

Professor Beisel, who specialties are psychohistory and German history, is a prolific author, a past president of the International Psychohistorical Association, and a Contributing Editor to Clio's Psyche. □

Response to David Beisel

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In the Introduction to *The Holocaust in American Life* I observed that in addressing the question of why the Holocaust wasn't talked about for a long time, then came to be talked about a lot, there was something of a tacit consensus about the answer:

...sometimes explicitly, always implicitly, Freudian.... The Holocaust, according to this influential explanation, had been a traumatic event, certainly for American Jews, more diffusely for all Americans. Earlier silence was a manifestation of repression; the explosion of talk in recent years has been 'the return of the repressed.'

In explaining why I was not attracted to this model -- instead, preferred the approach of the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs -- I wrote the following, from which Professor Beisel quotes a snippet:

Surely there were some American Jews -- perhaps even some gentiles -- for whom the Holocaust was a traumatic experience. But the available evidence doesn't suggest that, overall, American Jews (let alone American gentiles) were traumatized by the Holocaust, in any worthwhile sense of that term. They were often shocked, dismayed, saddened, but that's not the same thing, certainly not for purposes of setting in train the inexorable progression of repression and the return of the repressed. Characteristically, it is simply assumed that the Holocaust *must* have been traumatic. And if it wasn't talked about, this *must* have been repression.

In writing this, Professor Beisel says, I "became defended." Are psychohistorians really unaware of how deeply offensive this sort of thing is to those outside the guild? How the superior posture of psychohistorians, condescendingly ex-

plaining to the benighted rest of us, how our views are the result of "defensiveness" furthers the belief that rational scholarly disagreement can't be pursued with them? How this form of argumentation (if one can call it that) makes it certain that they will be confined to a scholarly ghetto within the historical profession?

Claims that Americans were (or were not) "traumatized" by the Holocaust are *empirical* assertions -- estimates (informed guesses, if you will) about the contemporary psychic impact of the Holocaust. Having spent many years immersing myself in surviving evidence which bears on the question (some of which I cite in the book), I concluded that for most American Jews the Holocaust was not "traumatic." Perhaps I was mistaken; I like to think that I am open to correction when I am offered (non-circular) *reasons* for changing my mind. But Professor Beisel offers no grounds for rejecting my conclusion except to assert that it is evident that I am "defended."

A short digression on "empiricism." Any theoretical discourse contains concepts which, in practice, can't be continually questioned -- for psychoanalysis, the universality of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex, etc., for Marxism, the class struggle and relations between base and superstructure, etc. One can't pursue Freudian or Marxist analysis without *stipulating* the importance and ubiquity of these phenomena, and much of such analysis consists of exploring how they play out. That's fine. But believing in the existence of certain mechanisms of trauma, repression, and the return of the repressed, and interest in exploring their interaction in practice, does *not* make it legitimate to *stipulate* that, in any particular case, "trauma" and its sequelae are present. And one should be particularly wary of shoehorning a particular case into an interpretive framework because one has developed tools for operating within that framework. Doing so resembles the well-known story of the man looking for his wallet under the streetlight, even though he dropped it down the block, because "the light's better here."

I find it at least "peculiar," Professor Beisel's comment on another observation of mine, concerning why the Holocaust came to figure so largely in American culture at large. I wrote:

A good part of the answer is the fact -- not less of a fact because anti-Semites turn it into a grievance -- that Jews play an important and influential role in Hollywood, the television industry, and the newspaper,

magazine, and book publishing worlds. Anyone who would explain the massive attention to the Holocaust has received in these media in recent years without reference to that fact is being naive or disingenuous.

Of my remarks on this subject, Professor Beisel writes: "We know what he means, but one may hear in these words disquieting echoes of anti-Semitic statements like 'The Jews run Hollywood.'" Are we again delving into the depths of my (in this case "self-hating") psyche, as Professor Beisel "hears disquieting echoes"? Or does Professor Beisel *dissent* from my view that one can't ignore this dimension of the question without being naive or disingenuous? He is, he tells us, "disquieted" about these remarks of mine, but *why*? Hard to say.

On two points having to do with my saying that the Holocaust "became an aptly bleak emblem for an age of diminished expectations," Professor Beisel criticizes me for what I fail to do.

He says that I "leave out ... the crucial role of Christian fundamentalists and the growing apocalyptic expectations ... connected in some way with the birth of the State of Israel." I miss "the possibility that the consciousness of many Christians turned to ... recent Jewish history not merely because Christianity emphasizes 'suffering and redemption.'" But Christian interest in the Holocaust has been greatest among Catholics and "mainstream" Protestant denominations which *eschew* apocalypticism; of all Christians, fundamentalists have been those who have talked *least* about the Holocaust. Again, what *grounds* does Professor Beisel have for asserting that fundamentalism played a "crucial role" in the rise of interest in the Holocaust?

More generally, Professor Beisel chides me for not exploring in detail the *psychic origins* of "diminished expectations." He might as well criticize me for slighting the military and diplomatic roots of the Cold War, which also played a role in my story. Any historian inevitably takes some of the background of what he or she writes about as "a given," lest one get caught up in "infinite regress." For Professor Beisel, diminished expectations, like the growth of victim consciousness, "cries out for deeper explanation." I'm not sure about "cries out," but I agree that it is *worthy* of explanation from various perspectives. I could only do so much, and thought it prudent to restrict myself to realms where I thought I had something worthwhile to contribute.

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The Memory of the Holocaust: A Psychological or Political Issue?

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Quite recently, the Council of French Bishops issued a "declaration of repentance" regarding its "failings" during the Nazi Holocaust. "The Catholic Church knows full well that conscience is formed in remembering, and that, just as no individual person can live in peace with himself, neither can society live in peace with a repressed or untruthful memory." In Germany, Wolfgang Thierse, the Speaker of the *Bundestag* [Parliament], in responding to the contentiousness surrounding the Memorial to the Jews in Berlin, stated, "We are building it for ourselves. It will help us confront a chapter of our history."

The memory of the Holocaust is in the general public awareness and in the news, as well it should be: the World War II generation is now getting older and facing the prospect of death. Its chances for expression and for dialogue become more limited as time goes on; its need for integrating the war experience becomes more urgent. We all know about the groups of survivors and of children of survivors which have mushroomed in recent years; about their writing autobiographies, fiction, and films; about their returning to places of hiding and saying "thank you" to rescuers -- all are trying to give flesh to the years of the Holocaust. We also know about groups of the second generation of Germans -- the children of the German war generation -- and we have heard about German "fatigue" with the Holocaust. And, of course, we