ALAIN FINKIELKRAUT
(1949- )

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Alain Finkielkraut is one of the most prominent intellectuals in France today. His cultural and political interventions inevitably return to the crisis in modernity that culminated in the Holocaust: the contradictions between the core values of the modern West—liberty, equality, human rights, democracy, national sovereignty—and modern identity, whether racial, national, religious, or ethnic. Finkielkraut's work explores this crisis in terms of the legacy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolutionary tradition, the Shoah and its denial, and the politics of memory and history in general.

Biography
Alain Finkielkraut is a child of survivors (of the Holocaust from Poland). His father arrived in Paris from Warsaw in the 1930s and was subsequently deported to Auschwitz for three years. His mother moved from Lvov to Berlin, escaped the war with false papers in Belgium, and then moved to Paris in 1948 where she met her future husband and gave birth to Alain in 1949.

Finkielkraut was raised with a strong Jewish identity, albeit with little religious content. Although his parents sought to lay their traumatic past to rest and embraced the French assimilationist tradition, their persecution as Jews had lasting impact. As the tumultuous period of the late 1960s reached its crescendo, Alain was studying at the prestigious lycée Henri IV to enter the École Normale Supérieure de Saint Cloud in French literature. Attracted to the New Left's emancipatory politics, he was one of the anonymous militants in the mass student uprising in May 1968 and a fellow traveler of the radical Left in the early 1970s. Like the cohort of young former militants, the Nouveaux Philosophes, Finkielkraut was skeptical of the lyrical illusions of his generation by the late 1970s and broke with the New Left over their widespread anti-Zionism.

He taught for a period at the École polytechnique until he achieved enough notoriety from his success as an engaged essayist by the 1980s to work tellingly as an homme des lettres in the mold of Voltaire. His interventions reflect on struggles from the Israeli occupation into Léonard Cohen to Holocaust denial, from the King-Bache trial to polemics over the Third Balkan War, from debates about multiculturalism in France to the fecundity of the humanist tradition. His meditations on these topics are widely disseminated in regular appearances in the French media, including Médiascope, his own radio show; as the editor of the now defunct journal Le Messager européen; on the cultural pages of many French newspapers, and as the author of a large and expanding number of books.

The Imaginary Jew
Finkielkraut first addressed the impact of the Shoah 'à Le Juif imaginaire (The Imaginary Jew, 1980), a brilliant analysis of the Jewish condition in a post-Holocaust world. The Final Solution eliminated Jewish socialists of the Bundist tradition and secular Yiddish culture, leaving surrealists Jews like himself without a living culture to sustain their identity. This abyssal absence structures his conception of his Jewishness: "What makes me a Jew is the acute consciousness of a lack, of a continuous absence: my exile from a civilization which, for "my own good," my parents did not want me to keep in trust" (The Imaginary Jew. Translated by Kevin O'Neil and David Schoff. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1994, p. 114).

Finkielkraut recognizes that his early conception of authentic Jewishness, based on Jean-Paul Sartre's co-
The Future of a Negation: Reflections on Holocaust Denial and the Question of Genocide

This negation has guided Finkelkraut in other texts he has published, first in his castigation of Holocaust deniers in L'Avenir d'aujourd'hui (The Future of a Negation, 1981). Holocaust denial has an infamous history in France, dating back to the immediate post-war period. Unlike Deborah Lipstadt or Pierre Vidal-Naquet, who historicize its evolution and demolish the arguments of what Vidal-Naquet calls the "assassins of memory," Finkelkraut reflects on the ideological and historical factors that lead people not to dismiss the danger of such deniers, who refer to themselves as "revisionists," to legitimize their position, is that they remain in the debate, posing their denial as a viable alternative. Finkelkraut's general intent is to "study the modalities of this obliteration of the past by the deniers" by examining the question of the genocide of the Jews" (The Future of a Negation: Reflections on the Question of Genocide. Translated by Mary Byrd Kelly. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1998, p. xxxiv).

