



Michael R. Marrus. *Lessons of the Holocaust.* UTP Insights Series. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. 216 pp. \$25.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4426-3006-2.

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The Uses and Abuses of Holocaust Lessons

How does the history of the Holocaust inform current events and phenomena, and human behavior? What can we learn from the past? What purpose can, and do, such lessons serve? Do they differ geographically? Do they evolve? These are only some of the questions related to the Holocaust that have preoccupied scores of intellectuals, educators and their students, politicians, activists, and artists, among others. In *Lessons of the Holocaust*, historian Michael R. Marrus offers a bold and superb assessment of prescriptions drawn from Holocaust history. This is as much an exploration of the uses and abuses of Holocaust history as an intellectual biography, a commentary on decades of studying and teaching the Holocaust, and an injunction to historians about the importance of increasing our historical understanding of it. Drawing superfluous lessons from Holocaust history to suit certain needs is, as Marrus observes, unhelpful to grasp the complexities of the Holocaust. He asserts, "My principal lesson of the Holocaust is, therefore, beware of lessons" (p. 160). He urges Holocaust educators and scholars "to get the history right," meaning "to be as true as we can possibly be to the facts and circumstances of the Holocaust, and to see as deep and sophisticated and independent-minded an understanding of these events as we can manage" (p. 159).

Grounded in the author's personal and scholarly trajectories, this book reads as an academic memoir, one that draws on Marrus's training and experience as a student of history, a professional historian, teacher, researcher, writer, speaker, and one of the founders of the field of Holocaust studies. Marrus explains how he came to the study of the Holocaust, including via the writings of, among others, Hannah Arendt, Bruno Bettelheim, Elie Wiesel, and Primo Levi. An analysis of these authors' classic texts comprises a key part of the book. In doing so, Marrus demonstrates how these works have acquired seminal status in the study of the Holocaust, how they continue to resonate in discussions related to the Holocaust, and how they affect the messages that many have extracted from the Holocaust.

Marrus outlines seven categories of lessons derived from the Holocaust. These include public and personal, historical, early, Jewish, Israeli, universal, and general lessons of the Holocaust. Each chapter examines one type of lesson and explores its origin, manifestations, and consequences. Organized this way, *Lessons of the Holocaust* provides a succinct, yet complex, inquiry into the role of the Holocaust as a springboard for discourse about ethics, identity, politics, national determination, human rights, social issues, and more.

Marrus explains how the propensity for meaning making from the past has driven people to the belief that they can formulate lessons from history, and Holocaust history in particular. He defines lessons as admonitions, directions, and prescriptions that derive from investigating the past. However, there are no formulae of lessons or *the* lessons of history. Because of the scope and magnitude of the Holocaust, there is a need to find some good in evil. That is one reason why some phrases have been elevated and appropriated to stress the connection between history and memory. Marrus challenges those myths. In this vein, he dissects George Santayana's widely used,

and misunderstood, quote, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” pointing out that the maxim warns not against not learning from history but rather speaks to acquiring knowledge from history. It is counterproductive, Marrus claims, to apply lessons of history to contemporary situations. Historical actors differ from decision makers and from people today, as do contexts in which these actors operated.

The last point does not deter some educators and activists from generating slogans and lessons gleaned from the Holocaust that are designed to apply universally and globally. Marrus observes that reaching to the Holocaust to select answers to suit present-day needs is fraught with problems, not least with misrepresenting and even disregarding the history of the Holocaust. Clichés about what the Holocaust can teach make the enormity and complexity of that historical event manageable, relevant, and malleable. While Marrus does not condemn those who engage in advancing lessons from the Holocaust about tolerance, civil courage, individual agency, and taking a stance, he cautions that doing so thwarts the goal “to get the history right,” “to be faithful to the event from which the lesson is claimed to derive” (p. 159).

