Contemporary Issues in Historical Perspective

Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide

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Sites of Nonmemory—Memory without Sites

In many parts of contemporary Eastern Europe one finds today innumerable sites from which vast chunks of history have been completely erased. Those who remember or know of this vanished past find very few physical traces on the ground. Crucial bits of evidence are missing—the sites of the killing, the houses and property of the deported, the bodies of the murdered. To be sure, the bodies, if not burned, are buried in mass graves, usually not far from where the murdered had lived; the property houses those who moved in after the murdered were taken away, and its condition has in many cases hardly changed; the sites of life and of death are generally if vaguely known. But these are not sites of memory, and never were. They are, in fact, sites of forgetting.

The memory of Jewish life and death in many towns and cities in Eastern Europe is therefore detached from the sites in which life was lived and murder perpetrated. Those who remember or know are not there; those who are there neither remember nor know (nor want to know). But the current inhabitants of these sites are hardly indifferent to memory. Indeed, they are engaged in creating their own sites of memory, sites from which the previous inhabitants and victims are blatantly absent, indeed must be absent, so as to facilitate the creation of a new memory, a new history, a new commemorative culture. Especially in such regions as Western Ukraine, the vanished sites of Jewish life and death are rapidly being replaced by one-sided, invented, or expurgated histories of events that either never took place or took place in ways very different from those presently being commemorated.¹

This is a somewhat unexpected condition in a Europe that is awash with talk about memory, commemoration, and representation. It is no less baffling

¹ My book, Erased: Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine (Princeton, NJ, 2007), outlines the history of interethnic relations between Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews; the mass murder of the Jews and the ethnic cleansing of the Poles; and the current politics of memory in twenty towns and cities of the former Eastern Galicia, now a region of Western Ukraine.
because since the early 1990s enormous numbers of hitherto inaccessible documents have become available in archives freed from communist control and censorship. But freedom of information does not prevent its abuse, and liberation from communist dictatorship has also liberated nationalist sentiments, resentments, and prejudices. Moreover, the newly skewed nationalist narratives of the past have not only replaced the previous skewed narratives provided by the communists but have also at times continued to conceal and forget precisely the same elements of that past. Many of those who erased then are erasing now, though with other rationalizations and goals, just as those who remembered then remember now, though their numbers are rapidly diminishing.

Meanwhile, the effects of biology and the erosion of nature, and a certain economic upswing in regions that had preserved some remnants of the past simply because no one had the means either to build new edifices or to destroy the old, are all taking their toll. Soon even the shadow of the shadow of these sites will vanish in concrete form and in the mind’s eye. Yet, despite years of scholarship on memory and commemoration, and after literally millions of pages on the genocide of the Jews, the actual areas in which the murdered lived and in which they were murdered have received and are still receiving little attention both as historical sites and as sites of memory: so much for the cunning of history. Just as astonishing, the recorded voices of those who experienced firsthand the destruction of that world are all too often treated with suspicion or ignored by many members of the historical profession, even as they privilege the ostensibly more objective documents emanating from Nazi files. This, to my mind, can only be seen as another version of the betrayal of the historians. In what follows I try, as briefly as possible, to outline some of the main issues entailed in this conundrum concerning the relationship between memory and site, documentation and forgetting, professional conventions and historical responsibility.

**BIFURCATED SCHOLARSHIP**

One of the more curious aspects of the historiography of the Holocaust is the relationship between the site on which the genocide of the Jews was perpetrated and the main focuses of historical research. For many decades, the most influential historical monographs written on the Holocaust focused on two types of protagonists: the perpetrators and the victims. The main perpetrators were of course the Germans, even if they were assisted by a variety of collaborators. Hence, research on the perpetrators linked them to the history of Germany and the evolution of Jewish policies by the Nazi regime.2 Con-

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2 Uwe Dietrich Adam, *Judenpolitik im Dritten Reich*, 2nd ed. (Düsseldorf, 2003);
versely, though the majority of the Jewish victims were in fact from Eastern Europe, scholars were more interested in their fate once they had been enclosed in ghettos and camps. From this perspective, it did not matter where the Jews came from, since they were supposedly cut off from the surrounding population.³

The result of this bifurcated Holocaust scholarship has been that Eastern Europe—even as it was recognized both as containing the largest concentration of Jews in the world and as the site of their mass murder—remained a largely uncharted territory for the most prominent historians of the Holocaust.⁴

It was quite possible to study the bureaucracy and administration of the “final solution” with almost no knowledge of such crucial countries as Poland. The languages, history, politics, and relations between different ethnic groups and denominations, as well as the prevalence and influence of antisemitism in the lands of Eastern Europe, received scant attention in such works. That there was in fact a growing mass of scholarship especially on Polish-Jewish relations before and during the Holocaust did not seem to have much of an effect on the grand narrative tradition of Holocaust historiography or on the major trends of interpretation and historical perspectives.⁵ In some ways, this neglect


⁵ Jan Tomasz Gross, Polish Society under German Occupation: The Generalgouvernement, 1939–1944 (Princeton, NJ, 1979); Ezra Mendelsohn, The Jews of East Central Europe between the World Wars (Bloomington, IN, 1983); Yisrael Gutman et al., eds., The Jews of Poland between Two World Wars (Hanover, NH, 1989); Stefan
of the peoples on whose territory genocide was enacted paralleled the inclination to write the history of the Holocaust with its victims left out. Thus many historians felt that while it was incumbent on them to reconstruct the decision-making process in the German leadership and possibly also to investigate the motivation of lower-ranking killers, no knowledge of the exterminated Jewish populations was necessary in order to explain the event. And, indeed, once the victims could be ignored, there was little reason to be interested in the relationship between the victims and their gentile neighbors, since the latter seemed to matter even less than the Jews in explaining the process of implementing genocide.

Presented in this manner, the historiography of the Holocaust—often seen as richer and more innovative, sophisticated, and varied than that of any other modern genocide—appears astonishingly narrow and constrained. The Holocaust, after all, was an international project, taking place as it did across an entire continent, involving the registration, systematic despoliation, transfer, incarceration, and murder of millions of citizens residing in the European countries occupied by or allied with Nazi Germany. Implementing this genocide thus entailed intricate negotiations between governments, complex bureaucratic and administrative arrangements, coordination between law enforcement agencies and military authorities, and the introduction of economic measures for looting and distributing property as well as for the exploitation of helpless forced labor. The material benefits of mass murder bought off the domestic German population, paid for the killing of those whose assets were robbed, financed much of the occupation of foreign lands, and bribed or silenced the occupied populations that resented foreign rule but enjoyed the

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material benefits of genocide. Such exploitation and manipulation linked in myriad ways entire European populations that became exposed to, complicit in, or resistant to the systematic murder of a people. Add to this the obvious though long-underestimated fact that the Holocaust cannot be understood without tracing its imagery, fantasies, passions, and phobias, as well as practices and legislation, to medieval Europe and centuries of Christian anti-Jewish theology, incitement, and demagogy. The resulting powerful imaginaire was doubtless shared to a greater or lesser degree by the vast majority of Europeans.

