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## Images of the “New Jew” in Postwar Culture

### *Building on the Legacies of Antisemitism and the Holocaust*

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In 1947, the best-selling novel and Academy Award-winning film *Gentleman's Agreement* captured the earnestness with which some Americans attacked antisemitism and its accompanying evils. Laura Hobson's book and the film based upon it made it clear that antisemitism—like all prejudice—was un-American, since it persecuted people for imagined differences. Such assumptions were emblematic of the widespread celebration of universal brotherhood that permeated popular and political culture in the years after World War II, and began to transform images of American Jews in these years. Previously, American Jews were almost always depicted in popular culture as outsiders and were usually objects of discrimination. Yet, after World War II and the upheaval of the Holocaust, public antisemitism became increasingly unacceptable as it came into conflict with the moral ideals Americans embraced in the war against Nazi Germany and Fascism. Moreover, the “new Jew” of the American imagination acquired a special kind of symbolic moral status. Thus, in popular fiction, the press, government propaganda, and the comments of social critics and politicians, a new American image of Jews began emerging in the postwar years: Jews as cultural and political insiders.

Not surprisingly, American views of Israel—the world's only Jewish state—were grounded in the images of Jews that permeated popular culture, both before but especially after World War II. Thus, a study of the postwar image of Israel in American culture must begin with a look at the images of “new Jews” and their cultural antecedents.

## ANTISEMITISM IN THE UNITED STATES

As part of a pluralistic nation, Americans had always grappled with the definition of their own nationality. The terms of that struggle had changed over time, including early in the twentieth century when an unprecedented wave of southern and eastern Europeans came to American shores. To many, new European immigrants and other minorities represented immutable “races” which were inferior to the “traditional” American group—White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant. One concrete result of this racist thinking was the reversal of unrestricted immigration in the 1920s. Jews, along with European Catholics, were objects of the new restrictions and considered to be a separate race by many government policymakers, scientists, journalists, and average Americans. Jews also faced educational quotas that cut their presence in colleges and universities, employment discrimination, bars to social clubs and resorts, and residential screenings. “Ingrained prejudices of respectable people,” argues Leonard Dinnerstein, were “confirmed as proper in the 1920s.”<sup>1</sup>

Even many Americans who did not subscribe to antisemitic ideas still believed that there was no room for diverse minorities in the United States. Some press stories blamed Jews for the antisemitism that they faced since they didn’t blend in with the rest of the population. Moreover, in the 1930s, some in the press—particularly in Christian vehicles such as *The Christian Century*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Lutheran Companion*—charged that Jewish behavior such as “clannishness” and radical activities invited persecution in Europe. The emphasis on assimilation permeated popular fiction as well. According to more than one study of Jewish images on film, de-semitization and de-Judaization were rampant in 1930s films as recognizably Jewish characters disappeared from the screen, while White, Anglo-Saxon Protestant characters predominated in Hollywood.<sup>2</sup> Hollywood’s de-semitized images of the 1930s were consistent with changing ideas about race and national identity in the popular culture. As social scientists repudiated nineteenth and early-twentieth-century biologically deterministic views of race, racist thinking declined among other Americans as well.<sup>3</sup> By the eve of World War II, anthropologists and sociologists focused on the “culture concept” as the locus of identity. Social scientists believed that prejudice could be defeated and tolerance encouraged through education.

Shortly before the war, officials in the U.S. Office of Education tried to put this prescription into action with a series of radio broadcasts called, *Americans All . . . Immigrants All*. This series was the first of its

type which stressed that the country was comprised of diverse people who all agreed on certain ideals. Yet, the thrust of this message as well as broader academic and popular beliefs of the time was assimilationist: although Americans should be tolerant of diversity, differences among specific groups would fade over time. A revealing example of how these ideas were integrated into wartime propaganda was the comic book *They Got the Blame: The Story of Scapegoats in History* put out by the YMCA, with the assistance of *Scholastic Magazine* and the government's Office of War Information.<sup>4</sup> Scapegoating was irrational, the comic argues, "a flame of insanity" which could be defeated through mere exposure and education. The comic ends with a ringing restatement of war aims: "the united nations are determining to build a world free of prejudice and intolerance."

The message of this YMCA comic was echoed throughout the public culture during the war, from popular entertainment to sociological studies. Wartime films inevitably highlighted the un-American side of prejudice, most dramatically through the multiethnic platoon in which soldiers overcame differences and relied on each other for their lives. Similarly, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal in his study of the position of African Americans in the nation, *An American Dilemma*, argued that the war was being fought to overcome prejudice: "In fighting fascism and Nazism, Americans had to stand before the whole world in favor of racial tolerance."<sup>5</sup>

In the postwar years, many political leaders, as well as writers, filmmakers, and other contributors to the public culture, believed that it was even more important to live up to the ideals which they had embraced during the war, and to defeat the still powerful forces of prejudice in American society. Civic groups and others believed that public education would end prejudice. For example, in 1948, the National Council of Christians and Jews organized American Brotherhood Week "to strengthen [the] Nation through the unity that grows out of brotherhood." Educators, publishers, and Hollywood and radio executives (with President Harry S. Truman as honorary chairman) participated in the project.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, antisemitism peaked in the United States during World War II. Hence, wartime views of Nazi persecutions were not always charitable toward Jews. Many Americans did not believe that the victims of the Nazis were completely innocent. In his analysis of public opinion surveys from 1938–1939, sociologist Charles Stember finds that anywhere from 27–61 percent of respondents believed that the German Jews were at least partly responsible for their own persecution. Reasons cited for the hostile attitudes toward the Jews included common antisemitic stereotypes.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, dedication to the Allied cause and opposition to Hitler's policies toward Jews were not necessarily one and the same. The strength of anti-semitism before and during World War II is reflected in the refusal of the federal government to allow the majority of Jews fleeing the Nazis to seek refuge in the United States. Refugee policy was executed by the State Department, where it was clear to many observers that powerful officials were antisemitic.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, after the war, it became increasingly unacceptable to voice antisemitic views in the *public* culture. As the editors of *Look* magazine observed, "Hitler made anti-Semitism disreputable."<sup>9</sup> Stember documented a clear decline in antisemitism after its World War II high. Even though prejudice was still harbored in private, "The mere repression of bigotry," he argued, "constitutes a social gain." The decline of prejudice was expressed in different ways. For example, the number of respondents to a survey who labeled Jews as a race dropped significantly, while the number who labeled Jews as a religious group rose by half as much. Not surprisingly, the status of Jews also increased as they rose in class. As the following discussion will illustrate, when prominent voices in the political and popular culture denounced prejudices based on race, the very meaning of race as a category and the borders between different groups changed in radical ways. With regard to the image of Jews, this change was clear: previously referred to in common stereotypes as "not white," in the late 1940s and 1950s, Jews "became" white in the public culture.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE DECLINE OF ANTISEMITISM IN POPULAR FICTION

