

Learning from History and The Holocaust Encyclopedia

reviewed by [Victoria Barnett](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

Two recent books reflect contrasting approaches to the study of the Holocaust. *The Holocaust Encyclopedia* is a good example of what could be called the "macro" approach, which includes generalized histories, lexicons and collections of archival and research findings. This readable one-volume work offers an extensive chronology of historical turning points during the Nazi era, brief descriptions of key events and people, and essays on general topics such as "fascism in Europe" and "illegal immigration." As those headings suggest, the choice of terminology for the subject headings is somewhat idiosyncratic.

A more serious problem is the poor index, which omits basic terms such as "immigration" and "refugees," leaving the hapless reader to leaf through the volume for information on these topics (of which there is actually a great deal). Nor does the index contain any entries for "Christianity," "Judaism," "churches," "Catholic church," "Protestant church," "theology" or "religion"--despite an article by Michael Berenbaum on theological and philosophical responses to the Holocaust, essays on the Catholic and Protestant churches by historian John Conway, and material about Christian and Jewish religious bodies and leaders under other headings. Hence, readers looking for specific information are most likely to find it by means of serendipity, which reduces the book's value as a research tool. Those with time to leaf through the volume will find fine essays by some of the leading experts in the field, and there is a helpful bibliographical essay at the end.

One of the most interesting recent works on the "micro" level of highly detailed studies is Hubert Locke's *Learning from History*. The book is part of the Greenwood series "Christianity and the Holocaust--Core Issues." The only African-American scholar who has written extensively in the field of Holocaust studies, Locke tackles the complex topic of the "similar histories--separate experiences" of the Jews under Nazism and of African slaves and their descendants in the U.S. He doesn't evade any of the hard questions, offering an honest and blunt analysis of topics that many

scholars avoid: the debate about Holocaust "uniqueness," tensions between blacks and Jews in this country, issues of patriotism, attitudes and policies toward "minorities," and the difficulty of doing comparative studies (as an example, Locke discusses Uganda under Idi Amin and Germany under Hitler).

A central theme of the book is Locke's conviction that Americans have a special obligation to study the Holocaust in light of our own history of racial violence. Yet he warns against superficial lessons that ignore the differences between the two histories. As the book's title indicates, he discusses how the Christian experience (particularly that of black Christians) shapes our understanding of the Holocaust and the lessons we take from it. This short, well-written book is a primer on how to approach the complexities of history with respect and courage.