nazi murders of the Jews among all crimes of the Nazis, and in fact were disinclined to believe their extent. Sure, the Soviets told the world about the Nazi murders of Soviet Jews, but the Soviets seemed to have lied about the Katyn forest massacre, so why believe them in this case? Soon after the war the murders did not enter the American popular consciousness, not least because the concentration camps liberated by the Americans were not the ones where Jews were being exterminated: the latter were located in eastern Germany and Poland, and were liberated by the Soviets. Memory of the Nazi genocide was not a major factor in the American decision to recognize Israel or in the ratification of the United Nation Convention on Genocide; the major backers of the ratification were Ukrainian Americans and Lithuanian Americans who believed that what the Soviets were doing in their homelands amounted to genocide. Through the 1950s the Nazi genocide was not remembered much in the United States: during the early Cold War it was not politically correct to remind of the crimes of the former enemy and present ally, which were stopped by the former ally and present enemy. However, in the 1960s and the 1970s several things happened. The black Civil Rights movement led to the rise of ethnic consciousness among all Americans, including American Jews; unlike blacks, Chicanos or Native Americans, American Jews could not conceivably claim to be oppressed now - but 30 years ago in Germany! Also, after the murder of one President, a lost war, a civil rights movement that ended in race riots, and a resignation in disgrace of another President, it became less fashionable to think of oneself as just an American, as opposed to a Chicano or a gay man or a woman. In 1967 Israel fought a war with her Arab neighbors who threatened to wipe her off the map; in 1973 the threat was more realistic; this of course brought memories of the Nazi attempt to wipe the Jews off the face of the earth. Since the 1970s and into the 1990s the Holocaust became an American fixture, with the NBC miniseries, endless books, films, memorials, and a taxpayer-funded museum. This had something to do with the American Jewish leaders wishing to promote ethnic separatism in the face of the spectacular Jewish assimilation into the American society; something with the fact that the Holocaust gives a clear picture of good and evil in a morally uncertain world; something with the fact that the victims of the Holocaust were white Europeans, often wealthy like Anne Frank's father, and were easier for Americans to identify with than victims of Third World wars and genocides. Something like 97% of the Americans polled are aware of the Holocaust, while only about 49% are aware of the fact that the Soviet Union fought on the same side as the United States in World War II. However, this knowledge is often garbled; Martin Niemöller's famous poem begins, "First they came for the Communists" but the taxpayer-funded museum in Washington DC omits this line because it is not politically correct. A book called Encyclopedia of the Holocaust moved Jews to the first place; Al Gore and Time Magazine did the same thing and added the Catholics.

Despite so many words, the Holocaust does not seem to have had much impact on American foreign policy. The United States did not do a thing to prevent the genocide in Rwanda; a humanitarian intervention in Somalia was cut short after a few American soldiers died. The Holocaust is the American Jewish entry in "the Victimization Olympics", competing against black slavery (Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is dedicated to the 60 million who died in the transatlantic slave trade, even though serious historians estimate that about 12 million slaves were transported across the Atlantic over 300 years, the vast majority to Brazil and the

Caribbean, of whom about 2 million died - which is not a round multiple of 6 million) and the oppression of gays. Peter Novick argues that this contest is good neither for the nation nor for the ethnic group.

Liz De Coster says

A compelling look at the understanding and role of the Holocaust in American consciousness in the years since the end of World War II. Novick combines a number of elements - historiography, religious studies, etc. - to support his argument that the Holocaust shouldn't be the defining characteristic or common denominator of American Jewish culture or identity. It's a difficult line Novick walks, to critique a somewhat touchy subject, but I think he generally maintains an even keel.

Fraser Sherman says

Novick looks at the Holocaust as remembered and interpreted in the US throughout the 20th century, from the post-war years when for various reasons it was largely ignored (even American Jews didn't make a big thing of it), through the increasing emphasis on the genocide as a singular point in human history we must never forget. Novick concludes that the Holocaust has always been interpreted according to the needs of the day (in the first decade or so of the Cold War, it was a warning that any totalitarian state, such as the USSR, was a threat), making it hard to know what, if any lessons to draw (by and large, he doesn't think there are any good ones).

