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Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012. 439 pp.

With three biographies of Lillian Hellman (1905–1984) and a fourth work that treats her passionate life with the writer Dashiell Hammett, as well as the playwright’s own three memoirs (*An Unfinished Woman*, *Pentimento*, and *Scoundrel Time*), it is fair to ask why Alice Kessler-Harris, a pioneer of American women’s history, decided to write a new biography of this “difficult woman.” What was so significant about her life as to merit another book? What is at stake in a reassessment of her political and personal commitments? And, perhaps more relevant to these pages: why should historians of the Jews pay attention to figures like Hellman, whose Jewishness was defined primarily by ancestry rather than affiliation? Paraphrasing the title of a classic article on this last question, we (historians of the Jews) might well ask, “Should We Take Notice of Lillian Hellman? Reflections on the Domain of Jewish History.”<sup>1</sup> In my opinion, we should, but not necessarily for the reasons that compelled Kessler-Harris to undertake this biography.

A biography of Lillian Hellman is relevant to modern Jewish history for three main reasons. First, her life intersected with one of the most complex aspects of 20th-century Jewish life: the fateful encounter with Communism particularly and with the Left generally. Second, as a so-called “marginal” Jew, to use Lionel Trilling’s phrase, Hellman represented the *sui generis* ability of Jews in the United States to exit the Jewish community without encountering any significant antisemitism. Third, Hellman’s gender was an essential component in how she negotiated her career in her lifetime, and the significance of her gender is one of the components of her life that is being contested today by historians.

The inclusion of gender and of women as categories of historical analysis has revolutionized modern Jewish historiography since the late 1960s. Several female historians of Jewish origin who were not trained as historians of the Jews *per se* (among them Gerda Lerner, Joan Scott, Natalie Zemon Davis, Linda Gordon, and Kessler-Harris herself) were drawn to the study of radical, progressive, and liminal women, many of whom were also of Jewish origin. These trail-blazing historians also uncovered the neglected histories of women of color and working-class women, highlighting the nexus between left-wing politics and historiographic trends. The study of Hellman, therefore, fits well into David Hollinger’s call for historians of American Jews to pay attention not merely to “communalist” but also to “dispersionist” figures.<sup>2</sup> Hollinger believes that Jewish history in America will be made relevant to American historiography if it is denationalized. In other words, Hellman is important to historians of modern Jewry, of which America is a part, because she represents a type of modern Jew who is marginal to organized Jewish life, central to new, 20th-century forms of modernist cultural production, and engaged with left-wing politics. We could make a long list of individuals of this type on both sides of the Atlantic.

This said, Kessler-Harris’s biography is concerned with other issues, primarily a reassessment of Hellman’s rise and fall in the public eye. In her words: “This then is a book (a biography if you will) about a woman, about the idea of a woman, and about the world that formed and shaped her” (p. 5). The book’s thematic chapters treat Hellman’s brief southern childhood, Hollywood writing successes, complicated sex and love lives, political activism, and financial moxie, among other topics. Yet, ultimately, Kessler-Harris wants to explore why Hellman was valorized early in her life for defying the House Un-American Activities Committee’s badgering in 1952, but was not forgiven by her peers or by historians for her unwillingness to condemn involvement with the Communist party. Hellman justified the purges of the 1930s and had participated in the Popular Front, an international campaign of cooperation with non-Communist, formerly suspicious “bourgeois” parties in the struggle against capitalism. She also ignored Soviet persecution of non-Communist leftists in the Spanish Civil War and supported the Hitler-Stalin pact. In *Pentimento* (1973), she transposed the real-life story of Muriel Gardner, an American anti-fascist activist in prewar Vienna, onto her lifelong friend “Julia,” the subject of a popular film partly based on the book. Famously and damningly, the New York intellectual Mary McCarthy pilloried Hellman on the *Dick Cavett Show* in 1980 for being an unregenerate liar and unrepentant Stalinist. Hellman responded with a life-draining libel suit against McCarthy, which never made it to court. McCarthy’s accusations, however, stuck.

Kessler-Harris wants to give Hellman another hearing. Her book emphasizes that Hellman had a lifelong commitment to fighting fascism and defending civil rights.

