



Book review : Idith Zertal, Israel's holocaust and the politics of nationhood

AUTHOR(S)

Pamela Maclean

PUBLICATION DATE

01-12-2006

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Maclean, Pam 2006, Book review: Idith Zertal, Israel's holocaust and the politics of nationhood, *Forum: Centre for citizenship & human rights*, no. 47, pp. 7-8.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Idith Zertal, Israel's Holocaust and the Politics of Nationhood, (trans. Chaya Galai), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, 236 pp.

At the time of writing this review Israel's invasion of Lebanon continues. The Israeli government has again mobilised the rhetoric of survival to justify its actions. Increasingly, however, Israel's position is met with skepticism, possibly because international goodwill, so long premised on a perceived obligation to make amends for Jewish suffering in the Holocaust, is difficult to maintain in the face of Israel behaving more as an aggressor than a victim. The uncomfortable relationship between Israeli nationhood and the Holocaust forms an important subtext for much of the debate surrounding Israel's behaviour. Idith Zertal's valuable study (translated from the Hebrew and originally published in 2002) argues that not only is this relationship no coincidence, but it has been deliberately manipulated and exploited by Israel's political elite since before the state's establishment in order to enhance the legitimacy of Zionism.

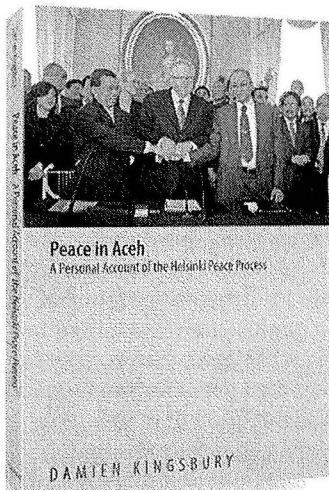
According to Zertal, Israeli collective memory has been shaped by a carefully crafted attitude towards the Holocaust. Zionist mythmakers tread a fine line between condemning the systematic murder of Jews by the Nazis and criticising Diaspora Jews for their failure to defend themselves. The integration of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising into the Zionist discourse (in opposition to the wishes of surviving participants), and prime minister David Ben Gurion's belated acknowledgment of the Holocaust in the 1960s, when he asserted that the Arabs and the Nazis posed an equivalent danger to Jewish survival, exemplify for Zertal the exploitative and self-serving attitude of Israel's leadership towards Holocaust history. While quick to exploit the memories of Jews who died in the Holocaust to justify military action, the leadership ignored the pain of actual Holocaust survivors who settled in Israel because such survivors were believed to exemplify Jewish Diaspora weakness.

Like any other nation-building myth, Zionism could not accommodate ambiguity. It needed clear-cut heroes and villains. Hence the publicity surrounding the 1961 trial in Jerusalem of Adolf Eichmann, the Nazi functionary responsible for organising deportations of Jews to extermination camps, was welcomed because it revealed to the world what Jews had suffered and their capacity to survive their intended destruction. Less welcome were the critiques of philosopher Hannah Arendt of Jewish behaviour during the Holocaust and Zertal points out that a lively exchange of letters between Arendt and the Israeli scholar Gerschom Scholem, who accused Arendt of betraying Zionist ideals, was never translated into Hebrew.

Ultimately, the 'sacred' discourse attached to the Holocaust was transferred to Israel, legitimising the prosecution of war against its enemies and confirming that never again would Jews be subject to extermination.

While Zertal's study goes a long way to explaining the psychology of Israeli responses to perceived threats, her approach is problematic in some respects. She implies that when Israeli leaders associated the Holocaust with Zionist aspirations this was done cynically and deliberately. She does not consider the alternative possibility that they were themselves participants in a broader community discourse, underpinned by pre-existing assumptions about the relationship between Zionism and the Holocaust. Their attitudes may have been both reflective and constitutive of Israeli society as a whole. Zertal could have taken a leaf out of the more subtle approach adopted by Peter Novick in the groundbreaking study, *The Holocaust in American life* (1999). Without taking a deterministic stance, Novick traces how American understandings of the Holocaust evolved in response to changing social and political contexts. His nuanced interpretation may be critical of the American Jewish community's over-identification with the Holocaust but he avoids suggesting that these attitudes point to some sort of conspiracy. Zertal owes a lot to Novick (whose contribution she in my opinion does not sufficiently recognise), however, she fails to take sufficient notice of his overall approach to accounting for the evolution of discourses over time.

Pam Mclean
School of History Heritage and Society
Deakin University



About the Author

Dr. Damien Kingsbury is Associate Professor in the School of International and Political Studies and Director of International and Community Development at Deakin University. He was political adviser to GAM for the peace talks and assisted in drafting and negotiating key elements of the peace agreement. Dr Kingsbury has published extensively on Indonesian politics, the military and regional security issues, including:

The Politics of Indonesia (3rd edition 2005),
Violence in Between: Conflict and Security in Archipelagic Southeast Asia (2005), and
Power Politics and the Indonesian Military (2003).

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