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# Holocaust: An American Understanding (Key Words in Jewish Studies)

*Deborah E. Lipstadt*

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## *Holocaust*

An American Understanding

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**Deborah E. Lipstadt : Holocaust: An American Understanding (Key Words in Jewish Studies)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Holocaust: An American Understanding (Key Words in Jewish Studies):

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. New book. Quick service.By Lawrence B.New book. Quick service.2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Totally Mischaracterizes (and Belittles) the Nazi German

Genocide of Poles. A Good PROMO for the Holocaust Itself By Jan Peczkis A strength of this book is its history of the emergence of Holocaust dominance in the USA. Lipstadt comments, "By the late 1950s "Holocaust" was increasingly being used in conjunction with the murder of the Jews, but it still did not have the singular connotation it has today." (p. 12). "By the end of the decade [1960s] the word had become firmly associated with the Third Reich's murder of the Jews." (p. 13). In September 1968, the Library of Congress decided to create a new classification in its Humanities Section. It was: "Holocaust. Jewish (1939-1945)". (pp. 81-82). In May 1978, 120 million Americans saw NBC's HOLOCAUST. (p. 100). So much for the USA, and the past. As of 2011, there are over 75 museums and memorials throughout the world with the word "Holocaust" in their name. (p. 1). The author takes a form of collective Jewish credit for the interest in the Holocaust by the likes of African people who visit Holocaust museums. (p. 150). However, this begs the question about the kind of attention that people of Africa would pay to the genocides of non-Jews if these were presented at the same level of detail and sophistication as the Holocaust. Deborah Lipstadt comes on the side of those who believe that widespread American awareness of the Holocaust has actually heightened awareness of recent genocides, such as the one in Bosnia. (p. 148). But, if true, it begs the question if public awareness of the genocide in Bosnia would not have been even GREATER had all the genocides in history been given equal attention all along. In any case, Lipstadt's argument is not germane towards legitimate grievances about the unjust overshadowing of the genocides of non-Jews as caused by the standard over-attention to the Holocaust. I now focus on some of the major themes of this book: HOLOCAUST UNIQUENESS REMAINS IN FORCE The author would have us believe that "Holocaust uniqueness" is a spent issue. (p. 151). Yet that is precisely what she promotes in this book! To keep genocides in perspective, the reader should realize that, in the twentieth century alone, at least 100 million people had lost their lives to genocide and state-sponsored mass murder. See my review of Rummel. DEATH BY GOVERNMENT. Jews are only 6% of this total! Enter the Holocaust. What other genocide of what other people gets this level of privilege and moral urgency—not to mention mystification? Some have called this the Jewish "triumphalism of pain" and even the "Cult of the Holocaust". Deborah E. Lipstadt repeats the canned "all Jews were targeted" argument as she reminds us that the Gypsies were not all exterminated. (p. 105). But who, to begin with, decides the basis for a meritocracy of genocides—assuming that there should be ANY meritocracy of genocides in the first place? Lipstadt does not tell us. What if someone decreed that it is power disparity that should count the most? While the Jews had some influence on Allied governments, the Gypsies had virtually none. So the Gypsies were even more defenseless than the Jews. Thus, the power disparity between the Nazis and the Gypsies was greater than the power disparity between the Nazis and the Jews. Therefore, the genocide of the Gypsies, and not that of the Jews, should be sovereign. The facts are clear. Any meritocracy of genocides is an invented one, and is arbitrary. The all-Jews-were-targeted argument itself, though endlessly repeated, this time by Lipstadt (e. g, p. 103, 134), is dubious at best. [See first comment under this review]. Finally, the reader should remember not to mistake greater victimhood with conferred status. Clearly, the quadriplegic is an unequal victim of spinal-cord injury as compared with the paraplegic. Moreover, the paraplegic still has use of two limbs, while the quadriplegic has no functional limbs. However, it does not follow that the quadriplegic is thereby entitled to noticeable special recognition or special rights, least of all from the paraplegic. [In this parable, the quadriplegic is the Jew (especially the Polish Jew) and the paraplegic is the Polish gentile.] MINIMIZING (EVEN BELITTLING) THE GENOCIDES OF NON-JEWS Lipstadt (p. 123) quotes William Faulkner, who had said, "the past is never dead. It's not even past." (p. 123). Indeed it is, but not always in a positive manner. The elevation of the Holocaust above the genocides of all other peoples does not merely lead to the marginalization of the latter. It can also encourage the active de-legitimization of the genocides of other peoples. I already mentioned Lipstadt's minimization of the Nazi genocide of the Gypsies. She does the same to Poles, and in a rather egregious manner. Lipstadt would have the reader believe that the Germans targeted Poles only because they might engage in anti-Nazi activity. (p. 110). To make this falsehood even stronger, she states that, whereas a Jew only had to be a Jew to attract the murderous ire of the Nazis, a Pole "had to do something" to be murdered. (p. 103). This is nonsense. She also disparages the genocides of eastern Europeans through the inane generalization that they were anti-Semites. (p. 104). This has nothing to do with the fact that they were victims of mass murder, and it smacks of age-old Jewish Polonophobia. To make matters worse, Lipstadt follows Timothy Snyder in misinforming the reader that the "3 million Poles", alongside the "3 million Polish Jews" was invented by Jakub Berman. (pp. 112-113). This is manifestly incorrect. The "3 million Poles" was established by careful postwar research. It still finds support from at least some current historians—notably Tomasz Szarota. Furthermore, uncertainties in this figure go both ways. The Polish Jews murdered amount to 2.7-2.9 million. Andrzej Chmielarz points out that the total number of Polish citizens who lost their lives during WWII could be as low as 4.5 million or as high as 8 million. This means that the number of Polish gentile victims of Nazi German genocide could actually be as high as 5.3 million! [For documentation of these facts, please see pp. 90-91 of the following scholarly IPN publication: Materski and Szarota (eds). 2009. POLSKA 1939-1945: STRATY OSOBOWE I OFIARY REPRESJI POD DWIEMA OKUPACJAMI. Warsaw]. Fact is, Poles were definitely targeted because they were Poles. Centuries-old German racist ideation, against Slavs, did the trick. It did not matter if a Pole "did something" or not! [For details, please read THE FORGOTTEN HOLOCAUST, by Richard C. Lukas.] Author Deborah E. Lipstadt disregards the pioneering work of Raphael Lemkin, the Polish Jew who