Craig Werner says

Finished rereading the pre-1980 sections of this book and it holds up very well. It's an important book for deflating some deeply-held mythologies about Jewish identity in the United States, specifically the one that places the Holocaust at the center of Jewish post-WWII consciousness. Novick makes an absolutely compelling case that that connection emerged only gradually in the 1960s and didn't establish itself as central until after the Six Day War of 1967, developing what he calls its "sacralized" form in the 1970s, partly in response to anti-Semitic statements by a few black militants (which were blown *way* out of proportion by parts of the Jewish leadership). Novick does a great job analyzing the importance of cultural events like the publication of William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*; Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*; as well as the Eichmann trial itself and the Broadway production of Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (which assailed Pope Pius XII for his silence in the face of the Nazis). First-rate intellectual history.

Rachel says

I agree with almost every point this author makes, despite his incredulity that anyone would.

Esther says

I grew up in the era when the Holocaust became so central to American Jews, and I have to say I never questioned it, though I was always a little put off by those who insisted that nothing ever has or could compare to the Holocaust. Not only does that seem questionable to me, it seems a bit like daring fate. Novick sets out to answer two questions: how did the Holocaust get to be so important to Americans, and is that a good thing for the American Jewry? His style is readable and easy to follow, and he does a good job of answering the first question. The second is iffier, and though he acknowledges the fuzzy nature of both the question and the whole issue, including the scarcity of actual evidence on which to base a conclusion, essentially he merely gives his opinion for the second answer. Still worth reading.

Mike Goldstein says

I can't imagine this book being any better than it is. Novick offers a definitive, sweeping overview of how the Holocaust has been understood in the United States, stretching from before the war even started until the book's present day.

The book's thesis is basically this: Memory of the Holocaust, like that of all other historical events, has proven to be endlessly malleable based on the demands of present-day political and cultural purposes, and that even our understanding of how we *used* to think of the Holocaust is shaped by those same demands. Novick shows the reader how the Holocaust wasn't understood as a Jewish-specific tragedy during the war (in order to prevent anti-Semitic backlash against American intervention), how it was entirely ignored in the decade after (as the Cold War took center stage and Western Germans became our allies), how Holocaust survivors were even spurned by some Israeli Jews (because their perceived sickness didn't fit the clean, virtuousness of the Israeli mission). And then he shows us how all that was easily forgotten once the Holocaust became culturally acceptable to discuss, and once it more neatly matched with Western political goals.

Novick spends some time contemplating the nature of collective memory, and how those memories are both made and forgotten. I found that discussion valuable, if a little less than fully-formed, but it was more the concrete historical details that kept me interested here. Novick talks about fights over official death totals (and specifically calls into doubt the popular 11 million figure for combined Jewish and non-Jewish victims), discusses how often the Martin Niemöller "First they came for the Communists" passage is intentionally misquoted, and even talks about how victims of the Khmer Rouge deliberately shaped their memorials around Holocaust symbolism in order to better draw international sympathy. The way in which genocide came to represent the ultimate evil, and the Holocaust came to represent the epitome of genocide is pretty fascinating.

This book was published in the late-90s, but with alarmist rhetoric about the "next Holocaust" being used to attack Iranian nuclear ambitions, and Netanyahu asserting that French Jews are only truly safe in Israel, it's obviously still quite relevant now. I'd recommend it.

Andre says

- 1) Deutsche Rezension
- 2) English Review

1) Deutsche Rezension

Für viele ist dies sicher ein sehr polarisierendes Buch, für mich war es an erster Stelle ein sehr interessanter Einblick in den Umgang mit dem Holocaust in der amerikanischen Öffentlichkeit.

Ich stimme dem Autor allerdings keineswegs in allem zu. So denke ich, dass die Behauptung der Einzigartigkeit des Holocaust, oder genau genommen der Shoah, wird auch jetzt, viele Jahre später noch genutzt um den Holocaust an den Romvölkern zu leugnen oder herunterzuspielen. Entweder indem man behauptet was stattgefunden hat würde nicht die Definition der Wörter „Holocaust“ oder „Völkermord“ erfüllen oder dass es weniger schlimm gewesen sein als die Shoah.

Was neu für mich war, zumindest im Detail, war das nicht nur die jüdischen Gemeinden in den USA den Holocaust nicht groß in ihren Zeitungen hatten sondern in Palästina war es nicht anders obwohl dort die meisten nach 1933 aus Europa ausgewandert waren. Was den heutigen Mythen so ziemlich zu wider läuft.

