

*The Holocaust and North Africa*, eds. Aomar Boum and Sarah Abrevaya Stein, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), pp. 349.

by *Piera Rossetto*

This volume arose out of the 2015 conference “On the Margins of the Holocaust: Jews, Muslims, and Colonialism in North Africa during the Second World War,” held at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and co-organized by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and a number of research centers at the UCLA itself.

As clearly stated in the introduction to the volume by the editors Sarah Abrevaya Stein (historian) and Aomar Boum (anthropologist), a key question lies at the core of this project: “Why has North Africa been written out of Holocaust history and memory, and, conversely, why has the Holocaust been excised from so many narratives about North Africa?” (p. 2). To address this, the editors present a multidisciplinary collection of essays with this manifold aim: to enrich the understanding of how the Holocaust unfolded in North Africa; to offer new readings on the impact of the Holocaust on North African Jews and Muslims in the postwar period, by considering different realms in which this impact is expressed (literature, memoirs, politics); and finally, to incorporate these new insights in the “larger geographies of the Holocaust” (p. 16).

The volume is divided into four parts and includes 15 chapters. Parts I to III consider a variety of case studies in the French colonies and protectorates (from French West Africa to Algeria) from a multidisciplinary perspective (history, anthropology, cultural studies). Later in this review, I will briefly discuss each chapter’s content and sources. Part IV, “Commentary,” includes six essays by scholars of the Holocaust and Holocaust memory, as well as North African and French imperial history, meant to mirror – in the editors’ view – “the focus of the preceding parts of the book” (p. 16). Given the more ‘reflective nature’ of this part (consisting of about fifty pages), one might consider reading it first as an introduction to the thorny issues that had until recently made it unthinkable to discuss the Holocaust in connection with North Africa; this can also help attune the reader to some of the interpretative keys suggested throughout the volume.

The chapters by Susan Gilson Miller (ch.12) and Haim Saadoun (ch.13) provide the readers, especially those less familiar with studies of North Africa and North African Jewries, with two important tools: a detailed chronology tracing the

development of the historiography of World War II in North Africa among academics and the general public in Israel (Saadoun); and a sharp critique of what caused the long absence of Sephardim in Holocaust historiography (Gilson Miller). A Eurocentric tradition in Holocaust studies along with the scarcity and challenge of accessing sources (and resources), made it difficult for “a specific North African narrative” (p. 226) to emerge until recently.

An important stumbling block to overcome was an earlier trend in Holocaust studies, seeking to establish an inviolate category of ‘the victim’ or of ‘the survivor.’ If ‘the victim’ or ‘the survivor’ of the Holocaust is an *a priori* established category based on the European experience only, then the fate of most Jews in North Africa, which was utterly different from that of Jews in Europe, is sentenced to being excluded. However, since the turn of the twenty-first century, as Susan Rubin Suleiman notes (ch. 11), the tendency has rather been to “emphasize specificities” (p. 215), and to let the unique destiny of individuals emerge from the collective (p. 216). As she poignantly affirms, “there is no such thing as ‘the survivors,’ only *survivors* who underwent different kinds of suffering and whose responses [...] were not similar” (p. 216).

Suleiman suggests adopting the “concept of inclusion with diversity,” which would imply considering “the *same* historical event but seen from different perspectives” (p. 216). This approach is in line with the most recent developments in Holocaust studies as clearly outlined by Todd Presner (ch. 15). This chapter, together with that by Omer Bartov (ch. 10) on other aspects linked with the “competition of victimhood” (as it unfolded in Europe beginning in the 1980s-1990s and in Israel), might serve as a kind of additional introduction for readers who are not well-versed in Holocaust studies and Holocaust memory.

As suggested by its title, “Where Fascism and Colonialism Meet,” the first part of the book (chs. 1-3) explores the overlapping and intersecting of colonial pre- and postwar policies with anti-Semitic legislation in North Africa. The chapter by Daniel J. Schroeter (ch. 1) considers the case of Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia and takes the reader through a complex and detailed historical account of the enactment and abrogation of both the Crémieux Decree and the *Statut des Juifs* (also known as the Alibert law). As the historian demonstrates, while Vichy’s anti-Semitic laws reproduced Nazi legislation in many respects, they nevertheless need to be understood “on a longer continuum,” as “integral to French colonialism, embedded in the racial policy toward both Muslims and Jews across North Africa” (p. 48).

