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Irving Howe and the Holocaust: Dilemmas of a Radical Jewish Intellectual

EDWARD ALEXANDER

[Irving Howe] phoned me before he wrote his memoir and asked me to have lunch with him. He wanted to know why we had failed to respond more strongly to the gravity of events. He asked me why we had written and talked so little about the Holocaust at the time it was taking place. Neither of us knew the proper answer, but we tended to believe that our residue of Marxist thinking and our preoccupation with the nature of World War II—was it an imperialist war or not?—distracted us from the mind-shattering slaughter of European Jewry.¹

How did Irving Howe, who was to become the most eminent Jewish public intellectual of the twentieth century, respond to the Holocaust? Did he bring his considerable powers of mind and capacity for imaginative sympathy to bear upon the news that the Jews of Europe were being done to death by the forces of National Socialism? Or did he fall prey to ideology, which—as Lionel Trilling, another leading Jewish intellectual, often pointed out—was not the product of thought at all but the habit or ritual of showing respect for certain formulas regardless of facts and experiences that confuted them?²

Howe's political ideas between the time he left City College in spring 1940 and the time he entered the army in 1942 are best examined in *Labor Action*, to which he contributed regularly, and the theoretical journal, *New International: A Monthly Organ of Revolutionary Marxism*, to which he was an occasional contributor. *Labor Action* was started in 1940 by the Workers Party, later the Independent Socialist League, which had come into being when the so-called Schachtmanites (disciples of Max Schachtman) left the Socialist Workers party. Its first editor was Joseph Carter, succeeded in about August 1941 by Emanuel Garrett (the pseudonym of Emanuel Geltman). When the WP sent Geltman, who had been very close to Howe, to serve as an organizer in California, Howe took on the editorship. He was assuming control of a paper that had already set itself in sharp opposition to the war against the Axis powers, just as its sponsoring organization had set itself against

1. William Phillips, "A Skeptic and a Believer," *Forward*, 14 May 14 1993.

2. Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York, 1950), 277.

the Stalinists for lapsing into “patriotic” support of Roosevelt’s war policy. The 3 June 1940 issue, for example, carries on the left side of the front page banner the slogan “Let the Bankers Fight on the Maginot Line, Labor’s Fight Is on the Picket Line!” On 9 July we find, in the same front-page location, “Workers! This Is Not Our War! It Is a War for Boss Profits! Join Hands in Independent Labor Action against the War!”

The Trotskyist character of the paper was clearly established before Howe took it over. Most of the issue of 26 August 1940 is devoted to the murder of Trotsky, which had taken place in Mexico a few days earlier. The material on Trotsky is assembled (into a kind of hagiography) by Dwight Macdonald, a frequent contributor to the paper who would later employ Howe at *his* journal, *Politics. New International* actually carried numerous articles by Trotsky until (and indeed after) his death, and, like *Labor Action*, it was preoccupied with him long after his demise. The editorial board of *Labor Action* could have been in no doubt about the political positions or the polemical ferocity of the young man they were considering for the managing editorship of their paper in the waning months of 1941 (by which time Howe was married to Anna Bader and living with her in Greenwich Village). In October, for example, Howe had published in *New International* an assault on the journalist Louis Fischer which was the journalistic equivalent of a blow to the back of the head. In an article delicately entitled “The Frauds of Louis Fischer,” Howe identified his target as “for fifteen years...the journalistic high priest of the left intelligentsia...a Stalinist and...the serious and authoritative spokesman of liberalism.” (This linkage of Stalinism and liberalism would continue in Howe’s writing for many years.) Among Fischer’s transgressions are the equation of Bolshevism with Stalinism, the suggestion that “socialism is not a realistic perspective,” and falsification of the role of the late Leon Trotsky. Using the subhead “Fischer Is a Liar,” Howe relentlessly assaults him for his former Stalinism, and this with a rhetoric even more violent than what he would later use against targets in *Labor Action*. “Only a person like you, Louis Fischer, king of the philistines and prince of liars, could establish such a record of filth and hypocrisy.” But the main reason Howe could not give Fischer any credit for abandoning Stalinism or let him live down his “foul past” was that (Howe would deal similarly with Koestler for the same reason) Fischer was now “an hysterical supporter of the imperialist war,” as bad a jingoist as Harold Laski, the English socialist.³

3. Howe, “The Frauds of Louis Fischer,” *New International*, October 1941, 240, 244.

Howe became managing editor of *Labor Action* just days before Pearl Harbor and American entry into the war, an action stridently opposed by the paper both at the time and for years to come. The 15 December issue, the third under Howe's editorial direction (by 22 December he is the only editor listed on the masthead), carries a front-page cartoon showing "The Ultimate Victor," which is a vulture named Capitalism perched on a stone labelled "3rd Year" (of the war, presumably). One unsigned front-page article is headed "40 Hour Week Will Be the First War Victim!" (Apparently the headline writer overlooked the Americans killed at Pearl Harbor.) A subhead expresses worry about what will happen to time and a half pay for overtime work. But the main article, also unsigned, is the lengthy "Statement of National Committee, Workers Party." It does attack the Hitler regime for "its cruel destruction of the labor movement in Germany" and for its crimes against the Austrian, Czechoslovakian, Polish, and other European peoples (among whom the Jews are not mentioned). But, it goes on, "noble hatred of tyranny has been cunningly exploited by the imperialist statesmen of the so-called democracies for the purpose of whipping up of a pro-war sentiment among the masses of the people." The paper takes the position, which Howe would espouse for many years, that this war, like World War I, is "a war between two great imperialist camps...to decide...which...shall dominate the world." It is "a war of finance capital...a war for stocks and bonds and profits...a war conceived and bred by world capitalism." The trade unions are also attacked for supporting Roosevelt's decision to enter this capitalist war.

