

Why Is The Wall Street Journal Now Devaluing Women's Holocaust Experiences?

A major new anthology has brought together the work of serious scholars of the Holocaust under a “women’s” rubric. In so doing, the book inspired a shockingly anti-feminist attack. Writing in *Commentary* magazine, Gabriel Schoenfeld accused these scholars of spreading feminist “propaganda,” and commented—gratuitously—that “the general execrability” of their prose “easily surpasses that of their male colleagues.” In a baffling editorial move, *The Wall Street Journal* adapted this analysis for its op-ed page, making sure Schoenfeld’s polemic lost none of its scornful, misogynistic fervor. In the following four pages, we offer a clear-headed appraisal of the book and some scholarly responses to the crucial new work of elucidating women’s Holocaust experiences.

by Deborah E. Lipstadt

Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman could not have imagined that when their edited volume, *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1998), appeared it would be drawn into a political maelstrom. Their serious academic study became, within moments of its publication, target for a salvo unleashed by political conservatives.

Despite being a foil for conservative wrath, this valuable collection of essays by 21 writers on women’s experiences before the war, in the ghettos, in the resistance and in the concentration camps makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Holocaust history. The contributors to this volume, the majority of whom are specialists in Jewish history, including the Holocaust, believe that while both Jewish men and women caught up in the whirlwind which was the Holocaust reached the same ultimate destination, men and women often were stopped at different stations along that path. Neither the authors of the various selections nor the editors argue that a woman’s situation was necessarily worse than a man’s. They do contend that it was different.

Some critics of the whole endeavor of studying women’s Holocaust experiences believe that since the Final Solution called for the death of all Jews, to focus on gender in general and sexual vulnerability in particular might seem irrelevant or even irreverent. Some have even said “obscene.” But it is axiomatic to note that the Holocaust did not have the same impact on all its victims. No event ever does. Age, geography and economic status are among the factors that differentiated one experience from the other: Child survivors, particularly those hidden, had a markedly different experience than did adults. A number of scholars have tried to ascertain whether Jews who

Some political conservatives have convinced themselves that the Holocaust has been hijacked by fuzzy-minded liberals.

had a strong religious faith were able to endure the torture of ghettos and camps better than those who did not. Many wealthy Jews were able to arrange for their family’s escape from the Reich, while Jews with no resources had fewer chances of avoiding disaster. Jews in German small towns in the 1930’s generally fared worse than Jews in larger cities where there was an organized Jewish community to assist them. Ofer, Weitzman and other scholars before them recognize that even as one explores differences of age, faith, class, geography, and nationality, “unless one understood the condition of women, one would not understand the general human condition,” as Ofer explains.

This understanding, however, is not—as some critics would have it—a contemporary agenda that feminists are trying to impose on the past. One of the first people to call attention to changes for women as a result of Nazism was the historian Emmanuel Ringelblum, who did his research from within the Warsaw ghetto itself. In Ofer’s contribution to the book, “Gender in Ghetto Diaries and Testimonies,” she quotes Ringelblum’s notes from the beginning of 1940 about women in the Warsaw ghetto.

“Women’s perseverance—the main providers. Men don’t go out. When [a man is seized for forced labor], the wife does not let go. She runs after [the kidnappers], she screams and cries ‘please, Mister’—she is not afraid of the soldiers. She stands on the long line—some are sent to work. . . . When there is need to go to the *Aleja Szucha* [the Gestapo] the daughter or wife goes. . . . The women are everywhere since the [men] have been taken to

all sorts of work. . . .When a husband escapes and his wife has to be the sole provider. [Women] who never thought of working [out of their homes] are now performing the most difficult physical work.”

Ringelblum asked his colleague Cecilya Slepak to explore this metamorphosis inside the ghetto. Why did Ringelblum not *also* ask another scholar to do a similar study on how men’s lives had changed? Because even then, in the midst of the horror, he recognized, as contemporary conservative critics do not, that the vast majority of the information being gathered by the group of ghetto researchers dedicated to documenting as many aspects of ghetto life as possible focused on men’s experiences. That was the norm.