Hence the very idea that a historian could presume to write the history of the Holocaust without much knowledge of the cultures, languages, traditions, and politics of the people that was murdered, or of the peoples in whose midst the killing took place, or of the lands in which the majority of the victims had resided is truly remarkable. And yet, this is probably the single most obvious characteristic, the most easily identifiable common denominator, of the scholarship on the Holocaust. In a certain sense, this one-sided view of the event reveals much more about the scholars involved in reconstructing it than about the nature of the event itself, although it is also related to the enormous geographical scale of this genocidal undertaking. Conversely, while those works that do focus on the victims often pay a great deal of attention to Jewish culture, traditions, responses to genocide, and the struggle to survive, they rarely examine in any detail the relationship between Jewish populations and


their local gentile surroundings. Generalizing assertions about gentile anti-semitism or rescue, collaboration or resistance, can be found both in accusatory and in apologetic works; but systematic analyses of the triangular relationship between Jews, local gentiles, and the German perpetrators are quite rare. Testimonies and other personal accounts are normally employed as anecdotal evidence rather than being subjected to a more rigorous examination and thus, unsurprisingly, tend to sustain otherwise contradictory interpretations. The fact that the mass of the gentile population was often hardly a unified bloc, but was divided into different and not seldom conflicting ethnic groups, religious affiliations, and classes (related in large part to the differences between the urban and rural populations), is again often missed in this literature.

This is not to say that there has been no East European scholarship on the Holocaust. But this literature has suffered from two related problems. First, for many years after the end of World War II the division of the continent into two blocs made it exceedingly difficult to do research in the archives of Eastern Europe. This limitation was felt both by West European and by East European scholars. Moreover, the communist narrative of the war left no room for the unique fate of the Jews during the Nazi occupation, instead folding it into the general narrative of “fascist” crimes and the victimization of the nation’s citizens. In order to legitimize the establishment of alleged socialism—which became for all practical purposes nothing but communist dictatorships—in Eastern Europe, it was necessary to describe the majority of the population as innately antifascist. The very idea that there might have been any kind of popular complicity in the genocide of the Jews, let alone that antisemitic sentiments remained close to the surface in the postwar period,

was anathema to the communist regimes established in Eastern Europe and unacceptable in the Soviet Union. Indeed, precisely because this heritage was not discussed and aired even as evidence of its reality was still visible for all to see, outbreaks of antisemitism in such countries as Poland continued after the war, both in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, as in the cases of the pogroms in Cracow and Kielce, and decades later, when antisemitism was used as a political tool by the Gomułka regime in 1968.10

Second, Eastern Europe, whether in its new guise as the communist part of the continent or in its previous incarnation as the continent’s more backward region—often seen by its neighbors to the west as at best only tenuously European—simply did not seem to merit any serious scholarly attention in discussions over the history and memory of the Holocaust.11 Vehement scholarly controversies over this or that aspect of the Holocaust were peculiarly silent about Eastern Europe, exhibited a general indifference to the scholarship produced there, and remained reluctant to examine the role of East European countries in the complex matrix of continent-wide genocide.12 Conversely, even as such countries as Poland began looking into their past in a more critical manner, the often heated debates conducted there were hardly echoed in the West.13 If we examine, for instance, the main proponents of the influential “intentionalist” and “functionalist” schools, as well as their primary research focuses, we find that neither the languages of Eastern Europe (Slavic, Baltic, Hungarian, Romanian, or Jewish) nor their histories and interethnic


11 In this context, see Larry Wolff, Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment (Stanford, CA, 1994).

12 Thus, for instance, the first scholarly study of the Holocaust in Slovakia has only recently been published: Tatjana Töösmeyer, Das Dritte Reich und die Slowakai, 1939–1945: Politischer Alltag zwischen Kooperation und Eigensinn (Paderborn, 2003).

relations played any role in the articulation of such theories. It was as if the Holocaust had happened on another planet, rather than in the heart of (Eastern, or East-Central) Europe.

It should be added that especially among Jewish historians the early post-war generation in fact included many scholars who had an intimate knowledge of the regions in which the Holocaust was perpetrated, not least because they often came from there, either shortly before the war or as survivors of the Shoah. But the impact of the scholarship written by these historians on the contextualization of genocide within the social milieu of the victims is open to question. This has to do with several factors. First, some of these historians became associated with Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, an institution that especially in its early years perceived itself as committed to the pursuit of the political-ideological goals of Zionism even as it asserted that objective research on the Holocaust would inevitably serve to legitimize the Zionist worldview. Whatever one might think of this observation, it clearly established a very narrow prism through which to observe the Holocaust and its sociocultural context.

15 Prominent examples include Yehuda Bauer, Yisrael Gutman, Raul Hilberg, and Saul Friedländer.
16 Dan Michman, “Is There an Israeli School in Holocaust Research?” unpublished paper delivered at the conference “Holocaust Research in Context: The Emergence of Research Centers and Approaches,” Yad Vashem, November 21–24, 2004; Boaz Cohen, “Holocaust Research in Israel, 1945–1980: Trends, Characteristics and Developments” [in Hebrew] (PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2004). The Israeli Minister of Education, Ben Zion Dinur, professor of Jewish history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, played a leading role in formulating the law that established Yad Vashem in 1953 by an act of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament). Dinur had a clearly Zionist understanding of the Holocaust. This view was articulated even during the event itself, and was repeated in Dinur’s book, *Remember: Essays on the Shoah and Its Lessons* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1958), 18–19: “Did this evil come to us all of a sudden? Have we not dwelled for many generations on smoking volcanoes? Whenever the earth trembles under our feet and the volcanoes spit out the lava that decimates us, we are astonished and bewildered, because we have shut our eyes from seeing and have repeatedly declared that the volcanoes have long been dead. . . . And this is a severe and terrible indictment to us all, to the people, the generation, and each and every one of us.” See further in Roni Stauber, *Lesson for This Generation: Holocaust and Heroism in Israeli Public Discourse in the 1950s* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2000), 75–78. Further in David N. Myers, “Between Diaspora and Zion: History, Memory, and the Jerusalem Scholars,” in *The Jewish Past Revisited: Reflections on Modern Jewish Historians*, ed. David N. Myers and David B. Ruderman (New Haven, CT, 1998), 88–103, and “History as Ideology: The Case of Ben Zion Dinur, Zionist Historian ‘Par Excellence,’” *Modern Judaism* 82 (May 1988): 166–93; Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1991), 412–31.
Second, thanks to their background and their experiences, some of these scholars shared the prejudices of the regions from which they came. In other words, intimate knowledge also brought with it shared views and biases. Whether it had to do with resentment against Polish gentiles or against traditional Jews, such preconceptions imported from the “old world” could be detrimental to a more balanced and nuanced view of the social context of the Holocaust.¹⁷ Third, for reasons that must be both objective and psychological, several scholars of this generation were greatly influenced by German historiography on Nazism and the Holocaust.¹⁸ This is all the more striking because these historians often disagreed with their German colleagues, not least because German historians offered a radically different view of the Holocaust and its interpretation and were openly suspicious of “Jewish” scholarship on the event in general and especially of its perceived focus on the experience of the victims.¹⁹ Still, not unlike their German counterparts, Jewish scholars of the older generation rarely investigated the triangular relationship between Jews, local gentiles, and Germans.