Very few political groups supporting the war would escape Howe's lash. In an article of 29 December 1941 called "Liberals State Their Program of Bankruptcy," he attacks liberals for having been "sucked into the fold of Rooseveltian capitalism." (In a letter of about the same date he alleges that Hitler and Roosevelt are doing essentially the same thing, i.e., keeping the machinery of capitalism running by mortgaging the future to provide for the present.⁴) His main targets in the article are the *Nation* and the *New Republic*, which "long ago attached themselves to the chariot of American imperialism and nobody expected them to jump off." These two ostensibly left-wing magazines Howe berates for their jingoism and ludicrous calls for national unity. They even dare to criticize the labor movement for selfishness, urging it not to demand wage increases in the midst of war. Liberals, ever incapable of struggling

4. Irving Howe to Dwight Macdonald (undated), Dwight Macdonald Papers, Yale University Library.

for socialism, “are no longer distinct from, they are rather lost in, the pack of journalistic hyenas who screech their super-nationalistic choruses.” Even Norman Thomas, of whom the mature Howe would write so reverently as the only great man he had ever met, comes in for severe criticism because he has “fail[ed] to specify the attitude of the Socialist Party toward the political character of the war.” (In the 19 January 1942 issue of *Labor Action*, the tireless Max Schachtman fiercely attacked Thomas for jumping “into the War Camp.”) By 1942 Howe’s paper had begun to carry in the upper right-hand corner of the front page of each issue the motto “We Say—Conscript War Industries Under Workers’ Control!”

If the prowar liberals and radicals were a constant irritant to Howe, the antiwar American fascists and Nazis were a constant embarrassment. In an article of 5 January 1942 Howe warns of the “dangerous” line of the Coughlinites with regard to the war—dangerous because to a large extent it resembles Howe’s own. Howe’s problem is that Father Charles Coughlin’s “rag,” the weekly paper *Social Justice*, is, like the Trotskyist *Labor Action*, also against the war. But it is against the war for the wrong reasons and does not try to explain to its readers the true cause of the war: “It makes no attempt to tie up the existence of capitalism with the outbreak of war because...it is pledged to rescue capitalism.” *Social Justice*, just like *Labor Action*, attacks war makers and profiteers, hoping thereby to “entice the people with their false ‘radicalism.’” The only reason that the capitalists hold back from supporting Coughlin’s fascism, alleges Howe, is that Coughlin is against their precious war. He neglects to mention that one of Coughlin’s central themes was the accusation that Jews were responsible for America’s entry into World War II.

One does not have to read very far in Howe’s outpourings of these years to recognize the voice and mind of a single-minded ideologue blaming all the world’s evils on capitalism and prescribing a panacea in “the star of socialism” (18 May 1942). Strong opposition to Stalin and Stalinism was no guarantee of lucid mind and disinterested judgment. On 9 March 1942, for example, Howe reflects upon the recent suicide in Brazil of the exiled Austrian-Jewish writer Stefan Zweig. He describes Zweig as a typical example of the Viennese petty bourgeoisie, a man whose suicide was an admission of his inability to face the reality of total war and a revelation of the blind alley of the culture he epitomized. If there was anything fine and beautiful in that bourgeois culture it could in future find expression “only in the cultural renaissance which is the promise of socialism.” Nowhere in the article does Howe mention that

Zweig was a Jew or that, during the Hitler era, this fact might have played some small role in his exile, despair, and eventual suicide.

Howe and *Labor Action* did, however, deal with the Jewish question in other articles. One unsigned piece of 30 March 1942 asks, in its headline, "What Will the Jews Do about the Struma Murder? Protest or Play Diplomatic Ostrich?" The article takes a very hard line against the British, who were indirectly responsible for the sinking of the *Struma*, carrying 768 Jewish refugees from Central Europe to Palestine. It actually recommends a statement on the tragic episode made by a socialist-Zionist group, not because it is Zionist but because the group's socialism and anti-imperialism are similar to *Labor Action's*.

Howe himself deals with the American aspect of the Jewish question in a 5 April 1942 article contentiously entitled "The Saturday Evening Post Slanders the Jewish People." This is a critique of an article by Milton Mayer called "The Case against the Jew" that had appeared on 28 March in the *Saturday Evening Post*. According to Howe, the article had brought into the open "the subterranean anti-Semitic currents swelling at the base of the American social structure." Mayer had severely criticized Jewish name-changers and assimilationists but had also subscribed to the antisemitic line on Jewish exploitation of Negroes, tenants, and shopworkers and even predicted a postwar outbreak of antisemitism in America.

Howe's reply is not without merit but reveals as much about himself as about the subject. He declares that most American Jews are working-class or lower-middle-class people who are entirely uninterested in "assimilating" or changing their names. Having recently substituted for the "Jewish" *Horenstein* the Anglo-Saxon pseudonym of *Howe*, having taken charge of a newspaper which seemed to favor employing Jews who had taken Anglo-Saxon names, having belonged to Trotskyist cells filled with Jews who had also taken on Anglo-Saxon pseudonyms, Howe brazenly asks, as a rhetorical question, "How many [Jews] could afford to spend \$50 to change their names, even if they wanted to?" To judge from Howe and his friends, the answer would be: plenty.