Of the unique experiences of women that have been neglected, Weitzman and Ofer suggest four general categories. First, the roles of women before

Scholars
now find
that
men and
women
experi-
enced
the
horror
differently.

Deborah E. Lipstadt is the Dorot Professor of Modern Jewish and Holocaust Studies and chair of the Graduate Program in Jewish Studies at Emory University.

to ‘give their children to the grandmother.’ The workers, who knew that the grandmothers—and the children—were already destined for the gas chambers, were trying to save the lives of the young mothers. . . . Naturally most women clung to their children . . . and were sent to the gas chambers with them.”

The most striking—and least discussed—difference that women encountered had to do with their sexual vulnerability, a topic that some of the contributors note has been minimized or ignored by researchers. The victimization of Jewish men during the Holocaust did not usually include their sexual exploitation. Even when women were not sexually exploited, they knew that was a danger facing them. Indeed, writes, Myrna Goldenberg based on her study of women’s memoirs of Auschwitz, “Although rape by the SS in the death camps was rare, the women were terrorized by rumors or threats of rape.”

the war. In Germany, for example, where few women worked, they had fewer Gentile contacts. In less affluent Jewish communities in Poland, on the other hand, women were the ones who had primary contact with the non-Jewish world and thus had Gentile contacts they could approach for help.

Second, suggest Weitzman and Ofer, because Jews anticipated that the Nazis would not harm women and children, they focused their escape efforts on the men. The emigration statistics for German Jewish men and women are, as Marion Kaplan observes, quite different. Precious visas were often used for the men on the supposition that once the situation calmed down women would be able to join their families. Parents willingly sent their sons abroad to pave the way for the rest of the family but regularly insisted that a daughter’s proper place was at home with her parents, irrespective of the dire conditions.

Third, the edicts passed by the Nazis tended also to treat men and women differently. We know—and essays in this book attempt to explore why—that in a number of ghettos the mortality rate for men was higher than that for women. We also know that a disproportionate number of women in their 20s and 30s were deported from the ghettos for the camps.

Even upon their arrival in the camps women fared differently. Whereas a healthy young man might well avoid being immediately sent to the gas chambers, young women, who might have been selected to work, were sent to the gas chambers because they were with their children. “It is well known,” write Weitzman and Ofer in their introduction, “that some of the Jews who worked on the arrival ramp walked among the women lining up for the selection and told the young women

One woman recalls her uncle telling her “that he had witnessed a mass raping of Jewish girls who were buried alive in mass graves that they had dug.” Other women had to face the terrible choice of using sex to try to save themselves and their families.

Finally, this book offers evidence of distinct differences in the way in which men and women responded to the Nazi policies, be it women’s refusals to abandon their mothers—thus closing off the possibility of escape—or their ability to make meager food and clothing last in the camps or their leadership in the resistance movements.

In light of these clear gender differences in experiences during the war, which this book explicates so sensitively, the question becomes: Why the political maelstrom about this book? Why has this serious work become the subject of devious attacks in leading Jewish and secular journals? A small number of political conservatives have convinced themselves that the Holocaust has been hijacked by fuzzy-minded liberals intent on de-Judaizing it and using it for all sorts of political ends. These conservatives, both within the Jewish community and outside of it, need ammunition to make their argument, and they have found it in the study of women in the Holocaust. In articles in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Commentary*, Gabriel Schoenfeld has glibly dismissed all such work on women in the Holocaust as having nothing more than a naked ideological agenda. He argues that “feminist scholarship on the Holocaust is intended explicitly to serve the purposes of consciousness-raising—i.e. propaganda.”

The best that can be said about Schoenfeld’s critique is that he did not allow himself to be confused by the facts. Had he not come to this book with his eyes already closed as to



An Egregious Attack on Women's Holocaust

Gender studies aims to redress the alleged neglect of women (plus various sexual minorities including homosexuals and the “transgendered”) in scholarly disciplines across the alphabet from astronomy to history to zoology. It was only a matter of time before its zealous and accusatory gaze fell upon the study of the Holocaust, and now it has done so with a vengeance. . . .