Novels and films after the war which focused on antisemitism were a popular, cathartic way to reaffirm moral values and expunge discomfort over past insensitivity to prejudice. Yet, a fictional discussion of anti-semitism in the postwar period was no easy task. In the three centuries since Jews had lived on the American continent, their status vis-à-vis their neighbors was not always clear. In addition, Jewish artists, themselves, were ambivalent about whether they should assimilate completely into the mainstream. Despite the adherence among some Jews to what Marshall Sklare called "the nineteenth century social contract" that one's Jewishness was only to be shown in private life, the wide appeal of universal ideals in postwar America, the horror of the Holocaust, and the growing political, social, and economic security of American Jews combined to overwhelm the caution that minorities should not call attention to themselves.

*Crossfire* is an example of a film that tackles antisemitism head-on. This hard-boiled 1947 *film noir* hammers out the message that all prejudice is evil and murderous.<sup>11</sup> The film opens on a brutal fight, as the sounds of breaking furniture are heard over the darting shadows. Hours later, a tough Detective Finley (Robert Young) looks over the crime scene and the body of the victim, Samuels, whose name is mentioned a couple of times, making his Jewish identity clear to the audience. We learn that Samuels spent the evening in a bar where he met three soldiers, one of whom, Montgomery (Robert Ryan), soon appears on the threshold. We later find out that the antisemitic Montgomery murdered Samuels because he was Jewish. But the senselessness of the crime means that the detective will overlook the most obvious solution. As the investigation unfolds, so does a parallel story of how groundless stereotypes become destructive prejudices.

There are a number of clues that signal to the audience that the abrasive Montgomery (Monty) is evil and his antisemitic beliefs are, therefore, indefensible. He is harshly critical of those around him; for example, he makes fun of a shy southern soldier with a thick accent. Monty rails against the falling standards of the U.S. Army which was full of "stinking civilians." His anger seems un-American. The civilian character of the army is a point of pride in American ideology, especially so soon after the victory of World War II. The self-important Monty is the only truly nasty character and the only one who makes antisemitic statements. Thus, by syllogistic logic, the film argues that only nasty, and in this case violent people make antisemitic statements.<sup>12</sup>

In contrast to the other characters, Monty uses common stereotypes to describe Jews. He explains that he followed Samuels out of the bar that evening, because "if a Jew-boy was setting up the drinks somewhere we might as well get in on it." According to Monty, Jews are both too wealthy and too stingy with their money. Monty's hatred of Jews is also fueled by the prejudice that Jews aren't good fighters and don't do their fair share of service in the army. He tells Finley, "I've seen a lot of guys like [Samuels] who played it safe during the war. . . . Some of them are named Samuels, some got funnier names." Monty's references to Samuels as "Jew-boy" reminds us of the common, overlapping language of prejudice that often questioned the masculinity of particular groups. (Throughout American history, for example, African Americans had been referred to by Whites as "boys.")

*Crossfire* and other works of fiction which addressed antisemitism used stereotypes which were apparently widespread in the public culture.

Charles Stember found in surveys from 1938, 1940, and 1946 that a majority of respondents felt that Jews had a variety of objectionable traits: (1) greed, unscrupulousness, an inordinate concern with money; (2) pushiness, aggressiveness, selfishness; (3) clannishness, covering for each other; (4) bad manners, a lack of cleanliness, an unrefined nature. Monty's opinions, thus, matched those of many of his countrymen in the late 1940s. The familiarity that many Americans had with the antisemitism depicted in *Crossfire* as well as with the steps to eradicate it was also reflected in the fact that the film was a "modest commercial success" and a bigger critical success, nominated for the Academy Award for best film.<sup>13</sup>

Far from drunken brawls that lead to murder, the extremely popular *Gentleman's Agreement*, both a novel and a film in 1947, demonstrates the social evils of antisemitism.<sup>14</sup> Even one review which called the plot "flagrantly thimble-rigged" argued that it was "required reading for every thoughtful citizen in this parlous century."<sup>15</sup> The didactic novel by Laura Hobson focuses on a writer who poses as a Jew for six weeks to do research for an exposé on antisemitism. Phil Green learns that antisemitism can be found everywhere, even among good-hearted liberals who don't know that they are prejudiced, as well as among self-hating Jews who are anxious to fit into the Gentile world. Hobson drew on her own experience to explain the pervasiveness of social antisemitism. She later recounted being at a dinner party before the war when the subject of Hitler's persecution of the Jews was discussed. One guest concluded, "The chosen people ask for it, wherever they are."<sup>16</sup>

Hobson's novel is a hollow construction designed to illustrate how age-old stereotypes are articulated. Phil's sister, for example, uses an expression which plays on the supposed stinginess of Jews, "That cheap Pat Curran keeps trying to Jew us down." One doctor makes a subtle comment implying that Jewish doctors pad their fees. A colleague of Phil's assumes that Jews don't fight and so asks Phil if he was a correspondent during the war. Phil's in-the-closet Jewish secretary, who has changed her name to get her job, doesn't want to see the company hire Jews who may be "too ethnic." "Don't you hate being the fall guy for the kikey ones?" she asks Phil.<sup>17</sup> And, Phil discovers that there are any number of social restrictions in real estate, clubs, and resorts. The novel's title refers to the unspoken agreement among some property owners that they will not rent or sell to Jews.

