The Holocaust Industry. Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering
NORMAN FINKELSTEIN
London: Verso, 2000

The Holocaust in American Life
PETER NOVICK

Reviewed by ENZO TRAVERSO

Uses and Misuses of Memory:
Notes on Peter Novick and Norman Finkelstein¹

Historians have often emphasised that the Holocaust was not the logical, inescapable outcome of a linear process, but the product of a ‘twisted road’. We could apply a similar definition to the path taken by the memory of Auschwitz in the Western world. Almost ignored – or, in any event, buried under the mountain of ruins and sufferings covering Europe at the end of the Second World War – for many years, the destruction of the Jews was pushed to the sidelines, when not omitted outright from our images of the war. History books consigned this event to only a few ritual footnotes, in which Jews were presented as one among the many victims of Nazism, we could almost say victims ‘without quality’, in the middle of a century of horrors. Survivors of the genocide longed to once again be part of the human community from which they had been so cruelly excluded and violently uprooted. Thereafter, they did not wish to ‘be set apart’ by their fate, to appear as ‘special’ victims, stigmatised by an aura of martyrdom setting them apart from others. Such uniqueness was too reminiscent of the old otherness created by anti-semitism. Today, the situation has been turned on its head – the Holocaust has become a central aspect of our depiction of the twentieth century. Yesterday’s ‘non-event’ has given way to a memory obsessively present in public life, conveyed by an uninterrupted flow of narratives, testimonies, books, fictional and film productions, museum exhibits and official commemorations. Two books have explored this phenomenon – analysing its origins, forms and aftermaths – in the United States, the country where its impact has been

¹ Many thanks to Maria Stuart Lagatta for the revision of the English version of this text.
The greatest: *The Holocaust in American Life*, by Peter Novick, and *The Holocaust Industry*, by Norman Finkelstein (the latter originally began as review of Novick’s work and afterwards grew into a separate book). If many of their reflections could be easily generalised, then they relate first of all to American society. Simply or mechanically transposing them to the European context may bring about certain misunderstandings (as I will try to show later on).

In order to explain the central place occupied by the Holocaust in American culture, Novick historicises its memory, distinguishing four main stages. He starts out from the War years, when the main enemy of the United States was Japan. At the time, Roosevelt was intent on ensuring that American involvement in the World War could not be interpreted as a ‘war for the Jews’. During this period, the destruction of the European Jews did not attract particular attention (in the United States nor elsewhere), and the country certainly did not feel guilty about failing to halt this crime. American Jews shared this outlook and did not view the tragic events in Europe at all differently from their fellow citizens. At the War’s end, they were proud of their country, which had contributed so valiantly to the defeat of Nazism.

During the second phase – the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s – the Judeocide was almost completely eclipsed in the public sphere. Remembrance of the Holocaust did not fit in well with the struggle against totalitarianism. When, in the Cold War, the USSR became the totalitarian enemy against which all forces of the ‘free world’ had to be brought into play, remembrance of the Judeocide and other Nazi crimes could disorient public opinion and become an obstacle to the alliance with the Federal Republic of Germany. American Jews were suspected of being Communist sympathisers. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were practically alone in mentioning the Holocaust in 1950s America, during the trial where they were sentenced them to death, and Jewish associations and institutions vigorously opposed erecting monuments or memorials in memory of Hitler’s slaughter of the Jews. It was a period where heroes, not victims, were in the limelight and the show of strength was a national virtue. Jews wished to identify with and assimilate into victorious America, and certainly did not want to appear as a community of victims.

According to Novick, a transition took place during the 1960s. First came the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. This was first public expression of the memory of the Holocaust, represented by Nazi camp survivors who testified as witnesses for the prosecution over many weeks. Next came the Six-Day War in 1967. A large part of the Jewish diaspora viewed this conflict as the threat of a second annihilation, in the form of a possible military defeat of Israel. This gave rise to a long-range split in the way the Jewish state was portrayed, which continues until this day. On the one hand,