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BOOK REVIEWS

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BOOK REVIEWS

History, Memory and Mass Atrocity: essays on the Holocaust and genocide

DAN STONE

Valentine Mitchell, 2006

x + 262 pp., £19.50, ISBN 0-853-03662-4

This volume brings together some of the recent essays of Dan Stone, Professor of Modern History at London University's Royal Holloway College. Stone, one of Britain's leading Holocaust scholars, argues throughout his essays that we need to study the Holocaust within a broader framework of genocide. He rightly insists that the Holocaust had its undeniable specificities and individual characteristics. Yet it does not help us understand better the Holocaust to insist on its uniqueness. Stone shows persuasively that it is time to bring Holocaust and genocide studies together in order to understand better the "over-arching explanatory frameworks" of genocide (vii).

Stone's essays are divided into four sections: the Holocaust's interpretation; studies of individual intellectuals' responses to the Holocaust; issues of representing and commemorating the Holocaust; and understanding genocide. Throughout these cogent essays, Stone deals with the Holocaust's relationship to modernity. He persuasively shows that violence and modernity co-exist. In the essays, Stone turns to individual thinkers' responses towards the Holocaust and asks whether their ideas can help us understand better the phenomenon. Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's concept of "modern magic", Stone claims, can help us "understand the affective sources of its [Nazism's] appeal" (47). Yet this argument, reminiscent of Michael Burleigh's recent interpretation of Nazism as a political religion, is unpersuasive. The terminology of religion or magic affords at best a one-dimensional and inaccurate way to understand what was a heterogeneous movement lacking political and programmatic substance, even if there were many Nazi attempts to use pseudo-religious forms of expression. Excellent essays on Hannah Arendt's, Jean Baudrillard's, Georges Bataille's and Georges Perec's interpretations of the Holocaust follow, all showing Stone's enormous breadth of learning.

The volume's next section turns to questions of representation and commemoration. Here, Stone delivers an extremely thoughtful analysis of survivors' testimonies. Yet do historians really find it hard to use such testimonies and shy away from using them? Recent studies of the Holocaust, including Mark Roseman's and Nicholas Stargardt's books, have made extensive and sensible use of survivors' testimonies. In what is perhaps the volume's most interesting article, Stone turns to British Imperialism's relationship to the Holocaust. Until recently, Stone argues, the Holocaust has been the "screen memory for the darker side of Britain's imperial past" (175). The British focus on the Holocaust—for example, the institutionalisation of Holocaust Memorial Day in 2001—has obscured Britain's colonial record, Stone argues. At the same time, recent work on genocide, inspired by research on the Holocaust, has contributed significantly to the study of British colonial atrocities and genocides. The final three essays bring home Stone's plea for a broader history of genocide that takes us beyond ultimately fruitless debates over "uniqueness".

Stone's excellent and thought-provoking essays are a significant contribution to Holocaust and genocide studies. They will be required reading for anyone interested in the Holocaust and a comparative history of genocide.

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The Price of Whiteness: Jews, race and American identity

ERIC GOLDSTEIN

Princeton University Press, 2006

xii + 307 pp., £18.95, ISBN 0-691-12105-2

Race has been a defining characteristic of American history since the landing of the first European settlers. The 2000 census differentiated between five (supposedly) dominant racial categories: African American, White, Asian (broken down into several sub-categories), American Indian and, in a separate column, Hispanic/Latino. The Census Bureau asked Americans to "mark one or more races" and also provided a box for self-categorisation ("some other race"). This can be read as an admission that the gulf between official racial categories and self-ascribed racial identities is widening. At no time has the United States census, which has been carried out every decade since 1790, included a category for Jews. Yet had the American Jewish Committee not intervened, the 1910 census would have included the categorisation "Hebrew". Since 1899 the Bureau of Immigration did in fact register arriving Jewish immigrants as "Hebrew". When respected Washington lawyer and Jewish proto-lobbyist Simon Wolf protested against this practice, arguing Jews were unfairly singled out as religious group, immigration officials responded that they registered Jews as a racial not as a religious group. The classification was abolished only in 1943. Apart from renewed Jewish criticism, it was a somewhat belated attempt to distinguish American racial definitions from Nazi concepts.

Yet as Eric Goldstein demonstrates in this intriguing and insightful study, it would be much too short-sighted to regard race solely as a problematic concept imposed on American Jews in order to marginalise them. At least until the post-Second World War era, Jewish self-definitions revolved around the race concept. American Jews were often at the same time repelled and attracted by the racial definitions prevalent around them. Since American Jewish history is marked by constant ambivalence about race, it provides a fascinating keyhole perspective on the history of this concept in America. The respective social environment could be an important factor. Not surprisingly, Jews living in the post-Civil War South tended to subscribe to dominant concepts of white superiority and black inferiority, rejecting claims of Jewish race pride in order to protect their claim to whiteness. Northern Jews criticised Jews in the South and voiced support for African Americans, but—and this is little known—initially they were quite confident and comfortable expressing Jewish difference in racial terms. Goldstein discusses the position of several leading Reform rabbis who promoted universal principles, but opposed intermarriage because it might lead to the dissolution of Jews as a distinct group.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Jews in the North were increasingly divided on the subject of race. Some of the Reform rabbis who had earlier emphasised

Jewish racial distinctiveness re-examined their position. The arrival of African Americans from the South in northern cities and rising antisemitic social discrimination had an impact, especially on established Jews. Some Jewish leaders continued to criticise the discrimination African Americans suffered, but tacitly supported residential segregation in their own neighbourhoods. A more crucial factor, however, was the arrival of large numbers of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe—many of whom defined themselves not exclusively in religious terms. Drawing on their own experiences of official discrimination and persecution, they readily sympathised with African Americans. A cartoon from a 1908 Yiddish humour magazine reproduced in the volume depicts a white Uncle Sam character forcing down a black man with the caption “civilization” and, in reversed positions, the same black man forcing down the white character with the caption “barbarism”.

The detailed analysis and discussion of the pre-1914 period is a strongpoint of this study because it covers almost completely un-chartered territory. The second extensive part of the book focuses on the 1920s and 1930s when antisemitic discrimination in American society reached unprecedented levels. The enormous pressure on Jews to prove their “whiteness” complicated their relationship to African Americans who were employed by Jews as domestic servants or patronised Jewish-owned retail stores in inner-city neighbourhoods. In the last chapter, Goldstein takes the story up to 1950, hinting at a paradox. As Jews joined the white mainstream, they emphasised Jewish difference in public in purely religious terms while preferring to socialise with other Jews on a personal level. In the last decades (covered briefly in a concise “Epilogue”), race has been replaced by Jewish “tribalism”. While emphasising Jewish distinctiveness is much easier, even outside of the white paradigm, Jews as a group are less cohesive than before 1950 and intermarriage rates have been increasing. In fact, these processes may be related to each other.

Goldstein relies on a wide array of sources: sermons, speeches, private letters, but also advertisements and different images. He aptly shifts between theological debates and grassroots discussions weaving in personal stories and paying much attention to the increasing importance of consumer culture and, more importantly, the role of gender. The book does have a very strong focus on the Jewish experience. Apart from the opaque white mainstream, only and not surprisingly African Americans receive some attention. Very little is said on other groups who only fully, and in some cases also uneasily, joined the white mainstream after the Second World War. I also wondered how nineteenth-century Reform rabbis, many of whom closely identified with German culture, reacted to the rise of modern antisemitism in Imperial Germany—a development very closely followed by the American Jewish public. Several radical German anti-semites even visited the United States, albeit without having a notable impact. However, these questions in no way detract from what is a very important contribution to American Jewish history.

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