Even if social antisemitism is not as dangerous as that which led to the Holocaust, Phil argues that it is infuriating, because it automatically assumes that you are not equal to other people. He explains the impor-

tance of opposing all prejudice when his girlfriend Kathy calls restricted resort owners "nasty little snobs." "Call them snobs and you can dismiss them," Phil responds. "See them as persistent traitors to everything this country stands for . . . , and you have to fight them. Not for 'the poor, poor Jews,' but for the whole damn thing this country is—" <sup>18</sup> Thus, Phil equates universal morals and identity with the definition of being American. Phil's mother, the moral center for Phil and for the film audience, expands this equation even more by calling for a triumph of universalism, using the one world political vocabulary of the day. "Maybe it won't be the American century, after all," she tells her son, "or the Russian century or even the Atomic century. Wouldn't it be wonderful, Phil, if it turned out to be everybody's century, when people all over the world, free people, found a way to live together." With the Holocaust in recent memory and the wartime ideals of a unified world still fresh, both the film and the book articulate broadly felt cultural values in the immediate postwar era: particular identities must be repudiated, because of their dangerous potential.

The novel makes clear that prejudice is un-American, because it is a short distance from genteel restrictions to crude name calling or worse. Phil's son, Tommy, comes home crying from school one day after he is called "a dirty kike." <sup>19</sup> Phil's Jewish friend, Dave, finds his career and economic future threatened when he can't locate a place for his family to live in the restricted housing market of New York City suburbs. *Crossfire's* Finley, like Phil, explains that antisemitism must be fought on all fronts, because distinctions in degrees of prejudice are not that significant: "This business of hating Jews comes in a lot of different sizes. . . and because we stand for all these kinds, Monty's kind grows out of all the rest." Prejudice is a cultural and psychological behavior that can be unlearned. Phil is convinced that he understands the experience of all who have been the object of discrimination through his own sympathetic ruse: "I know about *everyone* who was *ever* turned down . . . ." Thus, antisemitism is the same as all other prejudice and can be defeated through cultural education.

The earnest tone of *Crossfire* and *Gentleman's Agreement* belies the difficulty of discussing antisemitism in Hollywood from the 1930s through the 1950s. Before the United States entered World War II, Hollywood producers and filmmakers worried about antisemitism, especially when isolationists led by Senators Gerald Nye and Bennett Clark, and aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, charged in 1941 that Jews and Hollywood were leading the country into war. Hollywood fears of antisemitism

increased after the war when new charges of subversion were based on alleged Communist influence in films. The House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings in Hollywood which began in October 1947, just weeks before *Gentleman's Agreement* opened, made studio heads more jittery; people in and out of the industry regarded the investigations as antisemitic, because many of those accused were Jews. Most importantly, those prominent in the congressional investigations—such as Martin Dies and Charles Rankin—were openly antisemitic and supported by leaders of Fascist and racist groups.<sup>20</sup>

The depiction of Jews in the postwar period is complicated further by the insecurities of the Jewish studio heads about their own ethnic identity. Jewish moguls were anxious to assimilate into the American mainstream, but ever fearful of antisemitism which they thought “lurked everywhere.”<sup>21</sup> As a response, in part, to the schismatic pulls felt by these Jews, Hollywood de-emphasized ethnicity. Hence, films of the 1940s focused on the similarities between Jews and non-Jews, emphasizing assimilation and the melting pot ideal. In other words, Hollywood repressed ethnic differences and omitted most depictions of particular religious and cultural characteristics. Increasingly in the 1950s, Jewish heroes took on the attributes of other Americans, while ethnic characteristics were reserved for those few, older, less sophisticated characters who were *defined* by their Jewishness. For example, Jose Ferrer's portrayal of Lt. Barney Greenwald in *The Caine Mutiny* (1954)—unlike the character in Herman Wouk's novel on which he is based—doesn't mention his Jewish identity or its impact on the mutiny court martial. In contrast, Gertrude Berg's Molly Goldberg of *Molly* (1950) plays the stereotypical *Yiddishe Mama*.<sup>22</sup>

Characters in some films, such as *Gentleman's Agreement*, are de-semitized by their appearance. Gregory Peck's Phil is tall, dark, handsome, and earnest. John Garfield (Dave) was one of Hollywood's few leading men whose Jewish identity was known, and, along with Peck, he, too, was a matinee idol. The film places much emphasis on the similarities between Jews and non-Jews, as illustrated by the appearance of the actors. Elaine Wales, Phil's Jewish secretary, is a blond, stereotypically non-Jewish type who lies about her ethnicity and no one suspects that she is Jewish. Even in the book, the idea that Jews are physically indistinguishable from other Americans is a recurrent theme. As Phil contemplates his scheme to be Jewish, he notes how similar he and Dave are—in coloring, size, and features. The idea that Jews were not physically distinct was a common theme in other fiction of the period that challenged

antisemitism. For example, in the 1949 film *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*, a Jewish baseball player is very similar to his two Irish buddies except that he happens to be taller than his teammates (an additional detail that plays against the common image of Jews).

Antisemites in these works of fiction are anything from insensitive name-callers to violent murderers. The novels and films also demonstrate that prejudice is wrong by ennobling the Jewish characters. This valorization was another side to the prejudices about Jews. Stember found that stereotypes about Jews in the late 1930s and early 1940s included "admirable" qualities as well as negative ones. In three surveys from 1938 and one from 1940, 51–67 percent of respondents found positive qualities in Jews. The characteristics included: ability in business, persistence, ambition, intellectual talent, religious and familial loyalty, thriftiness, and integrity.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, the character of Samuels in *Crossfire* embodies certain positive qualities. He is sensitive and kind to a young soldier who is unsure of where he fits in once the war is over.<sup>24</sup> Samuels is depicted as a patriotic figure who was discharged from the army after being wounded. His record echoed the efforts of journalists and Jewish groups to correct the misperception that Jews had not done their fair share in the war.<sup>25</sup>

The whole premise of *Gentleman's Agreement* assumes that being a Jew is nothing more than experiencing antisemitism. Phil just decides that he'll be Jewish for a few weeks. He reasons that his friend Dave is just like him: they look alike, they grew up together, they're both modern American men. Phil does not seek out any other Jews, research Jewish history or culture, or visit a synagogue. He merely throws himself up against discrimination. After Phil's son Tommy is insulted by the other children for being Jewish, Dave tells Phil, "Well you can quit being Jewish now. That's all there is to it." A well-known physicist, Dr. Lieberman, confirms Phil's belief that Jewish identity is synonymous with being a victim. He tells Phil "it is a matter of pride to go on calling ourselves Jews. Only when there are no antisemites, calling ourselves a Jew won't matter." When antisemitism and other prejudices are eliminated, ethnicities will cease to exist.