Like racism and fascism, the origin of Holocaust denial is a phenomenon of both the Left and the Right in France. However, Finkelkraut focuses much of the analysis on the extreme Left and explores its convergence with the deniers' Weltanschauung. He first examines the failures of various Marxists strands to grasp antisemitism and the uniqueness of National Socialism from the Dreyfus Affair to the present. In the contemporary context, dogmatic extremists like the group La Veille Tune (who publish the works of Robert Faurisson, the most infamous of the French deniers), depict Historians antisemitism as a veil that prevents recognition of the suffering of our society at present. Their claim to the truth of history as the history of class struggle leads them to deny the facts of the gas chambers, which do not fit their historical model. Critiquing Noam Chomsky's defense for writing a preface to one of Robert Faurisson's books (that he was merely defending free speech), Finkelkraut explores how the rejection among contemporary intellectuals with unmasking the manufacturing of consent created by the media and nationalisms lead to a propensity to deny the truth of facts themselves. What remains is the "war of images" where "power is not content to make history; it manipulates it" (p. 51). This result in what Finkelkraut calls the "Holocaust effect," produced by the ministries Holocaust, which leads to a generalized skepticism. Finkelkraut contends that this skepticism is particularly prevalent in the 1960s generation, both because of its emphasis on dehumanization and because its own revolutionary gods proved false.

For Finkelkraut, however, anti-Zionism is at the core of Holocaust denial, which he explored at greater length during the Lebanese War in La Répression d'Israël (The Repression of Israel, 1983): "For some, Israel was unacceptable because of the proximity of the genocide. Today the genocide is subject to dispute due to the alleged behavior by Israel." (p. 89). As a result, in the present battle of images, there is a systematic effort to make the Palestinians the Jews of the Middle East and the Israelis into a Nazi occupying power.

Finkelkraut also considers the historical sources of the construct "genocide," arguing that since its inclusion in the UN convention in 1948, the specificity of the notion as it was originally defined by Raphael
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Lemkin has given way to a banalization of the concept. This has led a number of oppressed groups and those who speak for them to associate their victimization with genocide, which not only eviscerates the concept, but leads to a denial of the unique elements of the genocide against the Jews.

Remembering in Vain: Crimes against Humanity

Finkelkraut’s subsequent texts move beyond the extermination of memory evident in Holocaust denial, to an emphasis on its fragility evident in contemporary debates that inevitably concern how we remember history, most palpably in his assessment of the Klaus Barbie trial, La mémére vainque (Remembering in Vain: Crimes against Humanity, 1989). Barbie, known as the “Butcher of Lyon,” was head of the Gestapo in Lyon during the Nazi occupation. Two acts of murder that compete for symbolic priority in French consciousness make Barbie metonymically stand for the entire Vichy period: his torture and killing of Jean Moulin, de Gaulle’s representative in France responsible for unifying the Resistance, and his deportation of forty-four Jewish children who were sheltered in a children’s home in Issy.

Complicating the anguished competition between remembering the “Franco-French” conflicts during the Nazi occupation and the French complicity in the Final solution was how Barbie’s lawyer, Jacques Vergès, decided to defend his client. Choosing a defense team of ex-colonials and himself half-Cambodian, Vergès used the trial and the media to interrogate the category of “crimes against humanity” as the charge against Barbie by comparing the genocide against the Jews to the systematic oppression, expropriation, and mass murder of French colonial subjects and the ongoing mistreatment of Palestinians by Israel. Moreover, the United States assisted Barbie in escaping France because of his supposed expertise in combating communism. In South America he was allegedly involved with dictators, terrorists, and gunrunners.

The dark history of the twentieth century (colonialism, communism, the Cold War, fascist genocide and dictatorships) was thus condemned in this single trial. The Barbie trial was, therefore, to Finkelkraut and France what the Eichmann trial was to Hannah Arendt and to Israel and Germany. Finkelkraut uses it as a foil to focus on justice in the age of mass media, the distortions of the past in the present, and the frailty of universal humanity in the face of the competing interests of particular communities. His evaluation examined three aspects in particular: (1) the fallacies of analogic thinking by considering the comparisons made between the Holocaust and colonization, Nazi genocide and communist purges, and the deportation of Jews vs. Resisters; (2) the notion of “crimes against humanity” deployed in the case against Barbie, who was important to bring to justice precisely because he was unimportant in the Nazi hierarchy, thus insuring that individual responsibility would be ascribed to each cog in the death machine; and (3) the failure of the media adequately to represent history and its contribution to acting out rather than working through the traumatic past. Alice Kaplan’s excellent introduction summarizes Finkelkraut’s essential point:

We once thought that individuals died, but humanity itself continued unimpacted. The Holocaust taught us that humanity itself is mortal. The notion of crimes against humanity is the juridical trace of the coming to consciousness of humanity’s mortality, the legal protection that is going to safeguard what law for individuals can’t on. Finkelkraut wants crimes against humanity to be defined, clarified, and ready and waiting to protect humanity Remembering in Vain, p. xxviii).