Howe goes on, more fruitfully, to accuse Mayer of "slander" (a favorite Howe epithet at this time) for identifying Jews with the small group among them who are capitalists. After all, Jews who are capitalists are just like the capitalists of any other religious persuasion. Their badness is that of the capitalist, not of the Jew. However valid this objection, it comes with ill grace and an unconvincing guise of innocent shock from a devotee of Karl Marx, who insistently equated capitalist and Jew. Also tendentious is young Howe's indignant denial of any such thing as "the Jew," for this would limit the possibilities of class war by

ethnic boundaries. “There are rich Jews and poor Jews, Jewish workers and Jewish bosses.” Howe also insists, as he would still be doing 34 years later in *World of Our Fathers*, that the basic capitalist strength in the U.S. is not Jewish, indeed that Jews remain far from the centers of commercial and industrial power.

Even worse for Howe than Mayer’s description of the existing situation is his solution to the problem. It is deplorable partly because it is religious—urging Jews to return to the radical righteousness of Isaiah so that they may prepare for the suffering ahead by having something worth suffering for—and “vile” because it says that Jews must behave better than anybody else. This “Double Standard,” says Howe, is no more than an inversion of Goebbels. Although Howe’s language is hyperbolic, his criticism is just. But he concludes his rebuttal of Mayer with the assertion that antisemitism becomes dangerous “only when it is deliberately fostered by capitalism.”

The most amazing thing about this article is that Howe invoked it in 1983 to refute Lucy Dawidowicz’s allegation, in her *Commentary* essay of June of that year entitled “Indicting American Jews,” that “Hardly any group or party along the Marxist spectrum...ever gave a passing thought to the fate of the European Jews.”⁵ Had Dawidowicz troubled to look at some of the *Labor Action* articles Howe listed in his lengthy letter to *Commentary* (September 1983) she might not have mitigated her criticism to grant (however facetiously) that “I should have said: ‘Some leftist groups gave a passing thought to the fate of the European Jews.’”⁶ Despite Howe’s protestations of 1983, a reader examining Howe’s *Labor Action* reports and editorials of 1942, perhaps the most terrible year in Jewish history, in search of some evidence that what was happening to the Jews of Europe mattered very much to him and other Jewish Trotskyists will be sorely disappointed. An article by Howe (18 May) entitled “Poison Gas” at first seems an exception to the rule, but the title turns out to be misleading. Not only does the article fail to mention the Jews who were then being gassed to death, it assigns blame for the use of poison gas not to Hitler at all but to Churchill. “All that Churchill could promise the German people was...poison gas...the super-Versailles treaty to grind them down as they were ground down after the last world war, national dismemberment.” Although Hitler had threat-

5. Dawidowicz, “Indicting American Jews,” *Commentary* 75 (June 1983): 43.

6. For Howe’s letter and Dawidowicz’s reply to him and her other critics see “Exchange: American Jews and the Holocaust,” *Commentary* 76 (September 1983): 4-6, 24-8.

ened the use of poison gas as far back as 1 September 1939—“Whoever fights with poison will be fought back with poison gas”⁷—Howe not only endorses the Hitlerian practice of projecting his own murderous schemes upon his enemies but even implicitly endorses the Hitlerian apologia for war by blaming the Versailles treaty for humiliating the Germans.

It is not far-fetched to find in Howe and his Trotskyist colleagues even an element of pro-German (though not, of course, pro-Hitler) sympathy. In the October 1941 issue of *New Internationalist*, Howe, in the course of a sharp attack upon a new “bourgeois democratic” magazine called *Free World*, excoriates the exiled president of Czechoslovakia, Eduard Benes, whose country had been dismembered by the Munich Pact of 1938, for thinly concealing “his real program: the dismemberment of Germany.” Some unsigned articles in *Labor Action* severely criticize “so-called liberals” for making negative generalizations about the German people. One, on 22 June 1942, called “The Myth of Superior Races,” actually cites a study by one Curt Reiss as conclusively demonstrating that the German working classes entirely dismiss Hitler’s theory of superior races and “treat like brothers the enslaved workers imported from subjugated Europe.”

Out of such lucubrations was the Trotskyist analysis of Hitler’s Europe made. Nearly always the terrible actuality of Hitler’s war against the Jews and against the peoples of Europe was concealed in a socialist oration about how “we are living through the literal last convulsions of capitalist interminable warfare... both sides fight for the retention of their reactionary status quo” (“Poison Gas,” *Labor Action*, 18 May 1942).

The last *Labor Action* piece signed by Irving Howe in 1942 was “The Second Front Issue in England,” which appeared on 29 June. It claims that Churchill stays in power only because of FDR’s support for his “pliant puppet.” Although Howe never has a kind word to say for Churchill, he is equally dismissive of what he calls the alliance of Lord Beaverbrook (representing Britain’s extreme right) and the Stalinists, an alliance which, he claims, now seeks to overthrow the Churchill coalition.

In his first piece under the pseudonym of R. Fahan in *Labor Action* (21 September 1942), Howe (now serving in the U. S. Army as Private

7. Quoted in Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933-1945* (New York, 1975), 110.

Irving Horenstein) attacks President Roosevelt—also, of course, commander-in-chief of the armed forces—for bribing Fascist leader Franco to remain neutral for the duration of the war. The so-called “cultural” aid to Franco, he argues, is a foreshadowing of what the real “war aims” of the Allies will prove to be once the war ends: imperialism and support of dictatorships.