Such sentiments reinforce the pervasive universalist ethos reflected in public education projects such as American Brotherhood Week and *They Got the Blame*. The organizers of these projects and the creators of *Gentleman's Agreement*, indeed, argue that differences among people are merely imagined. This theme was commonly sounded by journalists as well in the late 1940s. For example, the photojournalists from one agency

collaborated on a project entitled “People are People the World Over.” For an entire year, *Ladies Home Journal* published photos showing similarities in the way people from all countries cooked, shopped, washed, and raised their children. Similarly, a 1947 series in *The New Republic* by journalist Bruce Bliven did its best to educate Americans that antisemitism—although disturbingly pervasive—was based upon *imagined* differences between Jews and other Americans.<sup>26</sup>

The press and popular fiction depicted the virulence of antisemitism and the innocence of the Jews who suffered from it. Importantly, they also presented solutions to the problem. The first way to combat antisemitism was to deal with the issues rationally. Contemporary social and political critics also stressed the irrationality of antisemitism. Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, argued that antisemitism was a “passion” and must, therefore, be opposed with dispassion.<sup>27</sup> The solution proposed in *Gentleman’s Agreement* and *Crossfire* is to demonstrate the meaninglessness of ethnic identity and thereby explain to the audience that antisemitism is wrong, because it is unfair and un-American. This view echoed numerous examples found in contemporary press and nonfiction books.<sup>28</sup> Phil explains to his young son Tommy that being a Jew is no different than being a Protestant or a Catholic. When he finishes his articles, he explains to Tommy that the “game” they’ve been playing is called “identification.”<sup>29</sup>

*Crossfire* uses a similar rhetorical structure. By the end of the film, the detective, Finley, explains everything to the childlike southern soldier Leroy in order to enlist his help in capturing Monty. Finley tries to show Leroy that prejudice against all groups is unfair: “Doesn’t Monty make fun of your accent and call you a hillbilly and say you’re dumb?” He tells him how his own immigrant grandfather was beaten to death by a mob because he was a Catholic. “Hating is always senseless,” Finley argues. “One day it kills Jews, the next day Irish Catholics, the next day Protestants and Quakers.” *Gentleman’s Agreement* also stresses the un-American aspect of antisemitism. For example, Phil argues in his article that the founding fathers knew that “equality and freedom were the only choice for wholeness and soundness in a nation.” Furthermore, the works of fiction demonstrate that Jews are good Americans; Dave and Samuels fight patriotically in the war.

The demonstration of Jewish patriotism through military service points to another theme of this fiction. Sometimes a rational approach is not enough. Sometimes, according to these authors, men have to stand and fight for what is right. Moreover, the war was also a personal test of manliness for the soldiers. Dave, Samuels, and others are meant to disprove the stereotype that Jews are not real men or fighters. Dave is also

ready to fight when some soldiers use slurs against him in a restaurant. Thus, they meet the gendered criteria which define heroes in popular American fiction. The third major prescription to combat antisemitism found in these works is to celebrate universal morals and the common humanity of all people. *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Crossfire* do this by downplaying the importance of ethnicity, and equating American freedom and democracy with universal morality.

Two other popular works of fiction which highlighted antisemitism among soldiers were the best-selling 1948 novels *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Young Lions*.<sup>30</sup> Irwin Shaw's novel *The Young Lions* tells the story of three soldiers during World War II, one German and two Americans, one of whom is Jewish. The most likable of all the characters is the Jew, Noah Ackerman. The reader's sympathies are with Noah when his commanding officers and bunkmates begin taunting him with antisemitic comments. The captain charges that Noah failed to clean his bunk area properly, so he confines the whole barracks to base on Saturday night. Sergeant Rickett, along with the other soldiers blame the "Jew-boy" for the punishment. Rickett admonishes him that the barracks has to be "white-man clean."<sup>31</sup> This exchange reminds readers of the common assumption of earlier racist thinking: Jews were often referred to as non-White. It would not be until the decline of antisemitism in the 1950s that Jews would be seen as completely "white," distinguished from other minority groups, such as African Americans, Chinese, or Arabs.

The men in the barracks come up with a litany of stereotypes about Jews: "I don't mind your killing Christ, but I'll never forgive you for not washing that window"; "[Jews] run all the banks and all the whorehouses in Berlin and Paris"; "I actually heard of a Jew who volunteered [for the army]." Noah suffers the taunts with dignified silence and soon finds himself ambushed and beaten by his bunkmates. Noah demands satisfaction and stoically endures beatings from the biggest men in the company. Outside the pages of a novel, many real soldiers experienced such abuse during World War II. Historian Arno Mayer recalled his experiences in the army that were not unlike those of Noah Ackerman's: "I experienced a kind of anti-Semitism I wasn't prepared for. It reached a point where I had a couple of teeth knocked out."<sup>32</sup>

The story of antisemitism which Noah must endure is paralleled with the transformation of another character of Shaw's, the young Christian Diestl, from a proud Austrian to an unfeeling Nazi. Even before he has joined the Nazis, he explains the necessities of antisemitism to a young American tourist: "I know it is ridiculous to attack any race. . . . But if the

only way you can get a decent and ordered Europe is by wiping out the Jews then we must do it.”<sup>33</sup> Sometime later, Christian has become a Nazi soldier, rounding up Jews to be sent off to death camps. By the end of the war when Christian finds himself passing through a concentration camp, he is decidedly indifferent to his surroundings.