Remembering to Forget: The Holocaust and the Politics of the Past

Following his examination of the frailty of memory and the need to reevaluate our conception of humanity dismattled by the Barbie trial and extrapolated in L’humanité perdue (In the Name of Humanity, 1996), Finkelkraut’s subsequent interventions are condensed in his most recent book, Une Voix vient de l’au re vivre (A Voice Comes from the Other Bank, 2000), which analyzes references to the Shoah made in the midst of contemporary political debates. The title refers to a quote by Emmanuel Levinas, who is perhaps the greatest influence on Finkelkraut and whose ideas he explored in La Sagesse de l’amour (The Wisdom of Love, 1984). Levinas enjoins us to accept the responsibility of hearing the voices from the other side, who include the ghosts of the past who demand a response that expresses fidelity to the significance and particularity of their deaths. How to respond responsibly is not a foregone conclusion. We are charged to “never forget” as an ethical obligation to the victims of the Holocaust, but Finkelkraut explores how what precisely must be remembered remains ambivalent.

Finkelkraut’s critique of certain modes of antiracist politics elaborated in La défaite de la pensée (The Defeat of the Mind, 1987) is revisited in his critique of
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French intellectuals intervened in the debates about negation in the late 1990s. In response to new
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ways makes the manner in which we remember complex. In short, Finkielkraut suggests that remembering the past responsibly should be a critical activity that questions dogmatism.

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Jean-François Lyotard
(1924–1998)

Jonathan Judaken

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard considered the Holocaust an event of such magnitude that it necessitated a rethinking of ethics, aesthetic, and politics. As a leading theorist of postmodernism, his numerous discussions of Jews and Judaism, antisemitism, and the Shoah have shaped the way philosophers, literary critics, and historians talk and think about Auschwitz and its centrality to the meaning of the postmodern age.

Biography

Born 10 August 1924 in Versailles (Seine-et-Oise) to Jean-Pierre Lyotard and Madeleine Caveli, from an early age Jean-François Lyotard expressed an interest in culture. He considered becoming a Dominican monk, a painter, a historian, or a novelist. After studying at the lycées Buffon and Louis-le-Grand, he pursued advanced degrees in philosophy at the Faculté des lettres de Paris. He passed the agrégation in 1950 and then began to teach first at a lycée in Constantine, the capital of the French department of East Algeria, and then in La Fliche in the metropole until 1959. From 1954 to 1966, Lyotard served on the editorial committee of the journal Socialisme ou barbarie and then the newspaper Pouvoir ouvrier, both sectarian, avant-garde mediums for elaborating a Marxist critique of Stalinism. His first articles, later published together as La guerre des algéries (The Algerians War, 1989), opposed the French colonial regime in Algeria. He taught at the Sorbonne’s Nantes campus, the site of the beginnings of the student revolt that led to the rational uprisings in May and June 1968, which he energetically supported. He completed his doctorat ès lettres in 1971 and also taught at the University of Paris at Vincennes and Saint-Denis, a post which he held until his official retirement in 1989. He was one of the founders of the International College of Philoso- phy, serving as its second director, and he continued to teach in various international institutions until his death of a second bout with cancer on 21 April 1998.

Lyotard’s first published book, La phénoménologie (Phenomenology, 1954) is still considered a classic introduction to the subject. Becoming fascinated with psychoanalysis after he met Jacques Lacan’s seminar, in the mid-1960s he began to reevaluate Marxism. Intrigued with Lacan’s critique of ego-psychology and his structuralist repurposing of the unconscious via linguistics, Lyotard eventually published works in the late 1960s and early 1970s that challenged the Freudian and Lacanian emphasis on the Oedipus complex. Like many of his contemporaries in France in the 1970s, he contributed to the revival of Friedrich Nietzsche and the attention to the will to power at work in truth claims. When he began to articulate his postmodern critique in the late 1970s and early 1980s, he demonstrated a profound interest in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and more generally in Judaism as providing a critical perspective from which to deconstruct and reevaluate the history of Western thought. Lyotard’s own intellectual route (Marxism, phenomenology, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, May 1968, Nietzsche, deconstruction) is thus a quintessential example of the aggregate of influential acts on postmodern thought.