In 1943 Howe, disguised as Fahan, attacked the Allies from a variety of perspectives and on several fronts in the pages of *Labor Action*. Although serving in the American army at the time, he was unremitting in his condemnation of radical or exradical intellectuals who “support the imperialist war.” On February 22 his target was Arthur Koestler, who had written an article in the *New York Times Magazine* supporting the war even as he admitted that it was “on the part of the Allies, as well as the Axis...nothing more than a conservative struggle for the maintenance of the capitalist status quo.” Koestler is offered a drop of pity, however, because he cannot find his way back to the socialist camp (“Koestler: A Pathetic ‘Knight’ Who Has Lost His Armor”).

With what might appear to be a fine even-handedness, except for the fact that both targets support the Allied cause, Howe tears into Clare Booth Luce one week and Stalinists the next. Luce and her like are, he alleges, even worse than FDR because they make it plain that America is “in this war for world domination” (“Globalony: Vital Issues Lie behind Luce ‘Humor,’” *Labor Action*, 8 March 1943). The Stalinists have realized a political “methodology” that “differs in no essential respect from fascism and Hitlerism.” Those on the left in Europe who point this out, like the Polish-Jewish socialist leaders Ehrlich and Alter, are promptly murdered. As always, Howe takes care to remind readers that “Stalinism is not socialism: it is the very opposite. Stalinism is...a workers’ prison” (“Stalinism: The Murder Machine Adds Two Victims,” *Labor Action*, 22 March 1943).

Although his eight or nine months as managing editor of the four-page weekly might well have been, as Howe later said, one of the happiest periods of his life, reading what he wrote or encouraged others to write in *Labor Action* cannot be a happy experience. Nor was it for Howe himself when he looked back on it. “Reading over, a mere thirty-eight years later, what I wrote in *Labor Action*, I blush at the ready-made assurance with which I wrote.” He admitted that the socialist analysis of the war was almost entirely mistaken. “We underestimated the ferocious urge to total domination characterizing Nazism. We were still thinking about Nazism as the last, desperate convulsion of German capitalism, and had not yet recognized that the society created by the Nazis was something qualitatively new in its monstrousness. Nor did we anticipate

that even in the ‘flabby’ bourgeois democracies... there would emerge an enormous popular will to resist, a deep, spontaneous conviction that the Nazi regime had to be destroyed at all costs ...We were a war behind in our thinking.”⁸

Howe uses “we” advisedly. Mary McCarthy, interviewed by the *Paris Review* in 1963, reflected as follows on her own blindness and that of her intellectual friends in the same period:

At the beginning of the war we [the *Partisan Review* group] were all isolationists, the whole group. Then I think the summer after the fall of France—certainly before Pearl Harbor—Philip Rahv wrote an article in which he said in a measured sentence, “In a certain sense, this is our war.” The rest of us were deeply shocked by this, because we regarded it as a useless imperialist war...In other words, we reacted to the war rather in the manner as if it had been World War I. This was after Munich, after the so-called “phony war.” ...Years later, I realized I really thought Philip had been right, and that the rest of us had been wrong. Of course we didn’t know about the concentration camps: the death camps hadn’t started at the beginning.⁹

But didn’t these intellectuals know, as did most ordinary, nonintellectual folks, about the Nuremberg Laws, and the boycott of Jewish stores, and Kristallnacht? Apparently not.

In retrospect, Howe acknowledged that although the socialists’ interpretations of fascism, Nazism, and the World War II contained “an element of truth,” most were “utterly wrong,” and all were scholastic and irrelevant. Nevertheless, he says that they maintained that fascism could be defeated only by socialist reconstruction that would infuse fighting energy into the European masses.

In actuality we recognized what our formal “third camp” position failed to acknowledge adequately: that there was a deep truth in the feelings of most people that Nazi Germany signified a social evil far greater than that of traditional capitalism, and that the one had to be disposed of militarily before the other could be confronted politically... We moved, I suppose, to what Marxists called a position of “critical support” for the war, though we didn’t make this explicit—and I don’t want in the least to deny the deep error of not making it explicit.¹⁰

This description of his position during the early 40s and, indeed, at least through 1946 is, not to put too fine a point upon it, inaccurate. The

8. Howe, *A Margin of Hope* (New York, 1982), 85, 87.

9. *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series* (New York, 1963), 298-9.

10. Howe, *Margin of Hope*, 88.

insistent demands for socialism that Howe and his colleagues made did not envision a more proficient force to fight fascism but an international brotherhood of the working class that would make war obsolete. Saying that he and his Trotskyist comrades were not “explicit” in their support for the war is worse than an understatement; it is a prevarication.

In February 1942 Howe published in *New International* a broadside against the *Partisan Review* for failing to unify its editorial board in opposition to the war. Rahv (as noted above) had in the November-December 1941 issue of *Partisan* attacked an article in the previous issue written by two other *PR* editors, Clement Greenberg and Dwight MacDonald, which had argued that the war was “reactionary” on both sides and therefore deserved no political support from the workers of America. Rahv committed, in Howe’s eyes, the cardinal sin of urging (critical) support of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin in the war. Given this editorial disunity with respect to the war, *Partisan Review*, Howe charges, has betrayed the essentially political purposes for which it was founded. Contemptuous of the magazine’s evasive “sophistry,” Howe relentlessly presses the question: “For or against the imperialist war—that is the issue.”