The focus of Yad Vashem on the Jewish experience led to the production of important works in Jewish history, and in that respect its historians distinguished themselves sharply from German historians.²⁰ But the belief of German historians—of both the older and younger generations—that their work constituted a paradigm of objective and professional scholarship, and their reluctance to examine distinct interethnic relations on the ground as an important factor in reconstructing and understanding the Holocaust, greatly influenced both the older and the younger generation of Jewish historians as well. And as the generation that traced its roots to the scene of the massacre slowly exited the scene, the younger men and women who took over were generally far less familiar with Eastern Europe and lacked the requisite linguistic skills, even as many of them both maintained strong biases against

¹⁷ For the debate over Hilberg’s views on Jewish complicity during the Holocaust and the rejection of the first edition of his book, The Destruction of the European Jews, by Yad Vashem, as well as the debate over Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (New York, 1963), see Omer Bartov, Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity (New York, 2000), 129–32. See also note 72 below.

¹⁸ This is of course the case with Arendt and Hilberg but can also be seen, however counterintuitive it may seem, in the admiration for German scholarship expressed by both older and younger researchers at Yad Vashem as well as of other institutions of higher learning in Israel.

¹⁹ Nicolas Berg, Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung (Göttingen, 2003); Peter Baldwin, ed., Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Debate (Boston, 1990), 77–134.

Eastern Europe, especially Poland, and remained fascinated with Germany. The “land of the perpetrators” seemed much more interesting than the land in which genocide was perpetrated; and the scholarship produced there provided a much more attractive model. For a long time, then, the German perpetrator drew much more attention than the Eastern Jew or his gentile neighbor.

OPENING PANDORA’S BOX

This situation has begun to change, especially after the fall of communism. The two conditions that worked against linking the history of the Holocaust with that of Eastern Europe (and, more generally, linking the history of West-Central Europe with that of East-Central Europe) no longer existed. First, access to East European and Russian archives became much more readily available, although in the latter case access has once more become increasingly restricted. Second, and related to the greater availability of sources, Western views of Eastern Europe as a place of little interest have been transformed. Many younger West European, American, and Israeli scholars have turned their attention to the “dark side” of the continent and discovered mountains of unexamined files, a long string of unanswered—and quite often also unasked—questions, and, not least, encountered a new generation of East European scholars eager to collaborate with them. Communist taboos over approaching the “Jewish question,” researching the Holocaust as an event distinct from the war, and discussing the fate of Jewish victims separately from that of other victims of Nazism were gradually lifted. Meanwhile, a growing consensus in Western Europe on the centrality of the Holocaust culminated in a resolution by the European Parliament calling upon all member countries to commemorate and teach the event. This decision transformed the preoccupation with the Holocaust—already quite visible in much of West-Central Europe—into a precondition for entry into the European Union, a major political goal for most of the countries just emerging from decades of communist rule.21

All this would have been very good news for the historiography of the Holocaust had many of the old prejudices, biases, and constraints not been transferred more or less intact to this new era. Moreover, this all-too-smooth transition was accompanied by the resurfacing of a much older and deeper layer of images and memories that the previous communist regimes had suppressed for many decades. Here was the conundrum: as long as the communists ruled, they did not allow any open discussion of the fate of the

Jews, even as they often pursued antisemitic policies. Once the communists were gone, the renewed public preoccupation with the Jews opened up the Pandora’s box that the communists had kept tightly sealed. In such countries as Germany and France, the eventual exposure of the myths and legends of the past had largely discredited those myths; but Eastern Europe’s stale old demons sought out a new, young constituency lacking personal memories of a murderous past and relying on sparse and often distorted historical knowledge. Streamlined and adjusted to contemporary circumstances, these indefatigable fabrications and conspiracy theories forged another link between the old and the new. This, too, has revealed the urgent necessity of including Eastern Europe in any new discussion of the Holocaust.

This need was of course most clearly demonstrated in the case of Jan Gross’s study Neighbors and the debate that raged around it in Poland. Gross insisted on the Polish-Jewish aspect of the Holocaust, whereas scholarship in general has stressed the direct link between Germans and Jews as the only one worth pursuing. The scandal of revealing a massacre of Jews by their Polish neighbors was that it transformed innocent or at least indifferent bystanders into perpetrators, neighbors into killers, and Polish citizens—traditionally seen as both heroic resisters and innocent victims—into tools of Nazi genocidal policy.22 The debate was also quite curious because the story of Jedwabne was hardly unknown, and instances of participation by local East European populations in the mass murder of the Jews were well documented.

22 References to the Jews as anti-Polish and pro-Soviet were made during the Jedwabne debate as part of an explanation of the Polish motivation for massacring Jews, even though, as Gross has shown, many of the collaborators with the Nazis were Polish Catholics who had previously collaborated with the Soviets. See the conflicting accounts in Elazar Barkan, Elizabeth A. Cole, and Kai Struve, eds., Shared History—Divided Memory: Jews and Others in Soviet-Occupied Poland, 1939–1941 (Göttingen, 2007). See also Shore, “Conversing with Ghosts”; Polonsky and Michlic, The Neighbors Respond. Compare also the perceptive and well-informed article by William W. Hagen, “Before the ‘Final Solution’: Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland,” Journal of Modern History 68, no. 2 (1996): 351–81, with the apologetic account of the antisemitic Polish National Democratic Party (Endecja or Endek) in Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, “Affinity and Revulsion: Poland Reacts to the Spanish Right, 1936–1939 (and Beyond),” in Spanish Carlism and Polish Nationalism: The Borderlands of Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries, ed. Marek Jan Chodakiewicz and John Radziłowski (Charlottesville, VA, 2003), 51–56. Compare also the extraordinarily obfuscating account of anti-Jewish pogroms in postwar Poland in the appropriately titled chapter, “Unknown Perpetrators and Murky Circumstances,” in Chodakiewicz, After the Holocaust, 159–76, to the detailed, well-documented, and precise account in Gross, Fear, esp. chaps. 3–4. And see the critique of Marek Chodakiewicz, Żydzi i Polacy, 1918–1955: Współistnienie—zagłada—komunizm (Warsaw, 2000), and other related books in Connelly, “Poles and Jews in the Second World War.”
and increasingly available to the public.\textsuperscript{23} Beyond exposing the lies and obfuscations of generations of historians, intellectuals, politicians, and the media, Gross also struck a powerful blow at the very category of “bystander.”\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, it was precisely in such regions as Eastern Europe—where Jewish populations were dense, killing was massive, and non-Jews were also threatened and often brutalized by violence, prejudice, and poverty—that the slippage from bystander to perpetrator, from passivity to participation, from empathy to profit taking was too great to warrant the use of this term as anything more than an apologetic turn of phrase.