*The Naked and the Dead* is also an epic of World War II which demonstrates the evils of prejudice and beneath its cynical exterior shows the path to redemption from this sin. Antisemitism in Norman Mailer’s novel arises from the displacement of anger the men of this platoon feel toward themselves and others. For example, Gallagher, a working-class Irish Catholic from Boston who resents losing at poker and feels guilty that he is throwing away money when he has a pregnant wife at home, turns angrily to a Jewish orderly playing in the game, “That Jew had been having a lot of goddamn luck,” he thinks, “and suddenly, his bitterness changed into rage.” The other soldiers’ prejudices are also expressions of their anger; Sergeant Croft’s childhood, for example, was dominated by a father who humiliated his son. Thus, the two Jews in Mailer’s platoon are subjected to any number of slurs from the majority of the soldiers. Gallagher taunts the first, Goldstein, about wanting a soapbox when he expresses an opinion about the military campaign. At other times, the Jews are addressed as “Izzy” and “dumb Jew bastard.”<sup>34</sup>

The antisemitism among the lower-class characters in these films and novels is crude and outspoken, but the works make clear that this is not a class issue. Rather, it is a danger that affects society as a whole. Mailer’s Lieutenant Hearn recalls how he grew up as the scion of a wealthy midwestern family hearing veiled antisemitic remarks at home. And, Noah, in *The Young Lions*, suffers antisemitism at the hands of officers as well as other enlisted men.

Antisemitism is not the only prejudice that is seen as dangerous. Befitting the period’s universal ideals, all prejudices are connected and all are depicted as wrong. The officers criticize a number of groups. Croft remarks to the Mexican Martinez (whom he has named “Japbait” for his scouting abilities) that an Italian soldier in the platoon is “a funny wop.” Martinez is uncomfortable with the remark as he feels, himself, not that far removed from the Italian in the eyes of the Anglos. Martinez’ good record as a soldier is due in part to his determination to be the hero in battle that he could never be at home, because he isn’t “white, Protestant, firm, and aloof.” In a moment of angry panic, Gallagher conflates his prejudices shouting at a Japanese prisoner “You look like a fuggin Yid with all that hand waving.”<sup>35</sup>

Shaw’s and Mailer’s novels showed how people could overcome their seemingly intractable differences to discover their commonalities, such as their masculine identity and ability to fight together. Noah becomes buddies with his friend Johnny, planning to move to his town and work for his father after the war. Noah clings to an idealized vision of Americana and asserts that he will never tire of the simple life. Historian John Higham—using the language of postwar universalism—puts Noah’s motivation in the context of contemporary social concerns: “Totalitarianism convinced Americans that racial and religious divisions constituted the last, . . . the most vicious cleavages in a beleaguered society that was otherwise knit together by a sturdy web of ideals.”<sup>36</sup>

### MOVING BEYOND UNIVERSALISM

The war, in general, pushed Americans toward a universalism that made antisemitism intolerable. The rejection of antisemitism in the public culture is reflected in crusading fictional works (such as *Crossfire*) which reaffirmed the moral purpose of the United States. Such fiction asserted that antisemitism was unacceptable, because Jews were just like other Americans. Yet, the neat lessons of absolute universalism had their limits in a post-Holocaust world. The particular reality of the Holocaust leads the popular culture and the image of the Jew in new directions. While the war is in the background of works about domestic antisemitism (one character in *Gentleman’s Agreement* refers to the “ovens of World War II”), the fiction about war-torn Europe and the Pacific tackles the complexities of acknowledging differences among various groups of people, while endorsing universal values. Thus, the novels of Shaw, Mailer, and other works depict the differences among people to endorse, nevertheless, a universal ideal. They show Jews who are distinguished by their appearance, characteristics, or fate as victims who rise above their status to provide a universal example or moral.

American ideas about Jews were manifest in both antisemitic stereotypes as well as valorizing celebrations of Jewish character. Such ideas were widespread in the media and political culture as well as in fiction. Popular images that resonated most strongly with an understanding of the Holocaust were those of Jews as weak, pitiful victims, helpless in the face of an overpowering enemy. Images of Jewish victimhood remained widespread even two years after the Holocaust. For example, in November 1947, *Life* reported on the U.S. tour of two eight-year-old orphans of Hitler’s concentration camps, which was arranged by an organization of

American Jewish women trying to raise money to support European orphans. Such ideas of Jewish victimhood remained vivid for years to come, as former President Harry S. Truman demonstrated in a 1955 speech to the Combined Jewish Appeal of Greater Boston when he concluded: "The Jews have already been the most persecuted of peoples . . . in the history of the world."<sup>37</sup>

The most prominent images of Jewish difference in popular culture were the real or imagined physical distinctions that set them apart from other Americans and Europeans. For example, Samuels, the murder victim in the 1947 film *Crossfire*, is physically distinguished from the Gentile characters looking as if he is of east European origin: he has dark wavy hair and bushy eyebrows, and is short and heavysset. Noah, from *The Young Lions*, is similarly distinguished from his Gentile fellows. He has a small stature, is physically weak, and, by the end of the war, noticeably frail. Norman Mailer also creates a World War II Jewish soldier who embodies many of the physical stereotypes about Jews. Roth was "a small man with an oddly hunched back and long arms . . . he had a long dejected nose and pouches under his eyes."<sup>38</sup> Roth is barely able to clear the jungle brush. For the other soldiers, Roth's physical weakness becomes a badge of Jewish identity.

In their portraits of Jews physically distinct from their neighbors, these Jewish authors have not only internalized the idea that Jews are weak, but also the idea that Jews are unattractive. In his 1950 novel *The Wall* about the Warsaw Ghetto, John Hersey creates Rachel who is "cursed" with a "Semitic face." There are numerous references to Rachel's appearance which all the characters in *The Wall* seem to agree is ugly. The implication is that she is ugly *because* she is "Jewish-looking." Noach Levinson, the archivist among these dwellers in the ghetto, also embodies common stereotypes about Jews. He has the looks of a Jewish *schlemiel* to suit his bookish occupation: "there was actually something repellent about his looks. . . . He had the face of an intellectual, narrow and drawn forward, and upon his unruly nose sat a pair of steel-rimmed glasses whose lenses were so thick that Levinson's eyes seemed . . . far larger than most human eyes."<sup>39</sup>