Who needs *Partisan Review* at all, asks Howe, when its literary contents are not superior to those of the *Kenyon Review* or *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and it has nothing to say on the greatest issue of the day? Worse yet, its most recent issue, albeit cluttered with “the insipid, gossipy purrings of Marianne Moore,” really does have a discernible political content—and it is entirely prowar. “There are several letters from England which are uniformly pro-imperialist. One of them, by George Orwell, even makes the assertion that ‘to be anti-war in England today is to be pro-Hitler.’ And this preposterous statement—fit for the garbage pails of the *New Republic* or *The Nation*—goes unchallenged by the editors!”¹¹ If this constitutes “implicit” support of the Allied effort against Hitler, one wonders what outright *opposition* sounded like?

Anyone who harbors doubts about whether Howe’s opposition to the war against Hitler was anything less than total can lay them to rest quickly by examining his articles in *Labor Action* and *New International* after the war was over, in 1946-47: Howe still insists that “just as the Second World War was the continuation of the first, so will the third be the continuation of the second” (*Labor Action*, 18 March 1946). He excoriates anyone, especially any liberal or radical, who supported the Allied effort. By the usual standards of intellectuals Howe may be said to

11. Howe, “The Dilemma of Partisan Review,” *New International*, February 1942, 22-4.

come off fairly well in assessing, and trying to tell the truth about, his own past in *A Margin of Hope*.¹² Nevertheless, reading his youthful work is mystifying as well as disappointing. One searches in vain for the qualities of mind and of writing that would make him one of the major figures of twentieth-century American culture. Indeed, Howe himself, when he had occasion in the 80s to look back over this early work, said that he took a mild pleasure in noticing that whatever his foolishness and self-importance in those days, at least he could write a passable sentence.¹³ When and why did the transformation of Irving Howe take place?

II

Howe has acknowledged that, prior to World War II, he had been indifferent to Jewishness and to the Jews. During the 1930s and 1940s he, like Lionel Trilling and Philip Rahv, was primarily interested in the progress of socialism (especially in America), not in the threat the Jews were facing in Europe and Palestine. When Howe was working on *A Margin of Hope* he looked through the old issues of *Labor Action* to see how, or whether, he and his comrades had responded to the Holocaust. He found the experience painful and concluded that the Trotskyists were only the best of a bad lot of sects, people who had been disabled by their virtues.¹⁴ He told Phillips that this inattention to the destruction of European Jewry was “a serious instance of moral failure on our part.”¹⁵

12. The question of just what Howe's Trotskyist “third camp” position with respect to the war meant was fought out in the letters columns of *Commentary* following Midge Decter's review of *A Margin of Hope* in the December 1982 issue. See especially the letters by Irving Panken and Dennis Wrong, and Decter's reply to them in *Commentary* 75 (February 1983). Just how sensitive Howe was on the subject is evident from the fact that he upbraided Panken—in what the latter called “a paranoid letter”—for betraying both socialist and personal solidarity by conceding that Decter, although mistaken in her main charges against Howe, had written “a perceptive article.” In his 1 February 1983 letter to Panken, Howe describes Decter's review as a viciously reactionary and philistine demolition of him as well as his politics. Even the slightest concession to her was, in Howe's view, a betrayal by Panken of their 45-year-old connection.—Irving Panken interview by author, 11 September 1996, and Howe to Panken, Albert Glotzer Collection, Box 40, Howe Folder, Hoover Institution Archives

13. Irving Howe to Albert Glotzer, 7 March 1985, Albert Glotzer Collection, Box 40, Howe Folder, Hoover Institution Archives.

14. Irving Howe to Albert Glotzer, 27 July 1979, Albert Glotzer Collection, Box 34, Howe Folder, Hoover Institution Archives.

15. William Phillips, *A Partisan View* (New York, 1983), 123.

But if we look at Howe's writings in the years just after World War II was over and everybody knew about the destruction of European Jewry, we find a similar "inattention." We might take as an instance the 5 August 1946 issue of *Labor Action*, to whose editorial board Howe had now returned. It contains two articles by him, both dealing with the subject of "terror." One concerns "Terrorism in Palestine." It purports to assess "the use of terror by the extreme nationalist wing of the Jewish community," in particular the Irgun attack on British military headquarters in the King David Hotel. Howe expresses some considerable degree of sympathy and even admiration for these "men of great heroism and daring" who risk their lives without flinching. But he shows no sympathy for the specifically Jewish nature of their aspiration, an affirmation that, in spite of the Holocaust, the Jewish people is determined to live. Rather, he scolds them for being "exclusively nationalist" in their struggle and putting Jewish unity above the great desideratum of working-class unity. What is wanted in Palestine, says Howe, is not a nationalistic union of Jewish workers with Jewish capitalists but a socialistic one of the Jewish and Arab "masses" against British imperialism. Ten days later Howe boasted to Dwight Macdonald (who was no doubt pleased to hear it) that he was quite immune from any Jewish nationalism.¹⁶

Elsewhere in the same issue of *Labor Action* we find one of the most bizarre articles Howe ever wrote. Called "Terror—The Barbaric Master of Europe," it features a large reproduction of a drawing done by a boy of 13 who had been in one of Hitler's concentration camps and miraculously survived. From the drawing, Howe surmises, "we can understand the fate of society under capitalism." Why? Because the boy has numbered the prisoners' huts, thereby reminding us (just how is not clear) of the identity of totalitarianism and capitalism. The picture does not call to Howe's mind the fate of the Jews (who go unmentioned) under Nazism. In fact, he at once launches into an attack on Stalinism for now terrorizing ethnic Germans by sending them "back" to Germany.

