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Reviews

Shlomo Shafir, *Ambiguous Relations: The American Jewish Community and Germany Since 1945*.

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By Nathan Abrams, Birkbeck College, University of London

Two controversial books have appeared in the past year addressing the impact of the Holocaust on American Jewish consciousness. First there was Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1999), followed shortly thereafter by Norman Finkelstein's *The Holocaust Industry* (London and New York: Verso, 2000). Both examined the relationship between American Jewry and the Holocaust. To this we can add *Ambiguous Relations: The American Jewish Community and Germany Since 1945* by Shlomo Shafir, editor of *Gesher* a journal of Jewish affairs published in Jerusalem. But where the earlier books focused specifically on the Shoah, this volume takes the larger dimension of Germany as its subject. It addresses for the first time the complex relationship between American Jews and Germany since World War II examining American Jewry's ambiguous attitude toward Germany that continues despite sociological and generational changes within the community. Of course, while the book may look at the wider picture of German-American Jewish relations, the Holocaust looms large.

At the outset he asserts that many American Jews today 'still distinguish themselves from other Americans in their ambiguous and largely negative attitude toward the German state and its people'(9). However, Shafir confines his study to organized Jewry, its major communal and religious groups (in particular the American Jewish Committee), a few committed legislators and intellectuals and a few outstanding individuals connected to the community. In which case, how can he make such a claim? It may well be true, but it is something of a generalization. Also, when he refers to 'Germany,' he focuses almost entirely on American Jewry's relationship with West Germany, as relations with East Germany were almost nonexistent for 30 years.

Ambiguous Relations is divided into six chronological sections beginning in 1933: 'Early Postwar Concerns', 'Getting Involved or Staying Aloof', 'Reparations: Their Impact and Limits', 'Holocaust Consciousness and the Role of Israel', 'American Jews and East Germany' and 'Unification and Beyond'. Shafir has undertaken an impressive amount of research to produce this book, including archival material and oral history and written interviews. This is manifested in the long, detailed footnotes and the bibliography which, taken together, occupy over one hundred pages. Consequently, the book is rich in material, dense and detailed.

Shafir makes an interesting point when summarising the American Jewish postwar relationship with Germany, as he destroys the myth of an all-powerful Jewish lobby in the United States. Within the context of U.S. foreign policy he argues that national interest and realpolitik dominated ethnic pressure and moral motivations. The ineffectiveness of the Jewish opposition to the rapid change of America's attitude towards its former enemy made this all too apparent for only five years after the Second World War West Germany had become a Cold War ally. Likewise, some forty-five years later in 1985, concerted American Jewish pressure could not change Reagan's decision to visit the Bitburg cemetery and again in 1990 American Jewish attempts to oppose German reunification were doomed in advance.

Shafir's conclusions are largely negative: 'More than fifty years after the end of World War II and the greatest catastrophe in the history of the Jewish Diaspora, the relationship between the American Jewish community and post-war Germany remains an ambiguous one. Despite the great strides recently made in relations with a number of German political foundations on bilateral issues, an ambivalence toward Germany persists even among members of organizations engaged in mutual exchanges and dialogues. In the broader Jewish community a more negative attitude seems to prevail' (359).

What the book does not deal with, and indeed what has been left out in research terms, is the impact of the Shoah on German-Americans. While not the ostensible subject of this book (nor of Novick's earlier one), very little research has been done on this topic and a sideways look at this other community and its relationship (or lack of) with American Jewry could have been (and still would be) very productive. Nonetheless, *Ambiguous Relations* is an extremely useful addition to the scholarship on postwar American Jew