

# CONTEMPORARY JEWRY

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**INTRODUCTION: GENDER, SCHOLARSHIP AND THE  
HOLOCAUST**

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(*Contemporary Jewry* v. 17 1996)

Despite a growing interest on the part of some academicians in "women and the Holocaust," such efforts remain within the framework of what has been called by some feminist scholars the "add women and stir" approach. Such an analysis is distinctly different from the gender approach taken in this special edition of *Contemporary Jewry* which focuses not only on women, but also on the scholarly consequences of relying primarily on theoretical and methodological models based on the interests, concerns, interpretations and experiences of men. One of its main themes is that until recently what we "know" about the Holocaust and what is given for posterity to "know" has been primarily understood through a master narrative developed in each scholarly discipline by and through a predominately male voice. Linden observes that she and the other contributors to this special issue of *Contemporary Jewry*:

are differently positioned in the nascent conversation about women in the Holocaust. We are deeply invested in the material-semiotic reality of terms such as "women," "gender," "Holocaust," "Jews," "power," "agency," "victims," "survivors," and "memories." Our stakes in these terms signal our intellectual and political commitments to various analytic categories, as well as our assumptions about the . . . priority of different kinds of evidence and different methodologies. Our intellectual and political commitments set the boundaries of what we can and cannot know about the world we live in, which is also (but not only) the world of the Holocaust (p. 19).

My article, the lead article, addresses the vociferous "silences" within sociology on the topic of the Holocaust. I argue that the epistemological foundations shared by many of the social sciences, through a strong adherence to scientific models of inquiry, often impede the study of complex and nuanced phenomena such as the Holocaust. By maintaining a link between theory and experience, as is done in feminist models, the Holocaust translates as both a unique and a universal experience in the voices of both men and women.

In her article, Linden accentuates the focal point for this special section as she recounts the experiences of those women who were among the earliest to ask feminist questions about Holocaust scholarship and narrative. Unlike many mainstream sociologists, she locates herself within the research

endeavor itself and focuses on the links between the questions we ask (or do not ask) and the ways we measure and define our sociological inquiries.

Tec begins her article by reconsidering her earlier conclusion that a gender analysis was theoretically unimportant to her research. Her empirical study of the experiences of men and women in the Byelorussian forests and in the partisan movement uncovered patriarchal patterns and traditions which affected the lives of these forest dwellers differently, often forcing men and women to engage in different strategies of survival and resistance. Tec comes to new understandings about differences, not only between men and women, but among women as well.

The last two articles, by Lagerwey and Budick, raise important questions about the socio-cultural impact of text and fiction on the contemporary memory and imagination of the Holocaust. Each author shows how the Durkheimian tradition of collective representation works within contemporary gendered responses to the Holocaust. Lagerwey explores how the reception and popularity of Elie Wiesel's *Night* and of the *Diary of Anne Frank* are constituted by the gendered nature of these works. In contrast to Lagerwey's analysis, Budick begins with a close contextual analysis of *Mind-Body Problem*, the work of one of the most popular of modern Jewish fiction writers and a recent recipient of a MacArthur award, Rebecca Goldstein. Although each begins at a different level of analysis, both contributors move beyond the individual texts to the cultural configuration of these texts for the modern imagination. For Lagerwey, the gender lens provides a focus on the way these popular narratives serve as a "fragile bridge between event and memory." Budick weaves issues of contemporary Jewish identity around the theme of reproduction as she explores the gendered legacy of the Holocaust within popular contemporary fiction. Each author challenges the oft-claimed universality of men's writing, interpretations and experiences. Each shows the way personal stories connect to socio-historic scholarship and cultural understandings of the Holocaust.

The purpose of a gender analysis is not to compare and contrast the experiences of men and women during the Holocaust in order to establish a hierarchy of pain and suffering. Nothing would be more intolerable. Rather, the purpose of a gender analysis is to show, as in all other areas of scholarship, that gender, like class, ethnicity, and geography, is always part of our everyday lives. Any analysis which fails to recognize gender fails in its scholarly mission. Beginning with a critique of scholarly discourse and moving toward the gender specific experiences of Jews in hiding, in resistance, and in the contemporary cultural imagination, these articles explore uncharted territories in the study of the Holocaust and its effect on contemporary Jewish life and scholarship. *Contemporary Jewry* is among

the first, if not the first academic journal to devote a special section to gender and the study of the Holocaust. In closing, I would like to thank the editor, J. Alan Winter, whose encouragement, intelligence and energy were important elements in bringing this brave new edition to completion.