Und es blieb nicht dabei. Das Buch greift auch die Mythen des „Schuldkomplexes“ der amerikanischen Juden (welcher erst Jahre später konstruiert wurde) an, sagt, dass die Gründung Israels aufgrund anderer Gründe geschah und dass Ben Gurion einst sagte, dass aufgrund des Holocaust der Zionismus tot ist.

Es war ironisch, dass der Grund weshalb in den 50er Jahren die jüdischen Organisationen nicht viel Aufhebens machten, die Tatsache war, dass dort die meisten Kommunisten Juden waren und man nicht alte Klischees wecken wollten. Tatsächlich waren die Anstrengungen für eine Aufmerksamkeit auf den Holocaust zu lenken unter amerikanischen Juden am wenigsten erfolgreich und es gab kaum eine öffentliche Diskussion zu dem Thema. Und der Universalismus der Opfer in den 50ern Jahren war das genaue Gegenteil zu dem Einzigartigkeitsanspruch der heutigen Zeit. Laut diesem Buch erhielt der Holocaust seine Stellung erst in den 60er Jahren, als sich in den USA eine depressivere Stimmung breit machte. Damals waren auch viele der amerikanischen Juden dagegen Eichmann in Israel zu verurteilen weil Unvoreingenommenheit dabei nicht gewährleistet würde, etwas was heute extrem kontrovers sein würde. Was auch kontrovers wäre, ist die Aussage des Buches, dass die schwindende Unterstützung Israels aus dem Westen nichts mit der Abnahme von Holocaustbewußtsein zu tun hat, sondern damit, dass nach dem Sechstagekrieg und aufgrund der Politik in Gaza Israel als europäische Kolonialmacht angesehen wurde. Was auch seine schwindende Unterstützung in vorher befreundeten afrikanischen Ländern erklären würde.

Zu dieser Zeit bemerkten jüdische Organisationen in den USA plötzlich einen Anstieg an Antisemitismus auch wenn die Daten (z.B. jüdische Politiker gewählt in Regionen mit kaum jüdischer Bevölkerung) etwas anderes zeigten, etwas was auch heute noch aktuell zu sein scheint. Der Autor argumentiert auch, dass die Auszeichnung der „Gerechten unter den Nationen“ institutionell eher dazu gebraucht wurde die „Nichtgerechten“ unter den Nichtjuden zu schmähen auch wenn viele Einzelpersonen das Gegenteil im Sinne hatte wenn sie den Antrag dazustellen, daher nicht alle Nichtjuden zu verurteilen. Das dieser Titel eine exklusive und ausschließende Seite hat, war mir schon klar, da Sinti und Roma ihm egal sind, aber von dieser Institutionalisierung hatte ich noch nichts gehört.

Leider galt das nicht für das was damals jüdische Organisationen zu gemischten Ehen sagten, deren fremdenfeindlicher und rassistischer Ton habe ich schon lange von besonders konservativen und radikalen Ecken gehört.

Und darüber zu lesen wie jüdische Organisationen auf den Völkermord an den Armeniern reagierten lies mich zwei Dinge fragen:

1) Wie würden sie darauf reagieren, wenn man ihnen sagen würde, dass alles was angeführt wurde um die Einzigartigkeit des jüdischen Holocaust anzuzeigen auch angeführt werden kann um zu sagen, dass die Sinti und Roma einen Holocaust durchlitten haben.

2) Warum erwähnt der Autor „Zigeuner“ nicht als Argument um über den Einzigartigkeitsanspruch des jüdischen Holocaust zu sprechen? Er führt Schwarze Amerikaner und Armenier an aber niemals „Zigeuner.“ Sie werden zwar später ein paar Mal erwähnt aber niemals in diesem Zusammenhang, obwohl er selber sagt, dass ihre Sterblichkeitsrate ähnlich hoch war.

Danach kam ich dann auch zu einer Behauptung des Autors die mich doch recht übel aufstieß: Er behauptete die Fernsehserie „Shoah“ hätte das Schweigen in Deutschland gebrochen, als wenn Dinge wie die

Auschwitzprozesse nicht existiert hätten.

Aber das war nur kurz, was interessanter war, war das düstere Bild welches er von Elie Wiesel und amerikanischen Juden zeichnete, dass sie sich des Leidens rühmen würden, was bei Wiesels religiöser Vorgeschichte sogar stimmen könnte.