Here is another curious aspect of Eastern Europe’s centrality as the site of the Holocaust. The late 1990s saw two important and painful debates: both focused on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, and in both the dispute was between those who condemned the newly identified perpetrators for the mass murder of the Jews and those who blamed the Soviets and their alleged Jewish collaborators for bringing violence upon themselves in retaliation for their own brutalities during the Soviet occupation of 1939–41. The Jedwabne debate undermined the myth of Polish innocence, heroism, and martyrdom; the Wehrmacht debate shattered the legend of the German army’s purity of arms and detachment from Nazi ideology and genocide.\textsuperscript{25} The argument over


\textsuperscript{24} On the conventional three categories of the Holocaust, see Raul Hilberg, \textit{Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945} (New York, 1992).

\textsuperscript{25} On the Wehrmacht debate see Omer Bartov, Atina Grossman, and Mary Nolan, eds., \textit{Crimes of War: Guilt and Denial in the Twentieth Century} (New York, 2002); Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., \textit{War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944} (New York, 2000); Hamburg Institute for Social Research, ed., \textit{The German Army and Genocide: Crimes against War Prisoners, Jews and Other Civilians in the East, 1939–1944}, trans. Scott Abbott with Paula Bradish (New York, 1999). The “Wehrmacht Exhibition” that set off the public debate in Germany on the complicity of the Wehrmacht in massive war crimes and genocide similarly did not reveal anything that had not already been published by historians; it merely exposed the known facts in public spaces to hundreds of thousands of German and
the Wehrmacht’s complicity in genocide concerned Eastern Europe only to the extent that the events on which it focused occurred in the east; it was very much a confrontation with German identity, guilt, and generational conflict. The fact that the atrocities carried out in those towns were also perpetrated by (mostly Ukrainian but also Polish) local citizens was merely an aspect of the German debate.

Conversely, the Jedwabne controversy was directly about the relationship between the site of genocide and those who carried it out and profited from it; it too was crucially about identity, self-image, and the sustaining but false narrative of the past. But the new narrative introduced Poles—and by extension other East Europeans—into the Holocaust as active protagonists rather than as passive bystanders, victims, or resisters. From this perspective, the Jedwabne debate was far more important to rewriting the Holocaust than the Wehrmacht controversy.

Finally, just as the Jedwabne debate seems to have had little effect on the German historiography of the Holocaust, so the debate on the Wehrmacht exhibition seems to have had little effect on the scholarship of the Holocaust in Ukraine. Indeed, in the town of Złoczów (Zolochiv), where one of the massacres shown at the exhibition occurred, the historical exhibit remains unchanged, portraying Ukrainians as victims of the Bolsheviks and not mentioning anywhere the massacre of the Jewish population of the town by their own neighbors—a massacre whose scale was in fact much larger than that of Jedwabne.26


26 Bernd Boll, “Złoczów, July 1941: The Wehrmacht and the Beginning of the Holocaust in Galicia: From a Criticism of Photographs to a Revision of the Past,” in Bartov et al., Crimes of War, 61–99; Delphine Bechtel, “De Jedwabne à Zolotchiv: Pogromes locaux en Galicie, juin–juillet 1941,” in Cultures d’Europe Centrale, vol. 5, La destruction de confins, ed. Delphine Bechtel and Xavier Galmiche (Paris, 2005), 69–92. For a revisionist view of the events in the region in June–July 1941, see Bogdan Musial, “Konterrevolutionäre Elemente sind zu erschossen”: Die Brutalisierung des deutsch-sowjetischen Krieges im Sommer 1941 (Berlin, 2000). In a visit to Zolochiv (Złoczów) in April 2007 I found a memorial to the Jewish community located at what used to be the Jewish cemetery—from which virtually all the stones had been removed—at precisely the opposite end of the town from the castle where the exhibition was to be found and where the Jews who were forced to exhume the bodies
COMMUNAL MASSACRE

How then can we bring Eastern Europe into the historiography of the Holocaust in a manner that will both contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the event and at the same time link together several historiographies that have long been either entirely separated from each other or have only intersected at moments of dispute and controversy? Can we understand the relationship between the Holocaust and Eastern Europe not merely from the geographical perspective of a region that happened to be the site of genocide but also by investigating the local circumstances and specific nature of mass killing in a territory where the majority of Europe’s Jews had lived for centuries in mixed ethnic and religious communities? Finally, to what extent is our understanding of this explosion of violence influenced by the fact that it brought about a drastic transformation of the region through extermination, ethnic cleansing, and deportations, re-creating it as an ethnically homogeneous space with little notion of its own rich heritage, while catapulting the survivors of other ethnic and religious groups to virtually all corners of the earth?

In this context it bears repeating that the vast majority of European Jewry was murdered in Poland, and that the vast majority of those killed were East European and Russian Jews. Furthermore, approximately half of those murdered did not die in extermination camps. Over 600,000 Jews died in large and small ghettos scattered throughout German-occupied Eastern Europe. Many of the rest, however, were killed in mass executions at or near their places of residence. These were open-air events, often watched by the gentile population. Even when the shootings were conducted at some distance from the towns—in forests, or cemeteries, or quarries—the brutal roundups (Aktionen or akcje), in which the old and the sick were dragged, humiliated, beaten, and shot, girls and women were raped, and babies were thrown out of balconies and windows or had their skulls smashed against walls, all took place in public view. Nor was everyone simply watching as the Gestapo and

of prisoners executed by the NKVD were subsequently murdered and apparently buried in an unmarked mass grave under the newly renovated grounds of the castle. For recent important studies on the German occupation of Ukraine and the genocide of the Jews there, see Karel C. Berkhoff, Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule (Cambridge, MA, 2004); Wendy Lower, Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005); Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, eds., The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization (Bloomington, IN, 2008).
SS, along with numerous collaborationist auxiliary troops and local police, did their work. For here was an opportunity to rob the corpses of the murdered, loot their homes or shelters, or take over their businesses.

Despite the increasingly common—and disturbingly comforting—image of the Holocaust as an event of impersonal, “clean,” and distant industrial murder, hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of Jews, the majority of whom were children, women, the sick, and the elderly, were murdered in full view of the populations in whose midst they had lived: in Eastern Poland, the Baltic states, Ukraine, and Western Russia. The Holocaust in these regions was therefore very much a communal genocide that left its imprint on all surviving inhabitants of these localities (much more so, it seems, than on the Germans). The impact of these extraordinarily savage massacres carried over both to people’s daily existence and to their memories. This was a very different situation from that of Germany or occupied Western Europe, since there the Jews were “simply” transported to the “East.” Most of the deportees never came back, and the few who did often could not or would not tell what the “East” had been like, and in any case rarely found anyone willing to listen.27 Conversely, the people of Eastern Europe, Jews and gentiles alike, were direct witnesses to a genocide that was so much a part of routine daily life as to appear almost “normal.” Genocide was part of their war, their reality, their survival, whether it targeted or spared them. Here large numbers of Jewish victims were not taken away to a foreign land whose language they did not speak and whose landscapes they did not recognize. They were slaughtered in front of family members, friends, and colleagues, in the cemeteries where their ancestors were buried, on the forested hills where they had dated their lovers or picnicked with their children, in the synagogues in which they had prayed, in their own homes and farms and cellars.28