The Jews of Europe are more visible in Howe's article in *Labor Action* of 26 August which discusses the Jews who are fleeing westward from the anti-Semitic terror of Poland and Stalinism in general. These homeless, still-persecuted Jews, amounting to about a million people, form the core of the Displaced Persons problem, according to Howe.

16. Irving Howe to Dwight Macdonald, 15 August 1946, Dwight Macdonald Papers, Yale University Library.

“Most of them,” he admits, “yearn for Palestine.” The article is a peculiar and precarious mix of general sympathy for Jews (including insistence that the doors not only of Palestine but of America and any other country they wish to go to be thrown open to them) and the usual complaint about “the fruit of [Roosevelt and Churchill’s] imperialist war and capitalist society.”

On 14 October, again in *Labor Action*, the tireless Howe returns to the subject of the war’s aftermath in a piece entitled “Why Schacht and Von Papen Were Freed at Nuremberg.” He notes with pleasure that some Nazi war criminals, such as Goering, have been sentenced to death. But just what was their crime? He describes them as having “danced on the graves of Europe’s workers and [given] to the world the names of Maidoneck [sic] and Buchenwald.” After offering the predictable explanation of the exoneration of Schacht and Von Papen—that they were spokesmen for those German capitalists who “played ball with Hitler” and so are favored by the Anglo-American imperialists who preside over Nuremberg—Howe says that the proper judges at Nuremberg should have been the German working classes, for they were “the real victims of Nazism.” Apparently Howe’s socialist zeal still led him to overlook not only the chief intended victims of Hitler’s war—the Jews—but also the little problem inherent in his proposal for replacing the judges: namely, that German workers had been among the murderers of the Jews.¹⁷

Even a year later, in September 1947, we find Howe writing about concentration camps in *New Internationalist* without saying a word about the Jewish identity of most of their inmates. “The Concentrationary Universe” is mainly a review of *The Other Kingdom*, by David Rousset, the French Trotskyist who had been in Buchenwald for 16 months. Howe approves Rousset’s “explanation” of Nazi atrocities as the logical result of the disintegration of capitalist society but attacks him (somewhat arbitrarily) for his failure to express opposition to Stalinism or to equate the Stalinist and the Nazi camps. “Rousset writes of them [Stalinists] as if they were the Communists rather than as a movement in the service of a totalitarian state as vile as that of the Nazis and one which maintains to this day concentration camps as terrible as those of the Nazis.”¹⁸ The place of the Jews in the Nazis’ “concentrationary universe” goes unmentioned.

17. It seems odd that Howe should have still embraced the pious fiction that all workers are innocent of racial prejudice when he knew very well that in Detroit many Poles and southern whites drawn to the auto industry by Henry Ford were seething with race-hatred, so much so that the UAW found it expedient to invite the antisemite Father Coughlin to speak to the union’s first convention in 1936 to attract Polish and Irish workers. See Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York, 1949), 13.

18. “The Concentrationary Universe,” *New Internationalist*, 13 (September 1947): 220-1.

Nevertheless, a change in Howe's perspective on Jewish questions was already underway. Starting in 1946 he published several pieces on Jewish literary topics in *Partisan Review* and *Commentary*. But it was not until 1949 that this change acquired a political dimension. In that year the jury for the prestigious Bollingen Award for excellence in poetry, a jury which included such writers as T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, W. H. Auden, and Robert Lowell, voted to give its coveted prize to Ezra Pound for his *Pisan Cantos*, a work permeated by antisemitic and fascist sentiment and idea. Indeed, insofar as the *Cantos* have an organizing idea it is Pound's belief in fascism. Typical of Pound's moral style in the *Cantos* are such lines as "Pétain defended Verdun while Blum/Was defending a bidet" or "the yidd is a stimulant, and the goyim are cattle/in gt/proportion and go to saleable slaughter/with the maximum of docility." Even Allen Tate, who staunchly defended the jury's decision, candidly admitted that "the disagreeable opinions are right in the middle of the poetry."¹⁹

Pound had also made wartime speeches on Mussolini's radio in Italy in praise of fascism and antisemitism—this at a time when the ideology of antisemitism was being realized in the destruction of European Jewry. In one broadcast (23 April 1942) he had said, "any man who submits to Roosevelt's treason to the public commits a breach of citizen's duty... Had you the sense to eliminate Roosevelt and the Jews...at the last election, you would not now be at war." In another (10 May 1942) he declared, "England will certainly have nothing whatever to say about the terms [of the next peace]. Neither...will simple-hearted Joe Stalin, not wholly trusted by the kikery which is his master." Yet again (26 May 1942) Pound urged that "every sane act you commit is committed in homage to Mussolini and Hitler...they are your leaders, however much you think you are conducted by Roosevelt or told up by Churchill. You follow Mussolini and Hitler in every constructive act of your government."²⁰

In the same year that he received the Bollingen Pound was tried for treason but judged to be of "unsound mind" and confined to St. Elizabeth's Hospital, where he would remain for the next 12 years. Some of his defenders argued that since he had been ruled of unsound mind not much significance should be attached to his wartime broadcasts. The negative implications of this apologia did not, apparently, occur to them: how could a madman have written as much verse as Pound did without his mental "unsoundness" leaving its marks on the poetry?