She hated bullies, and Joseph McCarthy was the worst of them. Seeking to deflect the preoccupation with Hellman's Communism, Kessler-Harris concludes that "her politics remained a *moral politics* vested in the belief that too much attention was being paid to the Soviets, too little to civil liberties in America" (p. 269, emphasis added). Earlier, she states: "Hellman's moralism (her insistence that she stood for truth, loyalty, antagonism to corruption, commitment to social justice, and racial equalitarianism) may have been her undoing, placing her, as it did, at the fulcrum of ideological disagreement" (p. 10). According to Kessler-Harris, Hellman believed that a better world was possible, and she was dedicated to an "ethic of justice" (p. 102). The problem with these assertions is that Kessler-Harris does not interrogate or historicize her own implicit praise for Hellman's "moral" anti-fascism. What is the meaning of the term "moral politics," and was it the same in the interwar period, during the Second World War, and afterwards? What was moral about justifying Stalin's handing over western Poland—with a Jewish population exceeding 2,000,000—to the Nazis in August 1939? And if much of the evidence of Stalin's authoritarianism was already known to anarchists and socialists soon after he came to power (cf. Emma Goldman's *My Disillusionment in Russia*, 1923), let alone to leftist writers as significant as John Dos Passos, George Orwell, and I.F. Stone, what was moral about her refusal to condemn Soviet terror?

Similarly problematic is Kessler-Harris' failure to distinguish between Communism and socialism. These terms—and the groups associated with them—had rent the international Left from the time of the Bolshevik seizure of power. Kessler-Harris, however, seems to regard them as basically the same: "In 1936 and 1937, the heyday of the Popular Front and the moment when the New Deal seemed to be veering leftward, Hellman found in a broadly defined socialism the value system she held dear. In the Communist party, to which Hammett probably already belonged, she saw the opportunity to oppose fascism and construct a political path for socialism" (p. 121). The historical problem is that fealty to Communism often meant implacable opposition to socialism, most famously exposed by Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*, which describes how supporters of Stalin deliberately fought against non-Communist socialists and anarchists during the Spanish Civil War. Likewise, trade unions in the 1920s had to contend with Communist efforts to "bore from within," a strategy that often pitted the latter against socialist and other left-wing activists. For historians of the Jews, one need look no further than the dissolution of any autonomous forms of Jewish socialism in the Soviet Union as early as 1920.

All biographies, perhaps, run the risk of a certain hagiography. Kessler-Harris's book, oddly, does not paint a particularly flattering portrait of her subject. Hellman's political myopia and stubborn defensiveness sullied her artistic achievements. The evidence from *A Difficult Woman* affirms that Hellman was a fabulist, making up components of her past and willfully forgetting inconvenient episodes in her life. But she was also a highly successful writer, an independent financial actor, a sexual free spirit, and a lifelong advocate of racial justice; for a woman in 20th-century America, these were no small accomplishments. To achieve them, one had to be "difficult."

Hellman's life is significant for U.S. historians and historians of modern Jewry. It illustrates how fundamentally different the stakes were for Communists in the United States as opposed to those living in Europe and thus challenges historians to grapple with American political difference. McCarthyism was symptomatic of the vulnerability

of U.S. democracy to demagogues; at the same time, the blacklist was not the gulag. Hellman's life also confirms the observation that, in the 20th century, Jews were definable as a social type even if they had no ethnic/linguistic/religious or geographic affiliation with other Jews. Their "difference" was palpable. At the same time, notwithstanding the social antisemitism of the 1920s and 1930s, a woman of Hellman's talents and ambition could become almost anything she wanted—a fact that again underscores the distinctiveness of the American Jewish experience.

Finally, Hellman, like many other American Jews, was entranced by the fact that, more than any other self-defined left-wing group, Communists fought for racial inclusivity. Communist Jews, as well as other Jews on the Left and among liberals, believed that fighting racial discrimination compelled the country to honor its founding promise of equality under the law. Expanding the boundaries of civic toleration, as evidenced by the predominance of Jewish women in the feminist movement and of Jews in the emergence of the new social history of the 1970s, is a Jewish story. For all of these reasons, Hellman's life very much fits into the domain of modern Jewish history. She may not have been exemplary, but her life is an exemplar of the range of political and personal options available to Jews in the American diaspora.

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## Notes

1. Ezra Mendelsohn, "Should We Take Notice of Bertha Weill? Reflections on the Domain of Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies (New Series)* 1 (Fall 1994), 22–39.

2. David A. Hollinger, "Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era," *American Jewish History* 95, no.1 (March 2009), 1–32.