Und wenn man bedenkt wie viel selbst heute, 16 Jahre nachdem dieses Buch geschrieben wurde in den USA noch über den Holocaust geredet wird, bezweifle ich, dass die Prognosen des Autors in nächster Zeit zutreffen werden. Leider.

Das Ende des Buches war dann sehr abrupt und was er über den Holocaust und Jim Crow geschrieben hatte, würde vermutlich auch viele über aufstoßen.

Und das ist was dieses Buch im Grunde ist. Eine schonungslose Konfrontation mit dem Umgang mit dem Holocaust in den USA seit den 1940er Jahren. Es wird nicht jedem gefallen aber es ist dennoch wichtig, egal ob der Autor richtig oder falsch liegt.

2) English Review

For many this is certainly a very polarizing book, for me it was in the first place a very interesting insight into the handling of the topic of the Holocaust in the American public.

However, I do not agree with the author in everything. I think that the claim of the uniqueness of the Holocaust, or more precisely the Shoah, is still being used many years later to deny or downplay the Holocaust of the Romani peoples. Either claiming what took place would not fulfill the definition of the words "Holocaust" or "genocide" or that it was less serious than the Shoah.

What was new to me, at least in detail, was that not only the Jewish communities in the US did not have the Holocaust large in their papers but in Palestine it was no different even though most of them emigrated from Europe after 1933. Which is pretty much against today's myths. And it did not stop there. The book also addresses the myths of the "guilt complex" of American Jews (which was constructed only years later), says that the founding of Israel was for other reasons and that Ben Gurion once said that Zionism is dead because of the Holocaust.

It was ironic that the reason why the Jewish organizations did not make much of a fuss in the 1950s was the fact that most communists there were Jews and one did not want to arouse old stereotypes. In fact, efforts to draw attention to the Holocaust were least successful among American Jews, and there was little public discussion on the subject. And the universalism of the victims in the 50s was the exact opposite of today's uniqueness claim. According to this book, the Holocaust did not gain its position until the 1960s, when a depressive mood spread in the US. At that time, many of the American Jews were also against Eichmann being trialed in Israel because impartiality was not guaranteed, something that would be extremely controversial today. What is also controversial is the statement in the book that the waning support of Israel from the West has nothing to do with the decline of Holocaust consciousness, but with the fact that after the Six-Day War and because of the policies in Gaza Israel was considered as a European colonial power. Which would also explain the dwindling support in previously friendly African countries.

At the time, Jewish organizations in the US suddenly saw an increase in anti-Semitism even though the data (for example, Jewish politicians elected in regions with a poor Jewish population) showed something different, something that still seems relevant today. The author also argues that the "Righteous Among the Nations" award was institutionally used to discredit the "non-righteous" among the Gentiles, even though many individuals had the opposite in mind when they made the request, not to condemn all non-Jews. It was already clear to me that this title has an exclusive and exclusive side, since Romani are not considered worth mentioning, but I had not heard of this institutionalization yet.

Unfortunately, that was not the same with what Jewish organizations used to say about mixed marriages, those xenophobic and racist tone I've long heard from particularly conservative and radical corners.

And reading about how Jewish organizations reacted to the genocide of the Armenians made me ask two things:

1) How would they respond if they were told that whatever was cited to indicate the uniqueness of the Jewish Holocaust can also be cited to say that the Romani have suffered a Holocaust.

2) Why doesn't the author mention "gypsies" as an argument to talk about the uniqueness claim of the Jewish Holocaust? He mentions Black Americans and Armenians but never "Gypsies." They are mentioned a few times later, but never in this connection, though he says that their mortality rate was similar.

Then I came to an assertion by the author that was quite upsetting: He claimed the TV series "Shoah" had broken the silence in Germany, as if things like the Auschwitz trials had not existed.

But that was only brief, more interestingly, was the grim picture he drew of Elie Wiesel and American Jews, that they would boast of suffering, which could even be based in Wiesel's religious history.

And considering how much even today, 16 years after this book was written in the US, is still talked about the Holocaust, I doubt that the predictions of the author in the near future will apply. Unfortunately.

The end of the book was then very abrupt, and what he had written about the Holocaust and Jim Crow would probably also push many away.

And that's what this book is basically about. A ruthless confrontation with dealing with the Holocaust in the US since the 1940s. It will not please everyone but it is still important, no matter if the author is right or wrong.