That feminist scholarship on the Holocaust is intended explicitly to serve the purposes of consciousness-raising—i.e., propaganda—is, as it happens, something its practitioners proudly admit. . . . Were they just a narrow cult living somewhere on a commune and insisting on a macabre sisterhood with the dead Jewish women of Europe, they could be safely ignored. Alas, however, just as Weitzman and Ofer assert, they represent “cutting-edge scholarship in an emerging field,” issuing a steady dribble of articles and books and increasingly assuming important positions in Holocaust museums, resource centers, and university enclaves. . . . If scholars who still study and teach about the Holocaust in a serious way were to speak up against [this scholarship], . . . we might yet begin to see a slow rotation of the wheel toward sanity and human decency.

—Gabriel Schoenfeld, “Auschwitz and the Professors,” (Commentary, June 1998)



Women Scholars Speak Up

Paula E. Hyman:

It is ironic that Gabriel Schoenfeld accuses feminist scholars of the Holocaust of writing with a political agenda. For Schoenfeld, who presents himself as concerned simply with saving the Holocaust from being “academicized,” is part of a right-wing political assault against feminism—in this case Jewish feminism—and the considerable and generally well-received scholarship it has produced.

Schoenfeld quotes out of context and refuses to engage the substantive claims that feminist scholarship has made for the importance of gender in historical and cultural analysis. In arguing that the Holocaust should not be studied in an academic context, he mocks courses that are described as “multicultural” or “multi-disciplinary” as “the most with-it.” He quotes an anonymous statement that is clearly unrepresentative of scholarship on the Holocaust—that, if accurate, stupidly links the Holocaust with ecological disasters—to display the tendentiousness of all academic study of the Holocaust.

Schoenfeld grants that studying “‘gender-differentiated behavior’ under conditions of Nazi persecution” is “in itself . . . an undertaking . . . hardly without merit,” but he labels all feminist scholarship as conducted “in the name of a naked ideological ‘agenda,’” whose goal, he writes, is “to sever Jewish women, in their own minds, from their families as well as from the larger Jewish community.”

He “knows” that feminist scholars of the Holocaust are only “paying lip-service to the inescapable truth that simply to be Jewish was to be marked for death”

To raise
the
issue of
gender
does
not
place it
above
racism
in some
hierar-
chy of
horrors.

because they “proceed systematically to . . . paint the Nazis less as anti-Semites than as ‘sexists.’” That remark is simply a libel of those of us—feminist scholars—who study and teach about the Holocaust.

Paula E. Hyman is the Lucy Moses Professor of Modern Jewish History and chair of the Program in Judaic Studies, Yale University.

Lenore J. Weitzman & Dalia Ofer:

If scholars do not study the Holocaust it will be forgotten. And if scholars do not pay attention to the unique testimonies of women survivors, they will certainly be forgotten. These concerns led us to put together our collection of new scholarship devoted to the experiences of women during the Holocaust.

We did not want the lives of women victims to disappear from our collective memory. In addition, we wanted to correct the mistaken assumption that the experiences of Jewish women were always identical to those of Jewish men.

At a time when the powerful “master narratives” of male survivors like Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel infuse our consciousness, it is easy to assume that their experiences were typical and representative of all Jews whether old or young, religious or secular, male or female. They were not. As Jews throughout Europe faced Nazi persecution, Jewish women—as wives, daughters, mothers—encountered special problems and had particular vulnerabilities.

Why, then, is there resistance to the scholarly study of women in the Holocaust? Schoenfeld charges us with imposing the feminist issues of our time

upon the past. This is simply incorrect. In 1941 Emmanuel Ringelblum, the historian who compiled the underground archives of the Warsaw ghetto, commissioned a special study of the experiences of Jewish women.

Others object to studying gender because any distinctions among victims may distract us from the murderous policy of the Nazis. For example, if women coped better in the ghettos, or if men coped better in the camps, we could, the argument goes, end up blaming those who did not cope as well, rather than focusing the blame on the inhuman policies of the Nazis. We believe, however, that invidious comparisons become obviously inappropriate and inadequate when we enlarge our knowledge and understanding of the impossible choices Jews faced.

