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Sarah Gensburger, *National Policy, Global Memory: The Commemoration of the "Righteous" from Jerusalem to Paris, 1942-2007*. Translated by Katharine Throssell. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2016. vii + 217 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-78533-254-8; \$16.39 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-78533-255-5.

Review by Carolyn J. Dean, Yale University.

The category "Righteous among the Nations" was created by the Israeli institute for Holocaust remembrance, Yad Vashem, in its 1953 founding mandate and describes Gentiles who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The reference, biblical in origin, designates an exceptional minority of Gentiles who rescued Jews during the Holocaust, and honors them. Even so, Israel did little in the way of official remembrance until the 1961 Eichmann trial testimony shone a light on non-Jewish rescuers, and the World Jewish Congress expressed its own intention to honor the "righteous" in 1962. Before 1963, ten years after the Knesset created the "righteous" identity, it was mostly a handy foreign policy device for David Ben-Gurion, the prime minister determined to make the young state a player in world diplomacy as well as to negotiate Holocaust reparations with Germany. He knew these efforts would go more smoothly if Europeans, and Germans in particular, did not feel cast as complicit in crimes against the Jews.

So begins Sarah Gensburger's intriguing book on the making and circulation of the category "Righteous among the Nations" from Jerusalem to Paris, including brief discussions of how the appellation was appropriated in Belgium and Poland and how its meaning changed in the process. This subject is rich and offers a "global" (primarily pan-European plus Israel) perspective on the politics of Holocaust memory. The book develops a social science model to account for the development of public policy on official forms of commemoration in different national contexts; if its historical point of departure is Jerusalem, its real emphasis is on the French law commemorating the "righteous" in France.

In order to explain how celebrating the "righteous" came to be a matter of public policy, Gensburger's analysis focuses on the nexus between private and public memory of the Holocaust and on the interrelationship between institutions, social actors, and the cognitive frameworks within which minimal consensus about the symbolic meaning of events is established and transformed over time. She refers to her approach as "social morphology," which finds family resemblances in diverse contexts, and she very effectively challenges a discourse about memory politics and policy that emphasizes the power of pressure groups to influence state policy in the name of "communitarianism."

This term, rarely used in English, has become a staple of the French criticism of American-style multiculturalism, interpreted by commentators on the left and the right as the celebration of group, usually minority identity, at the expense of a universal vision of humanity. French scholars criticized the demands of various groups for rights as feeding a "competition of victims." In English-language scholarship, denunciation of "victimhood" emerged either in criticisms of identity politics and often in works about Holocaust memory, like Peter Novick's *The Holocaust in American Life*, which criticized

Jews, not disadvantaged groups, for crying victim. In the 1980s and 1990s, he argued, American Jews who were not Holocaust victims nonetheless “wanted to establish that they too were members of a ‘victim community.’”^[1] In Gensburger’s book, Novick serves as an important foil not only because his work uses the “competition” argument, but also because methodologically, it treats Jewish individuals and communities as pressure groups. Gensburger stresses broader structural features to contest both the notion of a “competition of victims” and the pressure group argument.

She traces processes of appropriation in France, Belgium, and Poland across political differences, including republicanism, “pillarization” (the organization of collective life around religious and other particular groupings) and emerging democracy by focusing on how France and Poland in the 1980s and 1990s were in the midst of soul-searching about their responsibility for Jewish death. Trials of Vichy collaborators in France, and Polish recognition of complicity in the deaths of some Jews, made majorities in both nations receptive to more affirming portraits of their wartime behavior. The treatment of Belgium is extremely brief but demonstrates how, in a nation whose collective life differentiated comfortably between different religious and social groups, as well as between Jews and non-Jews (in contrast to France and Poland), the “righteous” category was contiguous with the nation’s acknowledgment of its own civilian resistance after 1946.

In France, the “righteous” category was appropriated entirely through a process of transfer from Israel beginning in the 1980s, when some French Jews sought to recognize their rescuers, feeling that there were an insufficient number of French on the list of the righteous at Yad Vashem. Their goals, however, were different from Yad Vashem’s, since the institute only addressed the French Jewish community, while the group of French volunteers aimed at a broader audience of all French and Israeli people. With Yad Vashem’s cooperation—but not at its direction or with its funds—the group began a process of recognizing and certifying the French “righteous,” a task usually conducted by Yad Vashem, which finally institutionalized the French group’s volunteer activity by making them fundraisers for its projects. Despite this convergence, the volunteer group continued its work on the “righteous,” establishing legitimacy in France and increasing the number of nominees for the honor. Between 1988 and 1993, towns held ceremonies all over France, no longer only in identifiably Jewish locations. When Jacques Chirac gave his famous Vel d’Hiv speech on July 16, 1995, he not only apologized for Vichy on behalf of France, but also recognized the “Righteous among the Nations” as having embodied an “honest” and “generous” France, “the truly French population that found Vichy policies toward Jews intolerable and acted in accord with its convictions” (p. 62).