19. Quoted by Howe in "The Case of Ezra Pound," *The Critical Point* (New York, 1973), 113.

20. See Howe, *Critical Point*, 110-1.

The Pound controversy (which would resurface in 1972 when the American Academy of Arts and Sciences rejected a subcommittee's recommendation that Pound be given its Emerson-Thoreau Award) raised questions about the relation between art and morality with a sharpness they could never have had prior to the Holocaust. George Orwell put the matter with characteristic bluntness: "One has the right to expect ordinary decency even of a poet."²¹ Wallace Stevens wrote, in a similar vein, to Charles Norman: "I don't consider the fact that [Pound] is a man of genius as an excuse. Surely, such men are subject to the common disciplines... If his poetry is in point, then so are Tokyo Rose's singing and wise-cracking." But there were more subtle questions to be considered. Are terms of aesthetic judgment adequate to assess literary works that carry a heavy ideological freight? Why did many major twentieth-century writers embrace totalitarian ideologies?

At the same time that Howe the burgeoning literary critic—still a mere 29 years old—was trying in his literary essays to work out the relation of the Jew as "stranger" both to and within American literature he was beset by the far more compelling and morally tangled Ezra Pound problem, one which seemed to set Jewish as well as ultimate human values in opposition to literary values. In the years following the war Howe, like many of the group upon whom he would bestow the sobriquet "New York Intellectuals," had embraced literary modernism, one of whose tenets was the autonomy of the literary text and of aesthetic judgment, a version of Oscar Wilde's famous dictum that "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all."²² But now the Pound controversy brought out the rift between the two wings of modernism: the New York critics (mostly Jews) and the (mostly Southern) New Critics.²³ It also released the feelings of uneasiness that the New York intellectuals had long harbored about the modernist poets and novelists they championed.

21. Quoted in Joseph Epstein, *Pertinent Players* (New York, 1993), 261.

22. Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

23. Of course, there were exceptions. The non-Jewish "New York" critic, Dwight Macdonald, was resentful of the Jews who opposed the award. Indeed, he outdid the Southerners by declaring that the judges' decision was "the best political statement made in this country for some time . . . the brightest political act in a dark period." Quoted in Michael Wreszin, *A Rebel in Defense of Tradition: The Life and Politics of Dwight Macdonald* (New York, 1994), 227. He told Howe, "I'm really floored by the attitude taken by many of my friends, including yourself, on the Pound award . . . I am not convinced by the arguments of your side, which seem to me illiberal and specious." Dwight Macdonald to Irving Howe, 21 May 1949, Dwight Macdonald Papers, Yale University Library.

Above all it brought literary and moral values into sharp conflict. It was one thing, Howe wrote, to acknowledge Pound as the poet of “the right wing of modernist culture,” but “to render him public honor a few years after word of the Holocaust reached us was unbearable.” Howe now wondered about the mental processes that had led the judges, all men of the highest literary sensibility, to make their decision in total disregard of the pain it might cause to their Jewish literary colleagues, and indeed to non-Jewish colleagues to whom it might have occurred that the Holocaust was not entirely a “Jewish” concern. “When John Berryman, author of an affecting story, ‘The Imaginary Jew,’ sent a letter to Meyer Schapiro asking him to support the Bollingen Award, couldn’t Berryman imagine the feelings of a real-life Jew?”²⁴

Howe found himself confronted by two different but intertwined questions. One was the propriety of honoring a fascist and anti-Semite whose poetic achievement of 1948 was highly esteemed by some discerning poets and critics. The other was the more complicated question of whether or how fascist and especially antisemitic matter can find a home in poetry taken to be great. To the first question Howe proposed the following answer in his contribution to *Partisan Review’s* May 1949 debate on the issue:

To give Pound a literary prize is, willy-nilly, a moral act within the frame of our social world. To honor him is to regard him as a man with whom one can have decent, normal, even affectionately respectful human and intellectual relations; it means to extend a hand of public fraternity to Ezra Pound. Now a hand to help him when he is down, yes. But a hand of honor and congratulations, no. For Pound, by virtue of his public record and utterances, is beyond the bounds of our intellectual life. If the judges felt that he had written the best poetry of 1948, I think they should have publicly said so—but not awarded any prize for the year.²⁵

Not to be outdone by *Partisan Review, Commentary* ran a symposium in October 1949 on the general subject of “The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition.” Howe’s contribution stressed the antisemitism of Theodore Dreiser, who also—not coincidentally—was a radical and a member of the Communist Party. Seeing a parallel to the far more celebrated Pound case, Howe asks why, “in all the tributes paid Dreiser, has this vicious, not exactly secret, streak of prejudice so seldom been mentioned?” Howe also argues that, although the gross caricatures of Jews in older English literature “make it impossible for one to be totally

24. Howe, *Margin of Hope*, 152.

25. Howe, “The Question of the Pound Award,” *Partisan Review* 16 (May 1949): 517.

at ease with its tradition,” the antisemitism of a Dreiser is far more reprehensible than that of Chaucer, who was only expressing the point of view universally accepted in the Christian Middle Ages. Howe does not propose any specific action to be taken with respect to literary antisemitism, but insists that one must not allow “notions about the inviolability of literature or the sacredness of art [to] sway us from expressing our spontaneous passionate feelings about those contemporary writers who succumb...to anti-Semitism.” To refrain from expressing distaste is to fall prey to what Clement Greenberg called “the culture-sickness of this age, the sickness which permits people to excuse or justify the most dreadful behavior and the most vicious ideas in the name of culture.”²⁶