A final concern of Schoenfeld's is that we are engaging in feminist "consciousness-raising." At first we were upset by this charge: our book is a scholarly work, not a political tract. But when we examined what he means by "consciousness-raising" we found that he was simply referring to our ability to show how gender made a difference. In other words, he is objecting to our engaging in "education," to sharing new knowledge and increasing awareness. Our book gives the reader new ways of looking at the Holocaust and raises consciousness about the importance of being a woman or a man during those years.

What seems to be upsetting Schoenfeld is that our work leads survivors who once thought gender was irrelevant to see that it can deepen our understanding of the Holocaust. For example, survivor-author Ruth Bondy was initially offended by "dividing the Holocaust and its suffering by gender" and agreed to write a chapter for our book only because she did not want the women of Theresienstadt to be ignored. By the time she finished, however, she had written a complex and moving account of the differently nuanced lives of women on the path from Prague to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz.

Such detailed portraits of women deepen our understanding of the Holocaust. Each voice helps ensure that the victims will not be forgotten.

Lenore J. Weitzman is Professor of Sociology and Law at George Mason University; Dalia Ofer is Professor of Contemporary Jewry-Holocaust Studies, Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Marion Kaplan:

Why, until recently, have we looked primarily at men in studying the Holocaust? To raise the issue of gender does not place it above racism in some hierarchy of horrors. We know, to quote Hannah Arendt, that the Nazis did not want "to share the earth with the Jewish people." To raise the issue of gender also does not place blame on other survivors for the disproportionate deaths of Jewish women. Blame rests with the murderers. Rather, gender helps us to . . . emphasize the multiplicity of voices and experiences in the war against the Jews. Gender counted, especially, in extreme situations.

Marion Kaplan is professor of history at Queens College. This passage is adapted from Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in

Nazi Germany (Oxford University Press, 1998).

Lore Segal:

In his book, *Guns and Barbed Wire: A Child Survives the Holocaust*, little Thomas Geve drew plans of the gas chambers and peopled them with stick inmates. The child also observed the tendency, in the half-starved, half-naked population, to take sides—German Jews against Polish, northerners against southerners, city against country people. In the post-Holocaust era, we are still taking sides.

The recent publication of *Women in the Holocaust* has roused the sleeping eloquence of two predictable antagonists.

There is Mr. Schoenfeld, who quotes Robert Alter's prediction that bringing Holocaust studies into the universities would end by "naturalizing the horror." This is what Schoenfeld sees the other side as doing. He accuses them not only of the sin of academic jargon, but of using the horror for their feminist agenda. (He seems not to notice that his own Jewish commitment is an agenda too.)

The other side believes that it will "deepen our understanding" of the Holocaust if we study it from the viewpoint of class and out of a raised feminist consciousness. In a letter to the editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, Joan Ringelheim, feminist philosopher and director of education at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, expresses her sense of having been "maliciously," "vilely," "grossly," as well as "recklessly" misquoted and misunderstood.

Mind you, what the two sides are against each other about is not the Holocaust. The Holocaust is what they have in common. The quarrel is about the correct way to understand, the proper way to memorialize it.

I was playing Scrabble with an acquaintance, a woman, when something said, perhaps, put her in mind of her experiences at Auschwitz. She began to remember and to talk and the more she talked the more she remembered and her eyes began to stream, her nose ran, the hair came loose from its combs. That, it seemed to me at the time, was a way to understand the Holocaust. My acquaintance could not, very fortunately, keep it up, and she presently gave an apologetic smile, mopped herself up, and we went on with our game.

As for the rest of us, let's not pretend that we can keep the horror fresh and raw at all times. Let's give ourselves leave to go on with the game. We do the best we know how with our monuments and museums, by writing our memoirs, attending yet another conference, and by endowing one more chair of Holocaust studies. And by taking sides as if we could persuade one another of the correctest anger, the properest way to mourn. ■

Lore Segal is the author of Other People's Houses and Her First America, in both of which the Holocaust necessarily features.

The
"master
narra-
tives" of
Primo Levi
and Elie
Wiesel
infuse our
conscious-
ness. But
they do
not rep-
resent all
Jews.