Nor could many of the people who filled the void and moved into the homes of the murdered be described as strangers. Even sixty years later some elderly residents, when prompted, would still remember the names of those who had

28 For a detailed account of one such public massacre in an East Galician town, known as “the bloody Sunday of Stanisławów” (now the city of Ivano-Frankivs’k in Western Ukraine), from various perspectives, see Pohl, Nationalsozialistische Judenverfolgung, 144–47; Sandkühler, “Endlösung” in Galizien, 150–52; Elisabeth Freundlich, Die Ermordung einer Stadt namens Stanislaw: NS-Vernichtungspolitik in Polen, 1939–1945 (Vienna, 1986), 154–64; Avraham Liebesman, With the Jews of Stanisławów in the Holocaust [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1980), 22–31.
once lived in this or that house (although rarely identifying their own home as looted property). Some could recount the circumstances of their neighbors’ murder in detail, and one could not but wonder about the original inhabitants of such witnesses’ own houses and much of their contents—the down blankets covering their beds, the pots and dishes in their kitchens, even the pictures on the walls. What is the psychological effect of living in stolen property for generations, sitting on the chairs, sleeping in the beds, and eating from the dishes of the murdered, while all along retaining a vivid memory of their eviction and execution? For this is the nature of a communal massacre, which by definition constitutes the precise opposite of the Nazis’ most notorious invention, industrial, impersonal genocide. One must assume that the ancient Biblical question, “have you both murdered and inherited?” cannot have entirely escaped the minds of those who remained in the newly cleansed towns and villages of Eastern Europe, and that it would eventually come back to haunt them. For communal massacre may not only devastate the lives of the victims but also spoil and distort the spirits of all who witness it, precisely because in reality no one is a passive observer: one is either killed or survives, is either hunter or prey, is either lost or makes a profit. To the sheer, hardly imaginable horror of those years must be added the moral contamination, the guilt and the rage, the shame and the terror, the self-deception and denial that have seeped through the generations and are still infusing the way in which people remember, speak, and write about the past.

This perspective on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe reminds us how intimate genocide can be, how personal, and therefore also how traumatic and simultaneously how profitable it can be for those who come into contact with it. Indeed, such a view of genocide teaches us—as I have noted above—that the category of “bystander” that has become so common in recent years is basically meaningless in situations of communal genocide, just as such attitudes as indifference and passivity do not actually exist under these circumstances. For what does it mean to be indifferent to the murder of your classmates under your own windows? What does it imply to be passive when you hear the shots and screams from the nearby forest, or when you move into the apartment vacated by those you have just heard being executed? Is using your neighbor’s silverware a sign of indifference? Does tearing out the floorboards to look for their hidden gold indicate passivity, complicity, or just greed?

That the murders were part of everyday life is evident from numerous testimonies. One witness reported six decades after the event: “I remember well how the Hitlerites committed crimes against the Jews, how they buried them alive on the Fedir hill, and how those people dug their own graves. From the street where I live (which is situated opposite that hill) I could see how the
ground was moving over the people who were still not dead.” 29 Another witness recounted, at the same distance of time:

One day . . . something drew us to a window [in the school] that faced the town center, the municipal hall. And what did we see? In the middle of the main street a crowd was going around the municipal hall towards the bridge over the Strypa [River]. Gendarmes with dogs, Gestapo and militia with hexagonal stars surrounded the crowd, hurrying it toward the Fedir hill. What a horrible sight it was! There were women, men, old people and young—our schoolmates and friends. They were beautiful and wise, well brought-up, and young; they might have lived, loved and worked. . . . They were our neighbors and strangers, but they were people! And they were led with dogs so that nobody would fall behind the crowd! Even now my heart breaks when I recall that day! 30

The sheer horror and intimacy of the killings is vividly portrayed by this witness. While everyone was a victim of a brutal occupation, some went to school, while others went to their deaths:

From about the fall of 1942 to the end of 1943 they [the Germans] would hold akcja-shootings, always on Fridays. But they would start on Tuesday: on Tuesday evening the Jewish militia would collect jewels and other valuable things . . . [as bribes from people seeking to escape massacre]. On Thursday evening the [Germans] would come [from nearby Czortków, the local Gestapo headquarters]. . . . They looked really horrible—they had a metal shield . . . on their breasts . . . [which] hung from a metal chain. . . . On their heads they had high black hats with a skull and crossed bones. By their appearance they really resembled demons from hell. They would “act” or “work” all night, and the next morning as we were running to school we could see the results of their work: corpses of women, men, and children lying on the road. As for infants, they would throw them from balconies onto the paved road. And they were lying in the mud with smashed heads and spattered brains. . . . It was not hard to guess what was happening on the Fedir hill: we could hear machine-gun fire accompanied by the drone of engines. But this only intensified the sound of the shooting instead of drowning it. 31

There is, however, another side to such an exploration of the Holocaust on the local level in Eastern Europe’s mixed ethnic communities. For while the majority of the Jews living in such towns and villages perished, and were often denounced by the population and not infrequently murdered by local collaborators, the few who did survive were almost invariably helped by gentiles. Indeed, it was virtually impossible to survive without being given

29 Julija Mykhailivna Trembach, written on her behalf by her daughter, Roma Nestorivna Kryvenchuk, collected by Mykola Kozak, translated from Ukrainian by Sofia Grachova, speaking of Buczacz in Eastern Galicia, now Western Ukraine, in 2003.

30 Maria Mykhailivna Khvostenko (née Dovhanchuk), interviewed by Mykola Kozak, translated from Ukrainian by Sofia Grachova, speaking of Buczacz in Eastern Galicia, now Western Ukraine, in 2003.

31 Ibid.
shelter and food by the non-Jews. Only the most sturdy and courageous, mostly young men and women, who decided to live on their own in the forests and became partisans after a manner, could survive without such help from gentiles, and instead often subsisted on supplies stolen or robbed from villagers. But most of these groups of partisans were also killed, whether by the Germans and their collaborators or by other non-Jewish partisans.32

Further complicating this view of the Holocaust from below is the fact that in many cases precisely the same people who sheltered Jews ended up also denouncing them, at times even murdering them with their own hands. The motivation for offering shelter in the first place was complex. Some did so out of sheer kindness and altruism; others out of greed. Others still felt some sense of loyalty or duty toward those they were helping or members of their family. But sheltering people was dangerous and feeding them was a great hardship. When those in hiding ran out of money, or when it seemed that they might be betrayed by someone else, the solution was often either to send them away or to denounce them, so as not to be accused of sheltering Jews and risk brutal punishment. In many cases, real or putative rescuers were much more afraid of their own neighbors than of the Germans. Unlike the Germans, who could rarely tell one local from another, the inhabitants of small farming communities or little towns immediately recognized strangers and could often also detect changes in their neighbors’ behavior indicating that they might be hiding someone. Denunciations could be construed as revenge for some offense or perceived injury by the rescuers; they might be motivated by an expectation of payment from the Germans; they could be part of a bid intended to frighten those still in hiding into paying larger bribes to potential informers; or they could stem from envy of the perceived profits made by those courageous or greedy enough to risk sheltering Jews.