But how could people who had long affirmed the principle of the autonomy of literature—exactly the principle on which the award to Pound was being justified—people who had defended literature, as Howe himself had done, against the depredations of Stalinist commissars now repudiate that principle when confronted with poetry expounding the antisemitic ideology that led to the Holocaust? Howe did not arrive at a firm answer to this question. But the quarrel over the Pound award had broad and lasting implications for American letters. It made critics like Howe think more carefully than they had ever done before about their motivating views of literature and history:

We were forced back to a reconsideration of what could be meant by aesthetic autonomy. We had meant, I think, that a work of literature has distinctive properties and must be perceived and judged according to categories distinctive to its kind. So far... so good. Troubles began when we tried to specify the relation between the literary work acknowledged to be autonomous and the external world to which nevertheless it was related—the relation between literature and history... And we had to cultivate, increasingly, a wariness regarding the claims of the formalist aesthetic.²⁷

The Pound controversy, ignited in large part by the guilt that writers like Howe were beginning to feel over their indifference to the Holocaust

26. Howe, “The Jewish Writer and the English Literary Tradition,” *Commentary* 8 (October 1949): 364-5.

27. Howe, *Margin of Hope*, 154-5. A few years later, in the essay “Anti-Semite and Jew,” Howe would upbraid his Brandeis colleague Milton Hindus for his inability to see the truth about the French fascist novelist Louis Ferdinand Céline because he overvalued literature and “culture” at the expense of immediate personal and social experience. As a result Hindus forgot that “a writer who provides us the deepest aesthetic satisfactions can also hold the most repugnant opinions and values.” *Celebrations and Attacks* (New York, 1979), 70-1.

while it was taking place, had wide reverberations whose full importance would not be recognized, even in Howe's own criticism, until many years later. His tenacity in opposing the Bollingen award to Pound because of the contradiction it revealed between aesthetic standards and central human values may be viewed, though it brought him into collision with numerous literary "conservatives," as, paradoxically, a function of his increasingly conservative view of human nature.

This view was a result, albeit neither direct nor timely, of the Holocaust, which disabused Howe of his liberal assumptions about human nature and turned him, hesitantly and unwillingly, in a different direction. He, like other radicals, had long espoused the malleability of human nature, mainly in order to oppose those conservatives who had argued that the inherent limits of human nature made grandiose proposals for social change implausible and irrelevant. "How small of all that human hearts endure," Dr. Johnson had declared, "that part which laws or kings can cause or cure." If Orwell could argue in 1984 (1949) and Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (which started to appear in *Partisan Review* in July 1948) that totalitarianism was capable of changing human nature—but for the worse, not the better—then Howe felt it imperative to switch sides in the old liberal-conservative debate. "Now, backs to the wall, we found ourselves stressing the intrinsic recalcitrance of human nature, its ultimate refusal of the transformations exacted through ideology and terror." He even felt forced to reconsider a matter that he had previously dismissed or minimized, namely, "the actuality of 'radical evil,' an evil rooted, incorrigible, irreducible, not to be explained or explained away by social analysis, but part of the very nature of things. A phrase from one of Saul Bellow's novels—'evil is as real as sunshine'—lodged itself deeply in my mind."²⁸ Just how deeply is evident from the fact that, decades later, Howe would speak of "that sense of evil which for cultivated people has become a mark of wisdom and source of pride, indeed the very sun of their sunless world."²⁹

Howe kept repeating Bellow's sentence to himself as a means of checking "the arrogance of an earlier radicalism acknowledging no limit to its claims." It reminded him of the need to restrain and resist socialist authority, which would be inherently flawed in the same way as capitalist authority. Reluctantly, Howe (still, it is worth recalling, under 30) was constrained "even to see some wisdom in the conservative idea that politics should not be allowed to engulf the whole of human

28. Howe, *Margin of Hope*, 203.

29. Howe, "The Burden of Civilization," *New Republic*, 10 February 1982, 31.

existence.”³⁰ Recognition of the incorrigible nature of evil did not, however, lead Howe to adopt the then-current literary versions of the distinctly Christian doctrine of original sin, the political applications of which he strongly censured.³¹ But it is likely that the more conservative view of human nature which he adopted in the aftermath of the Holocaust led a few years later to his remarkable sympathy with the “reactionary” school of Southern New Critics known as the Agrarians, who—paradoxically—had been Howe’s sharpest antagonists in the Pound controversy. Already he was succumbing to that taste for complication which is alien to the political mind.

But the Pound controversy was prelude to a far more important expression of Howe’s belated response to the Holocaust. That was to come in 1954 when, in cooperation with the Yiddish poet Eliezer Greenberg, Howe published the splendid anthology called *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, the first of a series of acts of critical salvage of the culture of Eastern European Jewry. The book is dedicated “to the six million.” It was, among other things, an act of atonement for having allowed Marxist ideology to blind him to the enormity of the Holocaust while it was taking place.

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30. Howe, *Margin of Hope*, 203.

31. See, for example, “This Age of Conformity,” the *Partisan Review* essay of January-February 1954 in which Howe complains (correctly) about the high prestige of original sin in the literary world.