Postmodernism and “The Jewish Question”

Lyotard’s œuvre aims at a critique of totalizing and totalitarian thinking. He articulates this critique of totality most clearly in La condition postmoderne (The Postmodern Condition, 1979), the book that gave the term “postmodern” its philosophical foundation and
that remains the ur-text for the modern-postmodern debate. Lyotard argues that the postmodern condition is constituted by a crisis of legitimation derived from the incredulity toward metanarratives in contemporary society. By metanarratives, Lyotard means narrations that claim to provide a universal story according to which all other claims can be evaluated, like science, Marxism, or psychoanalysis. The postmodern is characterized by a lack of consensus upon a metanarrative that provides a basis for a universal explanation or a universal law that can resolve political disputes. Although the crystallizations of Lyotard's insights about the postmodern condition are consistent with his ever-more-frequent references to Jews and Judaism, themes related to "the Jewish Question" and to the significance of the Shoah have a long history in his work, starting with his first published text, a review of Karl Jasper's Die Schuldfrage (The Question of German Guilt, 1947) just after World War II. In the 1960s and 1970s he developed this interest via psychoanalysis in general and his reading of Sigmund Freud's Moses und Monotheismus in particular. In "Jewish Osediy" (1970) and "Figure Foreclosed" (1984), Lyotard linked the problems in psychoanalysis and philosophy he was considering by drawing a parallel between the unconscious and the figure of "the Jew" in Western culture. He later extended these insights, arguing that "the Jew" signifies an incomprehensible, unidentifiable alterity that the European tradition has consistently excluded, repressed, or otherwise forgotten. His philosophical magnum opus Le Differend (The Differend, 1983), Lyotard's concept for a dispute that can no longer be resolved with reference to a common metanarrative, threaded its philosophical questions around the event of the Shoah. In the context of "the Heidegger affair," which erupted in France in 1987 and concerned the problematic influence of Martin Heidegger on contemporary French thought given his role as a Nazi sympathizer, Lyotard published Heidegger and "the Jews" (1988). He argued in "Europe, the Jews, and the Book" (1990), that the devastating and vicious violation of a Jewish body at a cemetery in Carpentras, France, in 1990 was only the latest in a long series of attempts in the West to erase the different dividing Jews and Europe. In Un trait d'union (The Hyphen: Between Jews and Christianity, 1993), Lyotard traced its origins to the hyphen, the trait d'union, which marks the differentiated the so-called Judeo-Christian tradition. Through a reading of Paul's Epistles, Lyotard explores the trait d'union as an effort to erase the different between Jewish and Christian conceptions of time, memory and history, election, revelation and redemption, justice, ethics, knowledge, and language.

Lyotard's analysis of antisemitism, as woven into his postmodern narrative, is consistent with his postmodern critique of the whole Greco-Roman-Christian-Enlightenment tradition, using the figure of "the Jew" to demonstrate the West's incapacity to remain open to heterogeneity and cultural difference. By the 1980s "Auschwitz" came to function metaphorically to indicate a series of philosophical questions about history and reference, ethics, and politics that registered the break between modernity and the postmodern. "'Auschwitz' can be taken as a paradigmatic scene for the tragic 'incoherence' of modernity," Lyotard stipulates, insisting that "it is the crime opening postmodernity. . . . How could the grand narratives of legitimation still have credibility in these circumstances?" ("Apologia on Narratives" in The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985, translated and edited by Julian Petrescu and Morgan Thomas, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. 19).

Auschwitz and the Differend

The Differend, Lyotard's philosophical masterpiece, is a series of "notices" of sketches of thought, preserving the exploration of drawing attention to and encouraging a task he sought to encourage. It opens with an extended discussion of Auschwitz, which Lyotard (like Hannah Arendt) considered an event of such magnitude that it shamess the criteria of judgment about it since "even the authority of the tribunal that was supposed to establish the crime . . . was extenuated" (The Differend: Phrases in Dispute, translated by Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. 36). There is a differend that separates the experience of victims and perpetrators. As for Alain Finkielkraut, Auschwitz signals irreparable rupture and infinite loss without the possibility of reconciliation for victims. Even though the event represents an indeterminate situation where one cannot appeal to a universal law or agreed-upon criteria, Lyotard nevertheless insists that Auschwitz demands judgment.