A testimony given by a seventeen-year-old Jewish lad in 1947 provides a vivid description of this dynamic:

The [Jews] who were hiding with peasants paid high sums of money for their shelters, and the simple-minded peasants went to town and bought large amounts of whatever they wanted. The peasants became jealous of each other, and this made the work for the Ukrainian murderers all the easier. They followed those peasants, found where they lived, set out on searches, and found Jews in attics, cellars, and so forth. After they found these victims they shot them on the spot in the peasants’ courtyards. This set off large-scale denunciations. The peasants themselves started killing the Jews or expelling them, because there were various rumors that whoever was found sheltering a Jew would be executed along with his family and his house would be burned down. The peasants believed this and tried to get rid of their Jews by all means, and in this manner made the work of the murderers all the easier. The Jewish fighters [a partisan group in

32 See, for instance, the account by Eliasz Chalfen (Elijahu Chalfon), Yad Vashem Archives, M1/E 1559 (in Polish), and 03/8553 (in Hebrew), October 21, 1947.
the forest] could do nothing against this. Their own lives became difficult, because at
the time all kinds of gangs were established, such as the Ukrainian bands (the Bandera
men ["Banderowcy" or "Banderivtsy"] and the Polish units (A.K. [Armia Krajowa, or
Home Army]), and especially the German-Ukrainian police, which did all it could to
destroy the fighting Jewish group.33

THE ECONOMY OF GENOCIDE

Recent research has shown the crucial role played by property and capital in
the implementation of the Holocaust.34 It has been suggested that to a large
extent the mass looting of the Jews actually funded not only their mass murder
but also Germany’s occupation policies, by facilitating mass bribery of the
occupied populations with stolen Jewish property and goods as the price of
their submission to foreign rule. It is also said to have contributed significantly
to the acquiescence of the German public with the policies of the regime. Not
surprisingly, this vast plunder operation also constituted a major element of
postwar policies and agreements. Various restitution agreements have also
had to contend with compensation for stolen material goods.35 But at the same
time, the immense quantities of Jewish property that fell into the hands of the
inhabitants of Eastern Europe also inhibited discussions on restitution. During
the communist era, the issue was hardly even raised. But following the fall of
communism, fears were expressed that demands for the return of looted
property or compensation for its theft would cripple the countries and econ-
omies in question and destroy the lives of untold thousands of people living
in stolen homes. Indeed, one cannot begin to understand attitudes toward
Jews, the Holocaust, restitution, and reconciliation in Eastern Europe without
taking into account the alarm caused by the imagined threat of material
deprivation, combined as it often is with the insecurity produced by the vague
notion of living in stolen property. It is only through the prism of Eastern
Europe that we can realize how crucial both the reality and the fantasy of
property were in the impoverished towns and villages of this region, where
even at the height of prosperity before World War I people’s expectations of

33 Ibid.
34 See note 7 above. See also Frank Bajohr, “Aryanisation” in Hamburg: The
Economic Exclusion of Jews and the Confiscation of Their Property in Nazi Germany,
trans. George Wilkes (New York, 2002); Frank Bajohr, Parvenius und Profitoure:
Korruption in der NS-Zeit (Frankfurt, 2001).
35 Constantin Goschler, Wiedergutmachung: Westdeutschland und die Verfolgten
des Nationalsozialismus (1945–1954) (Munich, 1992); Ludolf Herbst and Constantin
Goschler, eds., Wiedergutmachung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (Munich,
1989); Christian Pross, Paying for the Past: The Struggle over Reparations for
Surviving Victims of the Nazi Terror, trans. Belinda Cooper (Baltimore, 1998); Mi-
Michael J. Bazyler, Holocaust Justice: The Battle for Restitution in America’s Courts
(New York, 2003).
material wealth were on an entirely different scale from what we are used to in contemporary Western society.

Hence we need to recognize that property was an important cause of resentment and greed; it often determined how one would be treated in good times and bad. Under the Soviet occupation of 1939–41, one’s property determined one’s fate just as much as ethnicity or religion. Under the Nazis the Jews were often targeted both by the Germans and by local gentiles as a mythical source of goods and riches, even as their actual condition was reduced to utter destitution. This belief added a dimension of festive enrichment and socioeconomic improvement to the horror of the local mass killings. Genocide thus served as a mechanism for social mobility—for moving into the better stone houses, taking over businesses, giving clothes and jewelry to one’s wife or mistress or fetching toys for one’s children, all facilitated by the shedding of blood. And the memory of slaughter at the root of individual


37 In general, see Lucian Dobroszycki and Jeffrey Gurock, eds., *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941–1945* (Armonk, NY, 1993); Yitzhak Arad, *History of the Holocaust: Soviet Union and Annexed Territories* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2004). In virtually every shtetl in Eastern Europe the local population as well as people coming from afar (such as deportees) moved into the houses vacated by the Jews, which were mostly in the center of town. One can travel, for instance, across all of East Galicia, now Western Ukraine, from one former Jewish town to another, and find precisely the same demographic dynamic. There is rarely any indication, however, that these homes had belonged to the Jews, apart from some faint traces of a mezuzah that has been long removed.

38 The idea that eliminating Polish Jewry would create space for the emergence of
betterment is more difficult to erase than the stains of blood quickly washed from the pavement or absorbed into the earth. Many of the thousands, nay, hundreds of thousands of East Europeans who are still living in stolen property would rather not discuss or remember this fact; after all, most of them have not stolen this property themselves. Elsewhere we find a different phenomenon that can only be called a celebration of virtual Jews. Thus one can walk today into a restaurant in the Kazimierz quarter of Cracow, which is now undergoing a “Jewish” revival, and find it decorated almost entirely with looted goods: oil lamps, candelabra, menorahs, torah pointers, all probably bought for pennies at the flea market, where they ended up after being carted off from the homes of those moved to the ghetto, then to the concentration camps, then to the gas chambers. But whether it is the Jewish revival in Poland or the suppression of all Jewish traces in Western Ukraine, the context is not only the unmarked mass graves but also the still usable and useful looted goods and property.

This suppressed or exoticized memory makes for discomfort and apologetics. That too is an integral part of excavating Eastern Europe as the site of the Holocaust, so different in this respect from the affluent West. Poverty rarely breeds compassion, despite what some novels would tell us. A former Ukrainian mayor, Ivan Bobyk, who had ruled his town during the Nazi occupation, wrote after the war from his enforced exile:

[Pre-Habsburg Jews] had immunity from the city authorities; they were exempted from taxes, but profited from fairs and markets. . . . All this resulted in the impoverishment of our citizens, who were forced to move to the outskirts of town. . . . [Nevertheless, the citizens] were well disposed toward the Jews and lived together in peace. . . . [The Jews] did not like to serve in the [Austrian] army. . . . [During the Soviet occupation of 1939–41, while the] Jewish merchants, intelligentsia and craftsmen were not delighted with Bolshevik rule . . . everybody knew that the leadership of the Communist Party [in the town] was mainly Jewish. . . . [During the German occupation] the Ukrainian population sympathized with the grim fate of the Jews and tried to help them whenever they had an opportunity, exposing themselves to the worst consequences. . . . However, it is very strange that almost all Jewish publications on World War II accuse the Ukrainian population of having helped the Germans to exterminate the Jews. It is true that in some cases the local Ukrainian police took part in police actions as escorts.