As Gensburger notes, in the French appropriation, as in the Polish, state and popular and public and private interests converged. Unlike in Israel, the “righteous” were no longer those willing to stick their necks out for Jews; they now symbolized gentile solidarity with Jews and embodied that “certain idea of France” Chirac had invoked in his speech (p. 62). The French appropriation also represented a shift from the rhetoric of patriotic sacrifice to the language of human rights. This shift was consistent with the historical emergence of the humanitarian actor as a “new model” of “exemplary social conduct” (p. 111). The “righteous” not only represented the real France, or the good Poles, but also provided a model of humanity in dark times. By 1999, the “Righteous among the Nations” had become the “Righteous of France,” with their own naming procedures. Some French legislators penned laws to give the “righteous” the same status as partisans and thus to codify the meaning of their acts. These efforts unsurprisingly failed because of objections to the conflation of categories and the resources that would have to be spent, in a replay of Israel’s earlier refusal until 1963 to give substance or resources to the “Righteous among the Nations.” Gensburger argues that the absence of substance gave the “righteous” designation its power. The minimalist consensus within which it flourished accommodated multiple perspectives, including religious commitments to goodness and secular commitments to human rights. French citizens identified with local heroes, and French Jews identified with both Israel and France, the investment in French goodness, and the universalist belief in human rights. The transfer of the

“righteous” from the Israeli to the French public sphere was a complex process shaped by multiple actors whose interests ultimately converged in an affirming and broad vision of the French Republic.

Gensburger contends that the public policy of memory is neither a top-down project nor is it generated by “interest-group” pressure on the state. In France and Poland, the category of the “righteous” was not proposed for propaganda purposes by the state, nor was it an identity category in a competition of victims’ memories for recognition. In an original interpretation, Gensburger argues instead that the appropriation of the “righteous” in France was an expression of pluralism; French and Polish Jews generated the “righteous” designation in concert with representatives of Israel, their own governments, and other relevant social actors to express their belonging to the nation-state by honoring those Gentiles who had saved them.

This is a rich book—thickly documented, creative in selecting its object of inquiry—and challenges instrumental concepts of the uses of memory implicit in the accusations leveled by those who denounce “victim competition.” It also quiets related arguments that the Holocaust blots out other memories of persecution, including colonialism, because it insists that public policy is not simply generated by victim groups who fight over who should receive a larger slice of the pie. At the same time, historians will want to better understand the relationship between Gensburger’s social scientific account and the history of Holocaust memory, which cannot be exhausted by the citation of Peter Novick’s now three-decade-old work and a few others, so vast a field it has become. The similarities across nations in the adoption of the “righteous” category, Gensburger notes, are part of a general effort to reject or nuance national complicity in the Holocaust that was common all over Europe and has been amply discussed, if not applied to the particular case of the “righteous.”^[2] The model she develops establishes clearly that minimal consensus is necessary for a category to be adopted broadly across national cultures. Though Gensburger’s efforts to focus on structures and complex interrelationships (“cognitive consensus” rather than on interests and intentions) is welcome, her analysis of historical questions about how consensus is forged and under which circumstances remains primarily descriptive.

Historians will always question models that rely for their strength on generalities, even when, as in Gensburger’s work, they do situate policy in historical context. Gensburger’s aim is to explain public policy, and that she does in an eye-opening fashion. The problems she raises are timely and interesting, and her empirical rejection of the “interest-group” argument is convincing. Readers will, alas, have some trouble appreciating the argument as much as they should because the translation is marred with grammatical errors, renders the abstract language of French social science modeling in an often opaque English prose, and gives us phrases like “the Hebrew state” in reference to Israel (p. 28). Some footnotes cite English translations of sources, and others do not (such as the French version of the Eichmann trial). Once the conceptual framework is clear by the second half of the book, it is a far smoother read.

NOTES

[1] Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 189-90, 198.

[2] For a synthetic text, Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, eds., trans. Assenka Oksiloff, *The Holocaust and Memory in a Global Age* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). Gensburger cites this work by reference to the articles in which it first appeared. There are many others, but she rarely engages with their arguments.

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