Since lessons can be elicited only from that which is known, Marrus traces the emergence of Holocaust consciousness. He observes that such factors as guilt, unwillingness to know, indifference, antisemitism, little understanding of how the Holocaust happened, and a lack of a term for the organized persecution and murder of the Jews inhibited the entry of Holocaust history into public discourse. The need to understand the Holocaust was confined to survivors, whose efforts were initially rejected outside the Jewish world. It was only in the 1960s that the Jewish dimension of the Holocaust began to garner more attention through press coverage of trials, as well as via scholarly debate, film, and theater. Marrus notes that the ensuing discussions and disagreements have enriched our understanding of the Holocaust as an event, but also of issues surrounding it.

While the book offers a thorough, yet concise, examination of these topics, it presents an overwhelmingly Western-centric approach. Elsewhere in the book, however, the discussion of lessons shifts to eastern Europe, specifically to Poland. In one instance, Marrus connects the lessons derived from history with “nationalist calls to action” (p. 34). The sound of the trumpet played daily at particular times in the market square in Kraków—a melody that is broadcast on Polish national radio to this day—serves as an example. According to the legend that Marrus discusses, the melody and the act of playing it refer to the warning against the Tatar attack on the city in the thirteenth century. “Understanding these five notes as an emblem of Polish national identity,” he writes, “some even consider the Hejnał [trumpeted melody] as a reminder to the Poles that they are forever threatened by being overwhelmed by some horde or other aliens” (p. 34). This claim may appear somewhat stretched. Historically, the sound of the trumpet warned the residents of the walled-in city of danger, and signaled times to open and close the city gates. Since the nineteenth century, the melody played at specific times has marked time.

In another place in the book, Marrus considers the role assigned to survivors. Penned as a “Jewish lesson” is the role imposed on survivors to embody resilience, hope, and the human spirit (p. 95). But, as Marrus observes, survivors tend to exercise restraint in drawing lessons from the extreme situations they endured. And the way survivors interpret and speak of their experiences is subject to a variety of influences. The author draws attention to the careful way in which survivors living in Poland in the 1990s reflected on their Holocaust experiences, mindful of the environment of hostility and an emphasis on national suffering that framed their understanding of the Holocaust. This claim would have benefited from explaining how communism played a role in that and how the end of the oppressive system paved the way for Holocaust survivors living in Poland to “come out” and relate their experiences. Interestingly, the descendants of some Holocaust survivors in Poland decided to claim their Jewish heritage. But this generational process is more complex than just an outcome of the discovery of one’s Jewish heritage.

Some young Poles choose to embrace their Jewish heritage as a birthright they had been denied. Many other young Jews embark on experiential trips to sites connected to the Holocaust and located in Poland to boost their Jewish identity and link it to Zionism. Marrus focuses on the March of the Living, a program that brings hundreds of young Jews from around the world to learn and engage in a narrative that positions Poland as a place of Jewish past and death, and assigns Israel a place of Jewish rebirth and future. Marrus stresses some of the more problematic elements of the program, not least its emphasis on eliciting emotion, and points out the communal and international aspect of advancing the Jewish lessons of the Holocaust supported by the march.

Apart from inspiring communal identity and fostering group solidarity, the Holocaust as a “Jewish lesson” warns against the perils of Jewish as-

similation and about the need to take antisemitism seriously. Instilled is a lesson to see Jewish history through the prism of the Holocaust, thus underscoring the importance of Israel for the Jewish people. This, Marrus remarks, is an “Israeli lesson.” The Holocaust itself became part of Israeli identity. It is a guiding force in Israeli politics and relations with its neighbors, and is invoked in the country’s treatment of its Arab inhabitants and of African asylum seekers. To the critics, some in Israel respond: “a fundamental lesson of the Holocaust is that Israel must preserve its Jewish character” (p. 134). But others question whether reverting to the Holocaust to support Israel’s actions does not hamper the country to move forward and not dwell on the past.

Still, Marrus believes that studying the past is intellectually stimulating and allows us to better understand the world. A lesson of the Holocaust for Marrus is to not shy away from exploring contested issues, to ask questions, to debate, and to take advantage of the resources and tools to advance historical knowledge of the Holocaust. An objective should be to select an appropriate language and to position the history of the Holocaust within a wider historical context. Marrus concludes, “we have something that is more durable than lessons,” and explains, “the Holocaust has become history” (p. 171).

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