39 See, e.g., Ruth Ellen Gruber, Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe (Berkeley, 2002).
But in some other Galician cities there were Jewish police as well. Besides, Ukrainian policemen never took part in executions. There were also some individual cases when local policemen persecuted the Jews, but this is no reason to accuse the entire Ukrainian population, just as we cannot accuse all the Jewish population on the grounds that some of them collaborated with the NKVD and helped to arrest and exile to Siberia the most prominent citizens of [the town].

Having served as mayor of Buczacz during the German occupation, Bobyk had to flee when the Soviets returned. In exile for decades, he published in 1972 a massive volume of over 1,000 pages on Buczacz and its vicinity. Not much space was devoted to the Jewish majority that had lived there before the war, and what little there was would have better been left unwritten.

Yet Bobyk was in fact a compassionate man, considering the circumstances of the time. In defense of a crime he does not entirely acknowledge, Bobyk cites a letter sent to him in 1969 by Isidor Gelbart, a Jewish friend who survived in hiding along with this family. Gelbart’s letter, as well as the postwar testimony he gave, confirm Bobyk’s claims that he had behaved as decently as circumstances had allowed. Furthermore, this well-educated Jewish witness also acknowledged the help given his family and other Jews by Ukrainians and Poles. But very much unlike Bobyk’s account, Gelbart’s testimony stressed the collaboration of Ukrainian policemen in the killings and the desperate isolation of the bulk of the Jews caught between a murderous German-Ukrainian police apparatus and a hostile population. Thus Gelbart reported that on July 7, 1941, the day the Germans marched into Buczacz, “a Ukrainian police force was formed and soon thereafter Jewish women were dragged out of Jewish homes for cleaning work and were abused. Whoever had connections with the Ukrainians, could still be helped; the Ukrainian Ivan Bobyk was appointed mayor, and fortunately he was a good, decent, and unprejudiced man who did all he could to stand by the Jews.”

However, Gelbart also notes that Bobyk was present when the Jews were rounded up and sent to nearby sites where they were shot by the German Gestapo and Ukrainian militias. Gelbart was saved from the first roundup—where Jewish men were only used for forced labor—by Bobyk, who recognized him and told him to go back home. During the second roundup in August 1941 Gelbart decided not to go, while his brother, along with some 600 other members of the Jewish intelligentsia of the town, went and were killed. In June 1943 Gelbart, his wife, and his two sons found shelter with the Ukrainian peasant Zacharczuk (Zakharchuk) and his Polish wife and two

41 Isidor Gelbart, Yad Vashem Archives, 033/640.
small children in the village of Ćwitowa near Buczacz. They hid in the peasant’s attic until the first liberation of the region by the Red Army in March 1944. The area was soon thereafter recaptured by the Germans and most of the Jews who came out of hiding (estimated at 1,500 by Gelbart and closer to 800 in other accounts) were seized and murdered. But Gelbart and his family managed to escape to Czernowitz and were saved.42

The accounts by Bobyk and Gelbart reflect the complexity of the situation on the ground and the manner in which people belonging to different groups and slated for different treatment by the German occupiers responded to the new conditions and subsequently formed different memories of these events. The exiled Bobyk’s combination of prejudice and compassion found no counterpart in Soviet historiography. Soviet accounts simply ignore the fate of the Jews altogether, speaking only of the Soviet citizens murdered by the Germans and conveniently forgetting that some of those citizens were actively killing their own neighbors. For instance, Igor Duda’s 1985 tourist guide to Buczacz briefly recounts that “on July 7, 1941, the Hitlerites occupied Buczacz. During the time of the occupation they exterminated about 7,500 civilians from the city and the district villages; 1,839 young men and women were driven to forced labor in Germany. 137 buildings were destroyed, as well as a number of industrial enterprises and schools. Nevertheless the population did not submit to the fascists.”43 Nowhere in this peculiarly communist-nationalist-Ukrainian narrative of the city’s history is the word “Jew” even mentioned.

But following the fall of communism, accounts of World War II once more reflect the spirit of Bobyk’s perception of events, although they are written from a greater distance of time by men and women who have no direct memory of the occupation and who have also been stamped by the decades-long Soviet view of history. For instance, an article published in a local Western Ukrainian newspaper in 2000 presented a strange mixture of compassion for the Jewish victims of Nazism, Soviet-era pathos and fabrication, nationalist pride and apologetics, and a good measure of unconscious prejudice. The author, Tetiana Pavlyshyn, asserts that “people of Jewish nationality came [to Buczacz] from everywhere” because this “ancient city . . . has always been a profitable place for commercial activity.” Yet, as it turned out, “those people had an inborn ability for commerce,” and while “they would generously lend to you,” they “knew how to get their money back with interest.”44

42 Ibid.
The Jews are thus described as a foreign element that came to an already wealthy town from the outside and made a neat profit there on the backs of the local population. Once this historical “fact” is established, Pavlyshyn attempts to reconstruct what actually happened in Buczacz during the Holocaust. For this purpose she turns to several Ukrainian eyewitnesses (it does not seem to have occurred to her to consult any historical accounts or to look for testimonies by Poles and Jews). One witness is Ivan Synen’kyi, who was a sixteen-year-old lad during the war. Synen’kyi remembers seeing regular akcjas, during which masses of people were shot in the forest. There were so many bodies there, some still alive, that the thin layer of soil over the pit would heave. Other mass shootings took place at the Jewish cemetery, after which, Synen’kyi notes, “people could see streams of reddish liquid with a peculiar smell flowing from the slope where the grave was situated—human bodies were intensively decomposing. Later that liquid penetrated into a water reservoir that was situated nearby and used by the local population.”

Instead of offering her own opinion on the massacre of the local Jews, Pavlyshyn cites Synen’kyi’s explanation for what he perceived as their peculiar response to the annihilation of the community: “The Jews themselves behaved in a strange way. Rarely if ever did they try to escape. There was no fear in their eyes. Some of them explained their behavior by old prophecies that came true; others would turn to the local people and say: ‘We are the first, but you will be the next.’”

Thus Synen’kyi, and by extension also the author of the article who makes no further comment on his assertion, presents two explanations for the massacre. According to the first, the Jews died because of some “old prophecy,” obviously meaning the Crucifixion. This was the traditional antisemitic rationalization of the Holocaust that clearly infused the minds of many local Christians and was often encouraged by the clergy. The second explanation, however, can be interpreted in different ways. It could be read as a warning to the Ukrainians that once the genocide of the Jews is completed, the Germans would turn their wrath against the local gentiles. This argument was common also among those Poles who insisted on reporting the genocide of the Jews to the rest of the world for fear that the same indifference would subsequently greet the anticipated extermination of the Polish people. Yet the line “we are the first, but you will be the next” could easily be seen also as a condemnation by those who are going to be slaughtered of their gentile neighbors observing them as they pass through the town. Possibly the inclu-

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
sion of this line in the article reflects an awareness, or at least a subconscious acknowledgment, of the sense of betrayal felt by the Jews abandoned to their fate by their own community.