Mainly based on secondary sources, the contribution by Jens Hoppe (ch. 2) aims to ascertain the responsibility for anti-Jewish violence in Libya, in particular between 1938 and 1943, a question on which “other historians have rarely focused” (p. 51) and which constitutes an Italian-German-British affair, according to Hoppe. Most convincing in the article is the author’s demonstration of the responsibility of the Italian fascist regime for anti-Jewish violence: here Hoppe refers to Sarfatti’s definition of “an independent ‘maturing process’ of fascist anti-Semitism” (p. 51). In the category of “anti-Jewish violence,” Hoppe includes attacks against Jews in Libya by Italian fascists as early as in the 1920s (as proved by historian Michele Sarfatti); the enactment of anti-Semitic legislation in 1938; and the internment of Libyan Jews in camps in Libya, as well as the deportation of foreign Jewish citizens to concentration camps in Tunisia, France, Italy and Germany.

The fascinating chapter by Ruth Ginio investigates the case of French West Africa (FWA), where only 110 Jews lived during the Second World War. After defining the historical framework of pre-war FWA and outlining the situation in the French Empire after June 1940, Ginio considers the efforts made by the Vichy regime to extend its ideology of National Revolution (centered on family, work, and fatherland) to the West African colonies. She then moves on to examine the persecution of the very few Jews living in the federation by presenting how individual Jewish cases were handled by the French colonial authorities to accord with directives from the Vichy regime. Her wise use of microhistories from FWA is particularly effective since it constantly refers to the wider French colonial context. In this way, she manages convincingly to demonstrate how the implementation of anti-Jewish legislation against this tiny Jewish presence in the FWA “shed light on the obsessive nature of Vichy policy and its blind and irrational implementation” (p. 77).

Part II of the volume (chs. 4-6), deals with individual experiences of occupation, internment and race laws in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. The case of the Bedeau internment camp in Algeria during the Second World war is at the core of Susan Slyomovics’ chapter (ch. 4). Originally, the camp was one of the many detention sites built since the beginning of the French conquest of Algeria in 1830. After the enactment of the 1940 Vichy *Statut des Juifs* and the abrogation of the Cremieux Decree, the camp became - in a kind of “racial specialization” (p. 112) - an internment camp for Jewish Algerian soldiers. This designation of the camp remained in effect even after the 1942 Allied landing and liberation of North Africa. Based on historical evidence and personal recollections of former Jewish

inmates, Slyomovics proves how Vichy control continued after Vichy's fall, since the discrimination against Jewish Algerian soldiers "remained deliberately in place in post-Vichy liberated Algeria" (p.106). In fact, Jewish Algerian soldiers were not reintegrated into the Army and were forced into work units in detention camps until July 1943. This case study exemplifies Hannah Arendt's definition of race and bureaucracy as the "two new devices for political organization and rule over foreign peoples [...] discovered during the first decades of the imperialism" (p. 95).

The chapter by Daniel Lee (ch. 6) is another brilliant example of how fruitful connecting the study of the Holocaust in North Africa with the history of the French empire is. The author investigates the changes that occurred between late summer 1941 and spring 1942 in the anti-Semitic legislation in Tunisia, a French protectorate since 1881. While attention has typically focused on the German occupation of Tunisia (November 1942-May 1943), Lee suggests looking at earlier years more closely. Although he concentrates on a strikingly short period of time, the analysis he provides of the "policy making chain of command overseeing the Jewish question in Tunisia" (p. 139) is undoubtedly original and convincing. Lee unveils how competition among the protagonists of the time (the French colonial administration, the Tunisian government and the Vichy regime) along with the struggle by the Residency to maintain sovereignty triggered a contest of sorts as to who would be the most rigorous in implementing the anti-Semitic legislation in the protectorate. This caused a rapid worsening of life conditions for the Jews who had settled in Tunisia prior to the German occupation.

The chapter co-authored by Aomar Boum and Mohammed Hatimi (ch. 5) expands the focus to the pre-Saharan regions of rural Morocco, known as *bled* (a notion explained in the essay). The title *Blessing of the Bled* effectively conveys the authors' principal claim that the Second World War - and its impact on the economy of the region - "did not mark a turning point in Jewish-Muslim relations in the *bled* or worsen Muslim attitudes toward or treatment of local Jews" (p. 114). Boum and Hatimi base their argument on interviews conducted by Boum in the rural areas of Morocco and on archival sources (unfortunately limited and scattered). What emerges from the sources is that, apart from one major legal crisis known as the Plundered Lands Case, relations between Jews and Muslims remained good throughout the war. This particular case, analyzed in depth by the authors, shows how the interference of French colonial administrators animated by anti-Semitic sentiment threatened the traditionally good Muslim-Jewish relations in a rural setting afflicted by droughts and famine, where mutual collaboration was essential for survival.