Auschwitz is therefore not a mere historical event, but a limit experience, what Lyotard calls "a sign of history": an event that cannot be expressed in previous idioms. His analysis takes as its point of departure the final section of Theodor Adorno's Negative Dialectics (1966), where Adorno meditates on metaphysics and what is entailed in thinking "after Auschwitz." Adorno's basic project in Negative Dialectics was to demonstrate the totalitarian nature of "identity thinking"—thinking that demands a final reconciliation be-
Heidegger and “the Jews”

Heidegger and “the Jews,” Lyotard’s intervention into the Heidegger Affair, extends his reflections on “the Jewish Question” and his examination of the relation between history and memory in any account of the Holocaust. His basic thesis is that all thinking, and therefore all remembering, forgets. These are lacunae and limits to all thought. Specifically, Lyotard is critical of Heidegger’s philosophy, which was centrally concerned with the forgetfulness of the West in its failure to think Being because his thought itself forgets, evident in Heidegger’s silence on the Shoah. Heidegger’s role in the Nazi Party and, more perniciously, the fact that he made almost no comment about the Holocaust in the postwar period, implicated Heidegger in the Nazi Final Solution—the effort to eliminate European Jews without trace or memory. The “Final Solution” was a politics of absolute forgetting that resulted in a politics of extermination. Since for Lyotard, there are two modes to the politics of forgetting—effacement and representation—the question is how one remembers this forgetting, and more generally how one remembers the limits of thought—the unrepresentable, the unthinkable in thought—which Lyotard names in this work “the Jews.”

He argues that there is a double obligation on any history or monument to the memory of “the Jews”: (1) we must remember that in memorializing we forget; this forgetting results in effacement and (2) in remembering “the Forgotten,” we must also recognize that no history, literary work, or other memorialization of the Holocaust is capable of representing the shock of the past “as it really was.” As David Carroll suggests, the obligation in remembering the Shoah should thus not be phrased as “never forget” but rather “never forget that in all memory there is the ‘ Forgotten’” (“Memorial for the Different,” p. 24). Every history, every memorialization that wishes to remain sensitized to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust, must negotiate the double bind of history and memory. Lyotard has justifiably been criticized for appropriating and legitimizing “the Jews” to serve a philosophical function in his thought, valorizing images of “the Jew” pivotal to their historical exclusion and thus reinforcing a hypostatized, abstract image of Jews and Judaism that denies Jewish history and forgets Jewish
tradition. Several critics argue that Lyotard’s reappropriating the critical constructs in his philosophy—trauma, écriture, alterity, nomadism, the un(re)presentable, Nachträglichkeit (deferred action), not-forgetting—that there is the Forgetter—"the Jew" exists in the particularities of the Jewish past, and in a Pauline gesture spiritualizes the embodied experiences of Jews and Judaism within European history. Speaking of postmodern approaches more broadly, Max Silverman warns that "remapping an ethnic allegory to characterize the tension between order and disorder, reason and resistance to reason, the self-constituted self and the heterogeneous self, Europe and its other(s), this postmodern theory would appear to overlap uncomfortably with the ethnic allegory employed frequently in the age of modernity" (p. 199, Lyotard’s importance to Holocaust literature is nevertheless his reminder that those who meditate on these texts must be sensitive to the complexities of language, identity, and the often paradoxical relationship of history and memory expressed by the radical negativity of Auschwitz. He thus reminds us of our duty to remember the Forgotten, forcing us to recall that we will never come to terms with this remembering."

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Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)

Jonathan Judaken

A result of his contributions to philosophy, literature, literary criticism, theater, and his political interventions, Jean-Paul Sartre emerged as the most recognized French intellectual in the wake of World War II. His vast body of work contains some significant contributions to the literature on the Holocaust, especially his analysis of the victims in Réflexions sur la question juive (Anti-Semite and Jew, 1946) and his exploration of the culpability of the perpetrators detailed in Les requêtes d’Alphonse (The Condemned of Altona, 1959).

Biography

Born in Paris on 21 June 1905, Jean-Paul was the only son of Anne-Marie (née Schweitzer) and Jean-Baptiste Sartre. The cousin of Albert Schweitzer, he was reared to exceed his relative’s cultural renown. His father died when he was fifteen months old, and he was raised by his doting mother and his maternal grandfather, Arthur Schweitzer, a published educator of German. He early ´tuncoma in the right eye gave him his distinctive crossed-eyed look.

