Alon Confino presents *Foundational Pasts* as an essay dealing with both the Holocaust and historical methodology. “The Holocaust,” he writes, “makes problems of historical representation especially clear” (60). The ways in which historians have dealt with the Holocaust provide easily identifiable examples of the difficulties involved in defining where major historical events begin and end, what contexts are relevant in explaining them, how much room for contingency there is in their unfolding, and what role culture plays in determining their shape. To make his argument clearer, Confino compares the ways in which historians have approached another “foundational” historical event, the French Revolution, with the ways they have treated the Holocaust.

Although *Foundational Pasts* is certainly not addressed to public historians, the issues Confino raises are not merely of concern to research scholars. Edward Linenthal’s *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum* (2001) is a classic study of how the designers of the Holocaust Memorial Museum’s exhibit grappled with the questions of how to define the event, and what type of explanation of it to propose to the public. Indeed, as this reviewer learned through participation on the advisory council for the New-York Historical Society’s recent exhibition *Revolution! The Atlantic World Reborn*, such enterprises can compel sharp interpretive choices that can be papered over in monographs through evasive formulations and arcane discussions in the footnotes.

Although the issues Confino raises are certainly significant, it is less clear that he has addressed them convincingly. He has tried to avoid writing a review essay on the historiography of the Holocaust, he writes, because other scholars have covered this ground. But in fact the real aim of the book seems to be to present his own interpretation of the subject, rather than to pursue the more abstract question of how historians should approach major historical events. Specialists in Holocaust studies will recognize that Confino is taking aim at a number of the major publications in the field, but he rarely identifies his targets, and even when he does, he provides only the most summary descriptions of their authors’ positions. Thus he cites Saul Friedländer’s *The Years of Extermination* (2007) as an example of what he regards as a regrettable tendency in Holocaust studies to focus too narrowly on the period of mass extermination, from 1941 to 1945 (38), without acknowledging that the book was the sequel to the same author’s *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (1998), a detailed study of the period from 1933 to 1939. Confino is clearly dissatisfied with another of the major works on the subject, Christopher Browning and Jürgen Matthäus’s *The Origins of the Final Solution* (2004), but only readers familiar with the book will recognize his polemic against it (121).

In the end, Confino’s discussion of historiographical issues and his disguised quarrels with other scholars seem designed primarily to clear the way for his
own argument that the Holocaust was the result of a pre-existing conviction among Germans that it was necessary to remove the Jews entirely from their society (140). Confino wants to distinguish his argument from Daniel Goldhagen’s widely rejected claim that longstanding hatred of the Jews made Germans “Hitler’s willing executioners,” both because Confino claims to reject deterministic historical arguments and because he thinks anti-Semitism was just one aspect of a larger complex of beliefs about race that defined the Nazi project. Nevertheless, in the condensed form in which it is presented in this brief essay, Confino’s conclusion suffers from some of the same weaknesses as Goldhagen’s argument. Among other things, he ignores the fact that, in spite of anti-Semitism, Jews had enjoyed considerable success in integrating themselves into German society (during the 1920s, half of all German Jews who married chose non-Jewish partners). He also says nothing about the numerous studies that have concluded that relatively few Germans shared the pathological Jew-hatred of Adolf Hitler and his closest Nazi followers. Ambition, fear, and conformity may explain the behavior of the millions of “ordinary men” and women (to cite the title of Christopher Browning’s influential monograph on German perpetrators) better than the assertion that they were all in the grip of extreme “anti-Semitic hallucinations” (128). The unconvincing nature of Confino’s effort to sketch out a new interpretive paradigm for understanding the Holocaust necessarily weakens the persuasiveness of his argument about historical explanation in general.

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In mid-October 2010, in a courtroom in Rome, Italy, the criminal trial of Marion True, former J. Paul Getty Museum curator, came to an end when the sitting judges accepted a motion to dismiss the case by True’s lawyers. The investigation and trial are described in part of Chasing Aphrodite: The Hunt for Looted Antiquities at the World’s Richest Museum. Readers may be glad to learn, however, that this book is much more than a legal procedural about the True case. The most important aspect of the legal case against True is the information uncovered about looting and antiquities trafficking that led Italian prosecutors to charge True and others. What the investigators uncovered is used by the authors to describe the operation of illegal antiquities trafficking not normally open to scrutiny.

The book’s story is about how some prominent art museums have condoned, or, at best, turned a blind eye to the destruction of archaeological heritage. The authors make the Getty Museum an example, but references to other promi-