Part III, “Narrative and Political Reverberations” (chs. 7-9), explores the nexus of the Holocaust and North Africa and its repercussions on politics through the lens of literary texts. The chapter by Aomar Boum (ch. 7) deals with memoir and literary works by former prisoners of Vichy internment and labor camps in North Africa, such as Max Aub, a Mexican-Spanish Jew who survived the camp of Djelfa in Algeria. Aub was a literary critic, playwright, and novelist, as well as a Spanish republican. His diary is an almost unique case of documentation, since prisoners of the Vichy internment camps in North African colonies were not allowed to keep records of their daily experiences. As Boum shows, despite their possible limitations “as factual testimonies” (p. 153), these texts represent an invaluable source for understanding the unique elements of these camps, whose history has only recently started to attract scholarly attention. As Boum argues, internment and labor camps in North Africa “exemplify a different model of internment” (p. 150) as compared to the German Nazi camps in Europe, since prisoners in North Africa had “a margin of hope of survival” (p. 157) despite the harsh conditions of the desert and the abuses they were subjected to. The value of the literary texts discussed by Boum – “archives of emotion” (p. 167) as he describes them – is in their capacity to “lift the veil of silence” (p. 166) that has long covered the memory of Vichy camps in the region.

The chapter by Lia Bozgal (ch. 8) also deals with a relatively unknown literary corpus of chronicles written in French and published in Tunisia between 1943 and 1946, in particular, the accounts by Paul Ghez and Robert Borgel. While generally relegated to the footnotes in historiography, observes Bozgal, these chronicles should be more “rigorously mined for the rich microhistories they contain” (p. 169). The author takes on this task by exploring the poetics of these works – “tropes, narrative techniques, and discursive strategies” (p. 171) – such as the recourse to irony, euphemism, and apostrophe. Her contention is that these poetics reveal an “aesthetic of restraint” (p. 174), a sort of ambivalence, an ethics of *pudeur* in the words of historian Claude Nataf (p. 171). Precisely this restraint constitutes, together with the duty felt by the authors to recount what they witnessed during the German occupation of Tunisia, the main paradox of the Tunisian chronicles. Rather than remain trapped in this paradox, Ghez and Borgel opt to write and in so doing actually participate “in the literature of the Holocaust without setting off a contest for victimhood” (p. 184).

Finally, the contribution by Alma Rachel Heckma shifts the focus of this more literary-oriented part of the volume from the little-known works seen in the previous chapters to the well-known oeuvres by Moroccan Jewish novelist

Edmond Amran El Maleh (1917-2010), *Parcours immobile* (1980) and *Mille ans, un jour* (1986). Heckma's aim in this essay is to "address Jewish engagement in the PCM [Moroccan Communist Party] through the crucible of the Vichy years" (p.185). She does so by interpreting these semi-autobiographical fictions in light of El Maleh's biography as a Moroccan Jew and as a former leader of the Moroccan Communist Party. Heckma buttresses her interpretation of El Maleh's biography and characters with an exhaustive account – drawing in part on the archival sources of the Parti du Progrès et du Socialisme in Rabat, Morocco – of the interwar period and the profound impact that it had on Moroccan society as a whole, in which it caused multiple "political awakenings" (p. 204), eventually transforming the PCM into a national liberation party. El Maleh's biography and characters thus exemplify the marginality experienced by communist Jews in the aftermath of the Vichy period.

A collection of commentaries, briefly touched upon at the beginning of this review, closes this rich and illuminating volume, which, in my view, fully achieves its aims. The essays enrich our understanding of how the Holocaust unfolded in North Africa, most notably by unveiling the deep entanglement between colonialism and fascism. Moreover, they enable, in Michael Rothberg's words, a "more concrete understanding [...] of the place of Jewish and Muslim communities within that dynamic" (p. 243). The individual cases discussed in the volume display a variety of political, social and geographical situations that the authors carefully contextualize. This is a crucial approach in order to avoid the pitfalls of generalization and essentialization, as Gilbert Achcar – to cite but one example – has shown in his analysis of the reception of the Holocaust in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> Finally, this collection of essays shows the fruitfulness of a joint work of reflection, scrutiny, and interpretation in uncovering, in a truly multidirectional perspective,<sup>2</sup> the entangled nature of the long neglected relationship between knowledge of the Holocaust and North Africa.

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Achcar, *Les Arabes et la Shoah*, (Paris: Actes Sud, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

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