Sartre was educated in the elite Lycée (high school) Henri IV and studied at Lycée Louis-le-Grand for his entrance in 1924 into the École Normale Supérieure, the final training ground for France’s intellectual elite. Where he was a schoolmate with other famous French thinkers including Paul Nizan, Raymond Aron, Jean Hyppolite, and his lifelong companion, Simone de Beauvoir. After passing the agrégation exam with the top mark in 1929, he took a position in Le Havre before a one-year stint at the French Institute in Berlin just after Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor in 1933.

Having already published some of his early philosophical investigations, Sartre would spend the year revisiting his literary masterpiece, La Naissance d’Alphonse, in 1938, immersing himself in Martin Heidegger’s existential critique of Edmund Husserl, and completing his phenomenological analysis of consciousness, La transcendance de l’ego (The Transcendence of the Ego, 1937).

Sartre returned to a France embroiled in the Franco-French conflicts of the 1930s and his literature began to address the social divisions engendered by the rise of fascism and anti-semitism, especially his short story "L’enfant d’un chef" ("The Childhood of a Leader"), published in a collection titled Le Mur (The Wall), which appeared in 1939, a year after the critical success of La Naissante. It narrates the evolution of a young, provincial French boy, Lucien Fleuriel, enguished in his search for meaning, who finds purpose among the cadres of the camarilla du roi, "the hawks of the king," who sell the royalist and anti-semitic newspapers of the extreme-right Action Française and served as the shock troops in their battles. With his star rising in French intellectual circles, Sartre was called to the front as the German Blitzkrieg rolled across Poland in September 1939.

Sartre wrote at a furious pace during the nine months of the “phony war” before the German attack on France in May 1940. His posthumously published Les carnets de la drôle de guerre (The War Diaries, 1985) both testifies to the life of ordinary soldiers on the Maginot front and contains the outlines of subsequent work including his philosophical magnum opus, L'êre et le néant (Being and Nothingness, 1943). Sartre also completed L’âge de raison (The Age of Reason, 1945) the finx volume of his trilogy, Les chemins de la liberté (The Roads to Freedom). When the German Blitzkrieg roared through the Ardennes, he was among the 1,700,000 soldiers captured. While a prisoner of war in Stalag 12D, he began his foray into theater, writing Bariona; ou, Le fils du tonnerre (Bariona, or The Son of Thunder), a play about a small Jewish village confronting Jewish domination on the night preceding the
Writing on the Holocaust

In the immediate postwar period, Sartre did not directly assess the singularity of the Shoah. While the German existentialists Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers reflected on the radical novelty of the Nazi extermination and the general question of German guilt, and members of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, explored the links between Western instrumental rationality, culture, and the Holocaust, the Shoah was not directly discussed by Sartre. He did write about the conditions under German occupation, especially in a series of newspaper articles that appeared just after the liberation of Paris (August 1944), and he theoretically explored the existential conditions of human freedom in Being and Nothingness and in the plays Les mouches (The Flies, 1943) and Huis clos (No Exit, 1944). There is, however, no sustained exploration in Sartre's work on the role of the Vichy authorities in the collaboration of the more than 75,000 French Jews killed during the war or in the Holocaust more generally.

Despite this silence, the collaboration of the French state and the complicity of average citizens in the mass murder reverberates throughout his postwar work. His association with the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (1947–1949), where he was a leading member of a group of dissident intellectuals that attempted to forge a third way between the inequities of capitalism and the oppression of Stalinism, and his response to the Arab–Israeli conflict, where unlike most leftist intellectuals he refused to accede to the Arab position, notably reveal his critical and political theory, as well as his practical interventions, were significantly impacted by National Socialism and the Holocaust. His most prescient considerations of the issues raised by the Holocaust are his Réflexions sur la question juive (Anti-Semitism and Jew), his play Les sequestrés d'Alors (The Condemned of Altona), and the published essays written with Benny Levy, L'espoir maintenu (Hope Now).

Anti-Semitism and Jew

Sartre's Réflexions sur la question juive, written between the liberation of Paris and the opening of Auschwitz, is a highly influential examination of the victims of antisemitic subjugation. While he only refers to the Vichy authorities and to the Final Solution in "the Jewish Question" as a couple of moments in the past, this short book became a major contribution to postwar debates about antisemitism, Jewish identity, and the possibility of "Jewish emancipation" after the Holocaust. Sartre's failure to discuss directly the novelty of the racial strain, however, makes the text somewhat anachronistic; it explains more about antisemitism in the Third Republic (1870–1940) and undemocratic regimes than the forms of persecution experienced by Jews during World War II.