coined the term genocide. See my review of Lemkin's *AXIS RULE IN OCCUPIED EUROPE*. Lemkin unambiguously identified Poles as well as Jews as victims of Nazi genocide, notwithstanding the fact that the vast majority of Poles escaped death at the hands of the Nazis.<sup>2</sup> of 2 people found the following review helpful. America's evolving understanding  
By Michael Lewyn  
Today, most educated Americans know about the Holocaust, Holocaust memorials exist throughout the USA, and academics study it heavily- but in the first years after the war, this was not so. There wasn't a generally-agreed upon term for the Nazis' murder of Jews, the term "Holocaust" was used in all kinds of non-Nazi-related contexts, and it did not receive as much public attention. What changed? Lipstadt suggests that survivors' testimony at the Eichmann trial made the public more aware of the Holocaust, and made survivors more comfortable telling their stories. (By contrast, in the Nuremberg war crimes trials a few years earlier, prosecutors downplayed Jewish suffering). And later in the 1960s, the general public willingness to criticize American policy led to scholarship criticizing America's failure to do more to rescue European Jews.

Immediately after World War II, there was little discussion of the Holocaust, but today the word has grown into a potent political and moral symbol, recognized by all. In *Holocaust: An American Understanding*, renowned historian Deborah E. Lipstadt explores this striking evolution in Holocaust consciousness, revealing how a broad array of Americans—from students in middle schools to presidents of the United States—tried to make sense of this inexplicable disaster, and how they came to use the Holocaust as a lens to interpret their own history.

"Lipstadt's *Holocaust: An American Understanding* fulfills its editors' request for a volume that 'decipher[s]' a key word in Jewish Studies and underscores 'the points of intersection between academic disciplines and wider spheres of culture.' And to my mind, it also succeeds as a mini-intellectual and social biography of a scholar and Jewish advocate who has become one of the most remarkable Jewish women of our time."