The aesthetic which prizes "non-Jewish" looks continues to dominate popular fiction into the 1950s. Joseph Viertel in his 1955 novel *The Last Temptation* creates two characters who try desperately to escape from Nazi Europe. To a limited extent, they are able to assimilate and, thus, escape because they don't "look" Jewish. Deborah calls Vic "her tall warrior" and she has "pretty, delicate features." In contrast to this pair, Deborah's childhood friend Gussie is described as Jewish-looking: "She

looked it—plump and dark, and her thick glasses behind which she constantly blinked made it worse.” Furthermore, Gussie’s “prominent, bulbous nose, her black kinky hair, and plump figure” were highlighted. Deborah’s and Vic’s physical appearance is one of the temptations which fool them into thinking that they can shed their Jewish identity. Both Hersey’s and Viertel’s novels show the folly of trying to assimilate and to deny one’s own identity. Yet, the standard of beauty remains a non-Jewish one. The de-semitizing aesthetic comes to dominate the images of Jewish heroes who appear increasingly “Aryan” through the decade. Jews who act less like victims are, increasingly, depicted as less “Jewish-looking,” while those characters with stereotypically Jewish features are depicted as weak. Thus, the physical descriptions of Jewish frailty and homeliness are metaphors for the Jewish condition of victimhood.<sup>40</sup>

The lesson of World War II and, ultimately, of the Holocaust, argue these Jewish authors, is to transcend limitations and to become heroes instead of victims. Shaw’s frail Noah becomes an exemplary soldier. He patriotically enlists when war breaks out. In the army, he stands up to the antisemitic taunts of his fellow recruits, finally fighting his tormentors in supervised matches, explaining, “I want every Jew to be treated as though he weighed two hundred pounds.” When he and his platoon find themselves in the fields of France, it is Noah who becomes the natural leader. He is the bravest, quickest, and most practical in the field. A couple of the other men are literally helpless without him. He has not only served his country, but become ennobled in the process. When his friend from boot camp meets up with him in Europe, he recognizes this change in Noah: “Although he was terribly frail now and coughed considerably, he seemed to have found . . . a thoughtful, quiet maturity. . . . Noah talked gently, without bitterness, with none of his old intense, scarcely controlled violence.”<sup>41</sup>

Norman Mailer goes farther to create a heroic Jewish soldier who has overcome the limitations of his identity both physically and psychologically. Joey Goldstein, in *The Naked and the Dead*, is physically strong, blond, blue-eyed, thoroughly de-semitized, and a sharp contrast to the other Jewish soldier, Roth. Indicating how Jewish—and Israeli—heroes increasingly will be depicted in the 1950s, Goldstein—with looks of an all-American boy—is the one who will survive the war. Mailer makes the “non-Jewish” looking Goldstein comfortable with his American and Jewish identities, while Roth becomes consumed by his own feelings of difference and inferiority. Clearly, the physical depiction of these two characters reflected the aesthetics—embraced by most Jewish authors and filmmakers—which valued “non-Semitic” and “non-ethnic” types.

Other fictional characters, like Mailer's Roth, internalize the negative stereotypes about Jews and are, initially, unable to overcome their status as victims. Deborah Mamorek in *The Last Temptation* recalls being ashamed when she was the only Jewish child in her class taught by an antisemitic teacher. The pain created by this self-hatred, and how it made Jews feel and act like victims, is a common theme in the fiction of the late 1940s and 1950s. Joseph Viertel's characters Vic and Deborah survive the Holocaust and make it to Palestine, but they pay a steep price in their sense of self worth. Even in Jerusalem, Vic, although he denies it, is ashamed of his Jewish identity: "I'd say I was self-conscious. As if I'd been born with one eye or one leg. A man with an infirmity through no fault of his own but glad to be friends with healthy people."<sup>42</sup> The status of Jews as victims was enshrined not just because of stereotypes and because Jews absorbed the antisemitic judgments of those around them. Jews were the archetypal victims following World War II because of the unredeemable evil of the Nazis during the war.

Many postwar fiction writers detailed the evil of Nazi crimes against the Jews. Hersey's popular novel about the Warsaw ghetto, *The Wall*, describes the humiliations which Jews faced at the hands of the Nazis, putting, as William Shirer wrote in his review, the Holocaust in terms "we of the predominantly Christian West can feel and can comprehend."<sup>43</sup> The complete innocence of the Jewish characters in the postwar fiction makes the humiliation more acute. In the aftermath of the war and the undeniable revelations about the Holocaust, any ambivalence about responsibility for the persecution disappeared. *The Wall*, *The Last Temptation*, and *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, for example, all center on young women or girls who experience Nazi persecution and display courage in the face of it. Even after more than two years in hiding, Anne Frank is still able to see the good in people, "I don't think . . . of all the misery, but the beauty that still remains. . . . He who has courage and faith will never perish in misery!"<sup>44</sup> Remaining on the bestseller list for half a year, Anne's diary appealed to a sense of hopeful redemption after the inhumanity of the war. One critic wrote that she "brings back a poignant delight in the infinite human spirit."<sup>45</sup> Rachel Apt, in *The Wall*, also has an honest and nurturing spirit which draws other people to her and earns her the nickname of "Little Mother." Deborah Mamorek is yet another innocent girl who grows strong from the persecution which she suffers.

It is worth pausing to note why Anne Frank's diary is included in this discussion of images of the Holocaust. Although this book is not a novel, it shares some of the characteristics of a fictional work: it uniquely

personalizes the Holocaust and it was turned into a play and a film. Also, it was in some ways treated like a novel. One review called the diary part of the "literature of Jewish martyrdom of this age," and another made an explicit comparison with Hersey's novel: "It is in reality the kind of document that John Hersey invented for *The Wall*. . . . The common life effect which Mr. Hersey sought to suggest . . . here follows with utter spontaneity."<sup>46</sup>

The descriptions of Nazi treatment of Jews in the postwar literature came on the heels of wartime press stories that had doubted the evidence of a Holocaust in the making or the unique position of Jews in it.<sup>47</sup> By the time fighting had engulfed Europe and the brutality of Nazi policies was undeniable, news reports about Nazi persecutions still lessened the chance that Americans would feel it was a priority to halt the genocide. First, as the persecution of the Jews became familiar, it was relegated to ever smaller spaces on the inside of papers. Second, as Deborah Lipstadt notes, "the press subsumed Nazi antisemitic policy under the rubric of general wartime suffering." And, finally, Lipstadt argues, the stories of gas chambers and ovens were so shocking that many were reluctant to accept their veracity. When *New York Times* reporter Bill Lawrence wrote an account of his visit to the death camp Maidanek in August 1944, the editors of the paper printed an unprecedented editorial asserting the reliability of Lawrence. Yet, while some reporters might have understood the brutality of the camps after 1944, even by April 1945, when publishers and editors were brought to four liberated camps by Allied commander Dwight D. Eisenhower, they did not recognize that "the fate of the Jews had been unique in both ideology and scope."<sup>48</sup>