Anti-Semitism and Jew is a phenomenological analysis of "the Jewish Question" in France. The text has four parts: part 1 was called "Portait de l'antisémite" (Portrait of an Anti-Semite) when it was first published in December 1945 in one of the first issues of Tempor modernes (Modern Times), the journal created by Sartre after the war. Part 2 discusses the liberal-democratic or Enlightenment solution to the Jewish Question, which Sartre rebukes, calling it "the politics of assimilation" (Réflexions sur la question juive, Paris: Gallimard, 1954, p. 57). Part 3 considers the interrelation of what he calls the "authentic" and "inauthentic" Jew and part 4 proposes a new French revolution as the solution to "the Jewish Question." Part 1 and part 2, the two longest sections of the text, contain the two major themes that structure Sartre's analysis. In part 1, Sartre develops his first axiom that the antisemite is a man of "mauvaise foi" or self-deception: "Antisemitism, in short, is fear of the human condition" (p. 64). Here, Sartre's analysis amplifies his portrait of Lucien in "L'Enfance d'un chef" in terms of the basic categories developed in L'Être et le Néant.
Sartre's contribution to theorizing antisemitism is a testament to his insight that you cannot reduce it simply to economic, historical, religious, or political "factors," which do not reveal it as an existential choice. Rather, antisemitism must be understood as an authentic response to man's situation in the world and being-with-others. The antisemite fears the limits of the human condition (death, change, a world shared with others who call into question your essence and identity). Sartre argues the antisemitism of writers like Eduard Drumont, Charles Maurras, and Maurice Barrès who provided the intellectual foundation for Vichy antisemitism, condemning their assertion that "Vichy Jew" has contaminated the essential values of French culture and tradition. He thus disparages "local cultural racism", which uses "tradition" as a panacea for race in German antisemitism. He does however, discuss the specifically Nazi elimin- atist antisemitism or its French lineage. The focus of Sartre's analysis is existentializing all anti- semites who legitimate their choices through the typologi- cal character of the degenerate Jewish Other. Anti-semites avoid responsibility by projecting it onto others, identifying them with the "Jew" (e.g., the Jew serves as a free-floating symbol of what must be eliminated to redeem the modern world.

Like the antisemite, the "Jew" is condemned to confront the human condition: to assume in freedom the responsibility of his situation. Sartre's second axiom, first explored in part 3, is that a defining factor in the Jewish situation is that "the Jew is a man that other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start." (pp. 83-84) Sartre here renders in existen- tial terms the inescapability of Jewishness characterized by Nazi racial definitions. Every Jew must confront the possibility that the racial state, the individual anti- semite, or an everyday non-Jewish citizen may apprehend him as "the Jew," this possibility thus becoming a constitutive factor for the Jewish situation. Sartre further argues that Jews can respond to this situation either authentically or inauthentically. Anti- semitic Jews deny the objectivity of the antisemitic gaze, negating their Jewish difference to pass entirely unnotice- ed. This results in embracing racism, universalism, an abstract relation to money, and denying Jewish uniqueness. The only authentic response for "the Jew" is to understand the shared nature of his condition with other Jews, necessitating the recognition of Jewish ab- soluteness and taking pride in his situation. Following logically from his second axiom, the authentic Jew necessarily takes on the description of "the Jew" by the antisemite: "He knows that he is separate, untouchable, execrable, proscribed, outlawed, and it is as such that he claims responsibility (for his situation)" (p. 166).

Therefore, Jews are condemned to choose between the Scylla of inauthenticity or the Charybdis of martyrdom. Sartre's vision of Jewish authenticity, consequently, remains mired in contradiction, occasionally slipping into reiterating antisemitic stereotypes. Because of his lack of understanding of Jewish culture and history, he never adequately challenged the antisemite's de- scription of "the Jew," a point he later came to recognize. Thus, Sartre sometimes equivocates on whether Jews are a race, identifies "the Jew" with milkman and a love of money, reiterates the image of the wandering Jew," and repeats the Enlightenment and Hegelian no- tion that Jews are "quasi-historical" and that Judaism is atavistic or anachronistic in the modern period. Per- haps most perniciously, Sartre's opacity concerning the collaboration of Vichy in the Shoah was part of a wider French collective amnesia that would persist until the student revolts of May 1968.

