

Theodore S. Hamerow, *Why We Watched. Europe, America and the Holocaust*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2008, pp. XXI-520.

by *Michele Sarfatti*

In his *Why We Watched* Theodore S. Hamerow deals with actions and reactions by the ‘free world’ regarding the Jews before, during and after the *Shoah*. The book contains the results of a thorough research as well as the author’s own considerations – some of the latter are groundbreaking, especially the ones developed in the last few chapters. Hamerow does not offer a detailed history of the *Shoah*: the reader will not find the standard narrative of the European anti-Semitic legislations of the 1930s or the decision-making process leading to genocide. The author begins with the present situation, which is characterized by a widespread awareness of the *Shoah*’s gravity, with a view to understand how, when and why it matured. Above all, he aims at understanding the previous attitude towards the Jews, anti-Semitism and genocide (before the latter, during its perpetration and immediately after its interruption). The volume is explicitly directed to the U.S. readers. It deals with North American and some European countries (such as France, the United Kingdom and the Central-Eastern states) at length, whereas it pays scarcely or no attention to other countries (Spain, Italy, the Balkans etc.). By the term ‘Holocaust’ the author refers to the process of persecution and extermination of the Jews, not including the persecution of other social, religious or ethnic groups.

Hamerow puts the history of anti-Semitism and the *Shoah* on the background of the general history of the 20th Century, often making reference to the latter. If one might note that this is made necessary by the research approach, nevertheless the fact is worth noting since several books of history of the *Shoah* and even some studies on bystanders pay simply too little attention to what was taking place nearby and around the persecution of the Jewry.

The book is easy to follow and does not present obscure notions. In each chapter the author tries and highlight which attitudes and behaviors were more common in each national context. Almost in all cases, he records both the existence of biases or hostility towards the Jews and the fact that the country’s leaders, even when they did not share them, took these biases and hostility into consideration.

Hamerow quickly retraces the evolution of anti-Semitism during the 19th and the first decades of the 20th centuries. He stresses its transformation compared to earlier periods, as well as its growth in the elites, which had not previously been scared by a “separate” minority while they now deemed the Jews as rivals. The author does not show interest for the ideological dimension of anti-Semitism: very seldom he mentions the fact that nationalism was increasingly identified with the

majority religion, the new racial grounding of anti-Jewish hostility or the history of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Hamerow is much more interested in its dissemination within the wide public, as well as in its complexity as a phenomenon; i.e. the antithetic biases against the 'capitalist' and 'socialist' Jews. According to Hamerow, such a rise and embitterment came to a turning point some years after the First World War: "What finally persuaded both public opinion and governmental bureaucracy that something had to be done to solve the 'Jewish question' was the financial crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression" (p. 29). From a general point of view, the perspective of progress and democracy lost momentum; from a social standpoint, impoverishment and insecurity added to the perspective and practice of anti-Semitism, which now was considered even more useful and plausible.

While in totalitarian and authoritarian Europe the Jews were increasingly considered as an alien and exceedingly sizeable group, the public in other countries developed a dual feeling of solidarity in front of the persecution in the Jews' countries of origin as well as of resistance to the possibility to offering them refuge in their own homeland. On both sides of the Atlantic, refugees were increasingly qualified as "too many". Hamerow draws heavily on opinion polls and researches: in November 1938, 52 percent of the U.S. population believed that the persecution had not been caused by the Jews themselves (27 per cent thought the opposite way round and 21 per cent did not express any opinion), but 77 percent opposed a massive influx of German Jews (pp. 144-145). In some areas of South America refugees were welcomed more warmly; moreover, feelings and behaviors changed as the time passed. Nevertheless, on average the situation was the one just depicted. A British document of June 1943 briefed on the existence of "the present combination, in so many countries, of pity for Jews under German control and extreme reluctance to admit further Jews into their borders" (p. 388).

From 1940 to 1946 people interviewed in the United States almost inexorably answered that the Jews posed a comparatively worse threat than the Germans. One should note that this appraisal of the "Jewish dangerousness" had its climax (22 per cent) right in 1946, i.e. when the war was over and the genocide already widely known (pp. XV, 201 and following pages). While Hitler was eradicating the Jews from Germany (at the beginning by means of emigration), part of the citizens in possible countries of destination refused this sort of export of the German 'Jewish question'. In such a situation – once the new world war and then the genocide had gotten started – democratic governments did not want to give ground to the opinion that they were fighting (and leading their countrymen to die) 'for the sake' of the Jews. In this way, however, they eventually assumed – or at least did not

contrast – the diffidence and hostility against the Jews.

In the lengthy central part of his book the author stresses the coexistence during the war years of genuine anti-Semitism, hostility against Jewish refugees and nationalistic-oriented resentment against all kinds of refugees. Though descriptions of single countries always differ from each other, they do point to a common trend. Also in this occasion, however, Hamerow does not attribute too much importance to the main lines of historic events; for instance, he barely hints to the Allied declaration of 17 December 1942 with its strong condemnation of the genocide under way (p. 375).

This approach leads Hamerow to state that “there was a close correlation between the prevalent intensity of anti-Semitic prejudice in any given country and the relative proportion of the Jews in that country who perished” (p. 328), so neglecting the importance of other factors, which determined – for example – the high killing ratio of the Jews in Serbia.

Summing up, Hamerow dejectedly notes that the U.S. and other Allied governments vehemently condemned the genocide, but were reluctant to commit military resources to slow down its implementation, affirming that everything had to be devoted to the final defeat of the Axis. He remarks that this approach was probably the right one, but he adds that “by the time victory came, so few Jews were left to be saved” (p. 418). The author leads the reader to believe that this was the outcome of a wider series of events, namely the hurdles raised against Jewish immigration. These remarks are not out of fatalism, rather they express the fact that history is made of long-term processes whose continuation crises sometimes hamper and sometimes support.

In the last chapters the authors describes the new fluxes of Jewish migration after April 1945, above all the great waves towards the USA and Palestine, then Israel. In both countries they established centers of Jewish life inherently different from the European one, which by then was irremediably devastated.

At this point, as if the previous fifteen chapters were just some sort of long foreword, Hamerow revolves to his starting question: why in the 1960s did a change start in the public opinion – beginning with the United States – leading Western public opinion to recognize the importance of the Shoah? All standard explanations (Eichmann’s trial, Arendt and Hochnuth, the Six-Day War) seem “plausible”, but – the author adds – “are really enough? [...] Could it be that the traditional explanations deal primarily not with the causes but with the effects of a changing popular view of the Holocaust?” (pp. 467-468). And why did such sympathy come twenty years after the genocide and not when it had been implemented?

Hamerow proposes an explanation, which I deem convincing after reading his long and well-documented book. As he sums up, “the

growing realization in Europe and America during the late 1950s that the problem of Jewish refugees had now been solved – indeed, that the ‘Jewish question’ in general had ceased to exist - made possible the transformation of the Nazi genocide into the Holocaust” (p. 472).

Thereupon, according to Hamerow, it was the termination of Jewish emigration from Eastern Europe that made technically possible and favored a new attitude toward the Holocaust itself in (especially ‘Western’) public opinions beginning with 1960s I deem his proposed interpretation as viable from the point of view of historiography, as well as respectful of the events. It deserves consideration and discussion.

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