The willful ignorance on the part of many Americans about the wartime events in Europe continued in some respects after the slaughter stopped. Many misunderstood the particularly Jewish aspects of the Holocaust, the scope of Hitler's operation, or that antisemitism was endemic to Nazi rule. As *The Nation* observed in early 1948, "the average American does not yet realize how important anti-Semitism was for Adolf Hitler as a weapon in his struggle for world domination."<sup>49</sup> A number of cultural critics have argued that immediately following the war the tragedy was completely universalized in public consciousness and only understood as a campaign of World War II. Tony Kushner observes, "For many years . . . , neither British nor American society was able to come to terms with the specifically antisemitic aspect of the Nazis' extermination programme."<sup>50</sup>

Thus, Kushner and others have argued that the universalizing message of the Holocaust was tied to liberal ideology which opposed "any

form of Jewish separatism, even when the reality of the Nazi extermination programme became clear.” Given the universal rhetoric dominant in the political and popular culture throughout the 1940s, the reluctance to discuss Hitler’s crimes as persecution of the Jews instead of as a violation of universal morality was predictable. Moreover, political leaders and writers feared that any focus on the special fate of the Jews would only fuel the still widespread antisemitism. This fear was borne out by numerous expressions of antisemitism and polls such as a wartime one of American G.I.s, many of whom reported that “Hitler was *partly right* in his treatment of the Jews.” This fear, in turn, strongly affected the universalist tone of Jewish-American literature in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Dorothy Seidman Bilik observes: “Fear of American anti-Semitism and horror at a more virulent German strain contributed to a bland Jewish American fiction that extolled sameness, brotherhood, and caution.”<sup>51</sup>

The failure to highlight the Jewish fate in the Holocaust also reflected a misunderstanding of the details of the Final Solution. To be sure the horror of the Nazi deeds was not lost on the Allied public—on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, when the British first saw newsreels of the camps in April 1945, “Observers at the cinema and in the photographic exhibitions reported the audiences’ and visitors’ stunned silence.” Nevertheless, the implications of the evidence were sometimes ignored. For instance, in the media and government reports on the liberation of Bergen-Belsen, there were few references to Jews, although Jews comprised two-thirds of the prisoners.<sup>52</sup>

Even if many Americans were reluctant to recognize the particularly Jewish side of the Holocaust, the Jewish victims seemed to be defined by their relationship to the Nazis. Tony Kushner concludes, “the victims emerged as a devastated people without a past or a future.” The elevation of victimhood as a symbol of universal martyrdom after the war was, I would argue, of great importance in accelerating the acceptance of Jews as insiders in American culture. Dorothy Seidman Bilik notes that this connection had a powerful effect on the image of the Jew: “During this most tragic decade in Jewish experience, the Jew was universalized and mythologized as a symbol of twentieth century man, a homeless victim in an indifferent universe.”<sup>53</sup>

The widespread reaction to the unfathomable nature of the Holocaust and the tendency to universalize its lessons in public culture seems to belie the idea that the particular characteristics of Jews and their status as victims called for the establishment of Israel as retribution for the Nazis’s actions. Yet, to understand the importance of the Holocaust for

the establishment of the Jewish state, one needs to be reminded that the universalizing and particularizing images of the Jews were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they competed with each other in the public consciousness to widen the support for Israel by appealing to sometimes different constituencies. And, most importantly, while the lessons of the Holocaust may have been broadened and the victims of the crime universalized, Jews were nevertheless predominantly identified as victims in these years. Thus, by this logic, all victims of the Nazis were not Jews, but all Jews were victims. If all Jews are symbols of persecution, they have a particular role in the service of a universal lesson.

Two examples of popular fiction that briefly depicted the aftermath of the Holocaust are the 1947 novel *The Young Lions* and the 1948 film *The Search*.<sup>54</sup> At the end of Shaw's novel, Noah, his friend Michael, and the rest of their company liberate a concentration camp. The men are overcome by the horror of the scene before them:

The smell, by itself, would have been enough to make them silent, but there was also the sight of the dead bodies sprawled at the gate and behind the wire . . .

. . . although the objective appearance of their skull-like faces and their staring, cavernous eyes did not alter very much, either in weeping or smiling. It was as though these creatures were too far sunk in a tragedy which had moved off the plane of human reaction onto an animal level of despair.<sup>55</sup>

The horror of the camp is particularized as a Jewish experience to the extent that Michael is always looking to his stoic friend Noah to try to read his reactions. But Jews are not the only inhabitants of the camp. They are one group among the Poles, Russians, Albanians, and German Communists, and they still seem to be a minority which can be persecuted even here. One Albanian leader of the prisoners tells the American Captain Green that the other prisoners "will not stand for" a Jewish memorial service which a rabbi has requested to hold in the camp.<sup>56</sup> Green furiously gives his guarantee for the safety of the worshippers saying that he will station machine gun placements around the courtyard during the service. Although the Holocaust is treated as a human tragedy which affected everyone, Jews—as a group—are still defined by their status as victims and are in need of protection after the war.