Despite the problems of Anti-Semitic and Jew, Sart- re's account would become an ur-text for intellectual re- flections on the "Jewish Question" in the postwar period. It was the starting point for postwar Jewish thinkers like Albert Memmi and Robert Misrachi and Jewish radicals of the May 1968 generation like Benny Lévy, Pierre Goldmann, and Alain Finkielkraut. Sart- re's anti-essentialist thesis that "the Jew" is a construct of the specular gaze of the French antisemite and his emphasis on Jewish alterity as the paradigm of the Other in French and Western culture also influenced postmodern interrogations of "the Jewish Question."

The Condemned of Altona: Perpetrators and Collective Responsibility

First performed in September 1959, Sartre's most sus- tained meditation on the culpability of the perpetrators of the Holocaust is his play The Condemned of Altona, a work that has received insufficient attention by scholar- s of Holocaust literature. The play was written in the context of Sartre's denunciation of torture and terror tactics in the Franco-Algerian war and his simultane- ous effort to integrate the existential conception of freedom into a Marxist framework that achieved frui- tions with the publication of the Critique de la raison dialectique (Critique of Dialectical Reason, 1960). The drama represents the dilemmas of the von Ger- lachs, a family of wealthy industrialists who do not support Nazism but who benefit from their collusion with the regime. The play operates on three intertwined levels: it interrogates the interpersonal relations of the family members, it deals with personal guilt and re-
spontaneity for the events of World War II and the Holocaust as a part of a wider German collective ac-
countability; and it considers the interconnection be-
tween the modes of reproduction operating in the fam-
ily and the mode of industrial production. Sartre’s
success at linking these three levels in the drama re-
veals the fecundity of literary representations of the
Holocaust, since historiographical approaches have no
adequately connected them:

The central characters of the drama is Frantz, the heir of
the family fieldon who transgresses the interests of the
family when he tries to help a Polish rabbi attempt-
ting to escape from a concentration camp built on prop-
erty sold to the Nazis by the von Gesch patriarch.

To save his son, the father reports this “crime” to
the authorities rather than having him get caught by them.

Shattered, Franz seeks to overcome his impotence by
enlisting to fight on the eastern front. After the war,
recognizing that he is a perpetrator of Nazi atrocities
who is nevertheless only a basic cog in the machinery of
destruction, Frantz voluntarily sequesters himself in
Oradour in the family home after listening to the proceed-
ings of the Nuremberg trials. There, in a quasi-delirious
state, he serves as a perpetual witness to Nazi horrors
and the brutality of the twentieth century, constantly
serving to remind the family of their responsibility
even as they have become an industrial power in the
rebuilding of the German Democratic Republic. The
drama unfolds what it is revealed that the fact is dying and seeks reconciliation with his son, whom he
has not spoken to since the Nuremberg trials; it con-
cludes with achieving this reconciliation, when the two of
them commit suicide together. The play thus power-
fully dramatizes the contradictions of perpetrators who
are at the same time victims of historical processes
they are powerless to control and condemned to re-
sponsibility for their actions and for the significance of
the traumatic past. In a parallel fashion to the way
Sartre’s Reflections applied the terms of Being and
Nothingness to the concrete situation of Jews, the
Condemned applies Sartre’s existential Marxism to an
analysis of the Holocaust.

Hope Now: Sartre’s Final Reflections on “the Jewish Question”

The last controversy of Sartre’s life resulted from his
revisiting his lifelong reflection on “the Jewish Quest-
ion” in dialogue with the young radical philosopher
Benny Lévy, a former leader of the French Maoists and
subsequently an adherent of Orthodox Judaism.

Originally published in Nouvel Observateur in May
1980 and later repackaged by Lévy into a book called
L’Espoir maintenant, the interviews caused a sensation
because Sartre radically reassessed some of the funda-
mentals tenets of his philosophical system, including
his early conception of consciousness and Marxism as
the basis for his political thought. Perhaps most impor-
tantly, this infamous atheist rehearsed the importance
of Jewish identity to the Jewish concept of coming to
Messiah as a point of departure for rethinking the
question of justice. In the midst of the controversy,
Sartre entered Brussais hospital and died on 15 Apr-
il 1980.

Through his reflections on these questions, Lévy
left a mark on the literature of the Holocaust by con-
tributing some key concepts that have influenced hol-
ocaust studies as well as two major works that
have contributed to our understanding of the event
from the perspective of both the victims and the perpe-
trators.

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