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The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices (review)

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demning Nazi outrages in general, but not those against Jews in particular. Wise discerned a breakthrough and began to think more highly of the President.

Arad links the failures of American Jewry to their experience with Americanization, which “played a more powerful role in determining American Jewry’s response to the atrocities in Europe than the events themselves” (p. 222). Her book offers substantial detail and analysis, and is especially good on the politics of the Roosevelt administration and the rivalries among Jewish groups seeking access to the President. She demonstrates that the pre-1945 American-Jewish community was quite different than the one that emerged later; it had little self-confidence, a frustrated leadership, and only indirect avenues to political influence.

Too much of Arad’s book deals with American-Jewish history between 1840 and 1913. Although this illustrates the formation of Jewish community values and political positions, summarizing the information briefly would have left more space for such significant incidents of the 1930s as the *St. Louis* Affair (which reflected many more nuances of U.S.-Cuban diplomacy than the author suggests). In the author’s opinion the Zionist movement in the U.S. and elsewhere offered no counterbalance to the ineffectiveness of mainstream American Jews. Tom Segev’s *The Seventh Million* has also diagrammed the failure of Zionism to engage in any significant rescue. Together, Arad and Segev’s monographs paint a terribly pessimistic picture of initiatives for rescue, and stand as a significant indictment of Jews (as well as non-Jews) as observers of the Holocaust.

Note

1. Letter to Abraham Lincoln, December 29, 1862, from D. Wolff & Bros., C. F. Kaskell, and J. W. Kaswell in *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, Series I, vol. 17, part II, p. 506.

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The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices, Elazar Barkan (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), xli + 418 pp., cloth \$29.95, pbk. \$18.95.

One of the most dramatic—and wholly unexpected—events in the aftermath of the Holocaust has been the recent success in having European governments and corporations pay restitution for unjust financial activities carried out before and during World War II. As a result of the \$1.25 billion agreement with Swiss banks in August 1998, the newly revived Holocaust restitution movement expanded to other Nazi-era wrongs, including German and Austrian corporations’ use of slave labor; European insurance companies’ failure to pay policies belonging to Holocaust victims; French, British, and American banks’ roles in the “Aryanization” of accounts in their branches located in Nazi-occupied Europe; and the possession of stolen art by museums worldwide.

In December 1999, German firms and the government agreed to pay ten billion

marks, or approximately five billion dollars to compensate the country's former slave laborers. Other settlements followed. By the beginning of 2002, more than eight billion dollars had been paid or pledged by European and even some American companies in restitution for Nazi-era injustices.

As a result of the settlements made with European private and public entities, claims are now being made regarding other historical wrongs. Japanese companies and the Japanese government are being sued for their wartime atrocities; survivors of the Armenian Genocide are seeking compensation from American insurance companies for their failure to pay insurance policies issued to Armenians in Ottoman Turkey in the early twentieth century; and some African Americans are demanding redress for injustices stemming from slavery. The African-American reparations movement had remained largely dormant until it began emulating strategies used in Holocaust restitution.

Other real and debatable historical injustices—long forgotten, except, of course, by the victims or their heirs—also are being reexamined. A dramatic example is the increasing call by Sudeten Germans for restitution and for restoration of their properties in the former Czechoslovakia. No one could have imagined in 1995, when the first claims were made against the Swiss banks, that the matter of restitution would engulf most of Europe.

Exploring the question of historical wrongs can be perilous, and one of the best guides is Elazar Barkan's *Guilt of Nations*. Barkan, chair of the cultural studies department and history professor at Claremont Graduate University, addresses the issue directly and comprehensively. His book surveys the various restitution claims—both successful and unsuccessful—made by groups throughout the world, attempts to discover the motivations behind such claims, and provides a general theory of restitution applicable to all such movements.

Trying to address every claim of past injustice committed by one group of people against another would be an impossible task. Barkan focuses on some of the most interesting and most egregious cases. His survey is divided into two parts: restitution claims related to the “residues of World War II” and those stemming from “colonialism and its aftermath.”

The most relevant discussions for readers of this journal are those of postwar reparations by the German Federal Republic. Like Tom Segev in *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (1993), Barkan describes the painful moral dilemma faced by Holocaust survivors and Israeli officials as they try to determine whether such moneys should be accepted, or even whether it is appropriate to discuss how much the German Federal Republic should pay for the horrors committed by the Nazis. Barkan labels this “the Faustian predicament.” Interestingly, the very same arguments made in the 1950s—that accepting money for lives lost would desecrate the memory of the Holocaust victims—are now being resurrected by some to explain why recent attempts to obtain monetary compensation should not have been undertaken.

Barkan's other World War II related case studies involve the claims of Japanese Americans regarding internment, of the “comfort women” forced into sexual slavery

by Japan, of the victims of plunder by the Red Army, and of a variety of Eastern and Central European victims—including claims of Jews to expropriated properties and of the Sudeten Germans. In his discussion of cases stemming from colonialism, Barkan covers varied subjects such as the claims of indigenous peoples of North America, Hawaii, Australia, and New Zealand.

The most interesting parts of the book focus on the theory of restitution, covered extensively in the book's introduction as well as in its conclusion. Barkan is "fascinated by the sudden appearance of restitution cases all over the world" (p. ix), which motivated his tracing "the new global trend of restitution for historical injustices" (p. x).

Why has restitution become so popular? Barkan attributes it to Enlightenment (liberal-humanist) guilt (p. 114). The Enlightenment focus on individual rights and on wrongs committed against individuals, or against entire groups, produces guilt, which generates calls for action. This guilt encompasses injustices—as perceived by Enlightenment morality—not only for ongoing wrongs, but also for past injustices. As Barkan explains, "The public is expected to feel guilty even about injustices perpetrated by an earlier generation" (p. 315).

"Because they have suffered in the process of claiming injustice, moral superiority is bestowed upon the victims of inequality," Barkan argues. "They are transformed into the prototype for the good, which superseded the traditional moral superiority of the powerful" (p. 316). More succinctly, "Victimization empowers" (p. 317). Peter Novick, author of *The Holocaust in American Life* (1999), makes the same point when he argues that the "me too" status of victims has provided a powerful motive for American Jews to maintain collective memory of the Holocaust as an integral part of their identity.

According to Barkan, humanist-liberal guilt has created a new moral element: restitution to the victim or victim group provided by those with some link to the perpetrators (children, grandchildren, successor governments, nationals of successor governments), entered into voluntarily, and finalized through binding agreements. Thus Barkan calls monetary restitution "negotiated justice" (p. 321).

Because Barkan finds instances of what he terms "apology +" behavior throughout the world (and he points to "frequent apologizers" such as former President Bill Clinton, for U.S. support of Guatemalan rightists, and Pope John Paul II, for various historical wrongs committed by the Catholic Church), he labels restitution "a global movement" (p. 318). "The moral economy of restitution enjoys a growing popularity in the private and public sectors alike," observes Barkan, who goes so far as to designate this new moral element a "new international system" (p. 317).

This is a serious, well-written study that raises, and attempts to answer, vital questions about a worldwide movement much in the news today.

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