Just as implied in *The Young Lions*, *The Search* also indicates that Americans will have a special role in healing the wounds of World War II. *The Search* is a 1948 film about the tragedy of refugee and orphan children in postwar Europe.<sup>57</sup> Americans are the victorious soldiers as well as

the people who will care for the victims after the shooting has stopped. The United Nations Refugee Relief Agency is an international organization, but it is staffed by many Americans, most prominently a motherly Mrs. Murray. The film, shot on location in the American-occupied zone of Germany, has a serious, semidocumentary tone befitting the subject of refugee children, "one of the saddest, most arresting dramas of our time," wrote critic Bosley Crowther in his review of the film.<sup>58</sup> The opening scene shows relief workers taking displaced children off a train; the camera pans over the sad-looking, frail children as the narrator tells us, "the war is over, but there is still want and misery." When the children are registered at the United Nations Refugee Relief Agency, we meet a French Catholic child, a Polish one, a Jewish child who had to sort the clothes of the gas chamber victims, and a little blond boy who cannot speak a word. In a flashback, we learn that the mute boy, Karel, is from a cultured Czech family; he becomes the focus of the film as he learns to speak once again, and is finally reunited with his mother. The special case of the Jews is, at times, highlighted. One Jewish boy who is scared to reveal his identity pretends to be a Christian until Karel's mother and a kindly priest assure him that he will no longer be persecuted for being Jewish. Nevertheless, a clear choice was made to feature the Czech not the Jewish boy as symbolic of young war victims.

Although *The Search* focuses on the importance of rescuing innocent victims such as these children from the devastation of the war, rescue, by itself, is not enough. In this film, as well as in other fiction and nonfiction accounts of the war and its aftermath, there is a search for meaning in the tragedy. In the case of the Jews, the most visible group of victims, writers, and filmmakers find that meaning in the continuing persecution itself. Thus, it is the fate of Jews to suffer, but in that suffering they are elevated morally and are a beacon for the world. In *The Naked and the Dead*, the Jewish soldier who successfully survives the war, Goldstein, embraces his difference, because he sees it as inescapable. His grandfather told him when he was a boy that Jews "must always journey from disaster to disaster, and it makes us stronger and weaker than other men." Goldstein takes this statement of Jewish survival and difference to heart, and gains strength from it. He is driven forward even when his body is about to collapse by a sense of mission: "Israel [the Jewish people] is the heart of all nations. . . . The conscience and the raw exposed nerve; all emotion passed through it."<sup>59</sup> No other character in the novel has Goldstein's drive to survive even when the futility of the effort seems overwhelming. The sense of moral choseness found in Goldstein became a defining characteristic of Jews and Israelis in subsequent fiction.

*The Naked and the Dead* was written just three years after the end of World War II and the allusions to Jewish endurance in the face of the Holocaust are unmistakable. Already aware of the specifics of the Holocaust, Goldstein is overcome by the tragedy of the Jews's fate: "There was nothing in him now but a vague anger, a deep resentment, and the origins of vast hopelessness." Nevertheless, Goldstein does endure, in part, because he believes that he and other Jews must survive to redeem humankind. Of course, millions of Jews did not survive the war, but their deaths can nevertheless uplift others. In *The Young Lions*, after seeing the horror of the camp and hearing his captain stand up for the right of Jews to hold a memorial service, Noah exalts that "The human beings are going to be running the world!"<sup>60</sup> As Noah asserts this redemption, he is shot by a defeated and dejected Nazi who is wandering alone through the woods. Following Noah's example, Michael finally finds his own courage and shoots the Nazi. The particular mission of the Jews, then, has universal value.

Those who attempt to deny their Jewish identity—whether by assimilation into the larger society or collaboration with the enemy—do not find redemption. Joseph Viertel's Vic, who calls Jewish culture a fiction and refuses to circumcise his son, is an example. John Hersey, in *The Wall*, also emphasizes the importance of taking pride in Jewish identity. One character who does not learn this lesson attempts to smuggle himself out of the ghetto and pass as a Gentile. He is admonished by his rabbi that he cannot shed his Jewish identity so easily: "You are a product of [Judaism's] traditions . . . of humility, . . . of the Torah, of family bonds, . . . above all, of being persecuted. . . . The heritage is in your heart."<sup>61</sup> The rabbi's entreaty conflates Judaism and the history of persecution against the Jews. Yet, he argues, Jews are set apart by more than their status as victims, and their unique qualities are valuable to all people. A similar view is found in contemporary nonfiction rhetoric. For example, in a review of a history of the Jews, critic R. M. MacIver writes: "the ethno-religious system of Judaism expresses the particular *genius* of a people." MacIver and others stressed the universal value of this ethno-religious system.<sup>62</sup>

As in *The Naked and the Dead*, Hersey's Jews are the heart of humankind and the guardians of universal morality. One of the ghetto fighters writes that "we are indeed involved in the struggle of Humanity against anti-Humanity."<sup>63</sup> Such sentiments were expressed in nonfiction as well. Anne Frank wrote of her conviction that Jews serve a moral purpose in the world, and will never be completely a part of any other national group.

Others agreed with Frank. In her introduction to the diary, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote that Anne's words made her aware of the "ultimate shining nobility of [the human] spirit."<sup>64</sup> In *The Wall*, one character tells his fellow ghetto residents that honesty and justice are "implanted in the wandering blood of the Jews." He concludes with a call to celebrate universal humanity, while acknowledging the unique contributions which each group brings to it.<sup>65</sup> Importantly, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, the language of absolute struggle between "Humanity" and "anti-Humanity" paralleled the shrill view found in Cold War rhetoric of a world divided between good and evil. In this dialectic, there was no mistaking on which side the Jews stood.

## CONCLUSION

After the horrors of World War II, most Americans in the late 1940s were persuaded of the moral and practical importance of universalism, the extension of moral concern across and regardless of national or ethnic boundaries. Throughout popular culture and the press, universal values, at home and abroad, represented that which was noble, decent, and civilized. This postwar embrace of universalism led many Americans to reject prejudices, especially antisemitism, in the public culture. Yet, as this chapter has shown, Jews were not merely embraced in the popular culture, because they were just like other Americans. Jews were also depicted as having particular qualities that were valued. The Jew who had been unquestionably an outsider was now becoming an insider, because of his difference, not in spite of it. The new Jews of the popular imagination were similar to other Americans, but they also had special moral lessons to teach their fellows, lessons learned through years of prejudice and the Holocaust.

Thus, the new Jews of early postwar popular culture represented the beginning transformation of Jews from outsiders to insiders; and these images are essential for understanding American attitudes toward the formation of Israel. As the next chapter will discuss, Americans justified their support or opposition to the formation of Israel within the framework of tension between universal and particular identities. The new cultural image of Jews which brought together the two poles of the universal and particular, helped to justify the creation of Israel within the popular and political culture.