The community in question might have felt various degrees of compassion for the Jews. But people also had other things on their minds, and the Jews were well aware of this. The townsfolk were making a profit from this butchery: as Synen’kyi candidly reported, “there was also a shop in the city where the clothes of the murdered were sold cheaply.” Nor was profit making limited to the war years. According to Synen’kyi, when the only surviving member of a Jewish family who had lost his parents and twelve sisters returned to town after the war and “wanted to get back his house...the price fixed by the new owners was too high, so he had to abandon his dream” and move to Israel. As for rescue, Synen’kyi’s version strikes a more realistic note than Mayor Bobyk’s, noting that assistance to the victims was anything but conspicuous. “The local people,” he remarks, “were very careful about associating with the Jews in any manner. Most were scared for their lives; others did help, but very cautiously.” When “a Jewish man who had managed to get out of [a mass] grave” came to a local resident in the middle of the night, “the host gave him the necessary help but could not let him stay in his house. That same night that man went away to the forest.”

TESTIMONY AND HISTORY

It can therefore not be stressed enough that the Holocaust—including its postwar memory (and erasure) and the new socioeconomic conditions it produced through extermination and deportation of populations as well as massive property transfer—has had an incomparably greater overall impact on Eastern Europe than on Western and Central European countries. Jewish populations in Western and Central Europe were much smaller; their killing occurred very far from their places of residence; their property transfer, though substantial, left less of an economic and psychological mark on the nations from which they were deported; and, in many cases, the Jewish populations in these countries revived (often by absorbing former displaced persons from Eastern Europe) and reintegrated. The Jews of France and Italy today are more numerous than in 1939. Even German

48 Pavlyshyn, “The Holocaust in Buczacz.”
49 Ibid.
Jewry has seen a remarkable expansion since the fall of the Wall. Conversely, the Jews of Poland went on diminishing, under the impact of communist anti-semitic regimes, throughout the postwar period; the same can be said for Ukrainian Jewry and other Jewish communities in the borderlands of Eastern Europe (with the exception of Hungary). The tentative revival of Jewish life in these regions seems to be—where it can be identified at all—more a cultural matter and an issue of identity than a concrete expansion of population and revival of a living community.

But how do we gain access to the reality of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe? Some recent studies have employed the traditional tools of the historian, while making increasing use of previously neglected or inaccessible documents, to reconstruct Nazi extermination policies in Eastern Europe. Most of these studies, however, have taken a country-wide or regional overview and have focused largely on the policies of the occupiers and perpetrators, or on the cooperation between the invaders and local collaborators.

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54 See notes 4, 23, and 37 above. See also Ulrich Herbert, ed., *National Socialist
Such works are helpful in providing the framework of the genocide but not very useful in depicting the reality on the ground for the populations involved—namely, the Jews targeted for extermination, on the one hand, and their neighbors, who not only suffered under foreign occupations but also, in part, profited from the killing of the Jews and the massacres and expulsions of other populations, on the other. Indeed, most of these studies do not make any use of testimonies, or utilize them only in a sketchy and anecdotal manner; they also rarely demonstrate any knowledge of the Jewish experience or of the relations between Jews and gentiles on the local level.55 They are based largely on official documents by the occupiers and perpetrators and on secondary literature. Conversely, those studies that do examine the fate of the Jews have little to say about interethnic relations, tend to decontextualize the manner in which this community experienced the Holocaust, and at times are geared more toward commemoration than historical reconstruction. While such studies will rely more on testimonies, they will normally limit themselves to those provided by Jewish witnesses, whose perspective was obviously determined by the circumstances and prejudices of the time.56

The neglect of testimonies as historical documents has many roots. Professional historians generally tend to find such so-called subjective accounts,

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often reporting about events at a considerable remove from the time in which they were experienced, rather suspect. Historians are trained to prefer documents that carry an official stamp, that were produced at the time of the event by competent and responsible officials, and that are accessible at well-organized archival collections. Such documents facilitate the relatively accurate reconstruction of the manner in which a bureaucratic organization formed and implemented policy. But one gains very limited insight into the manner in which the implementation of this policy was experienced by those upon whom it was enacted. Moreover, the overtly objective nature of such documentation is highly misleading: the officials who write memoranda and hand down orders are hardly free of bias, prejudice, or an intentional desire to veil the actual meaning of the documents they produce in a web of bureaucratic euphemisms, whether out of habit or because they do not wish to be implicated in policies they know to be objectionable or criminal.

This difficulty with official documentation is particularly acute in the case of the Holocaust, and historians have been well aware of it. And yet very few have concluded that one way to lift the veil of obfuscation and euphemism and penetrate the reality of the event is to question those who were at the receiving end. Due to the very different nature of judicial proceedings (and with the important exception of the Nuremberg Tribunal), postwar trials of Nazi perpetrators have made much greater use of testimonies. In fact, the records of such trials provide a revealing picture of the vast gap between the depiction of genocide by its makers (both during the event and years later in their testimonies to the court) and the memory of these same events by the victims. But even when the records of police interrogations and trials have been used in the historical literature, they have not been linked to the vast array of other testimonial documentation that would help to recreate the experience of the victims and others present at the local site of genocide. This is mainly because such literature is still concerned with the motivation of the killers, and while it expresses sympathy with and shows some empathy for the victims, it remains conventional in regarding them merely as targets of genocide and not

57 For the politics of organizing national archives and establishing their authority as the record of the nation, see Jennifer S. Milligan, “Making a Modern Archive: The Archives Nationales of France, 1850–1887” (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2002).
60 Goldhagen, Hitler’s Willing Executioners; Browning, Ordinary Men.
as historical protagonists whose own thoughts, actions, and memories have a bearing on the event.

The reluctance to use Jewish testimonies in the reconstruction of the Holocaust goes back to the early postwar years. The Nuremberg Tribunal was loath to use victim testimonies and relied almost exclusively on official documentation (and testimonies by the defendants) for fear that allegedly biased evidence by the persecuted would further undermine the court’s somewhat questionable legitimacy and expose it as meting out victors’ justice.61 This was done despite the fact that at the time there were many thousands of available witnesses whose memories were still fresh and whose depictions of the crimes would have provided a far more vivid description than the dry, detached, and euphemistic documentary evidence. Subsequent German trials, especially since the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, made much more extensive use of victims’ testimonies, although the witnesses, many of whom were eager to testify, often found the process humiliating and the resulting sentences, when handed down at all, almost always laughable.62 It was the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 that established the survivors as the main voice of the indictment and put them right at the center of the judicial proceedings. While the Israeli judges and other observers—not least Hannah Arendt—criticized the state attorney’s strategy of presenting evidence not directly related to the defendant, the trial for the first time made the record of the atrocity as told by its survivors internationally available.63 The long-range consequence of the Eichmann trial was the gradual realization of the centrality of the Holocaust to World War II specifically and to the twentieth century more generally.64

62 For an overview, see Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen, 1945–1966, ed. Fritz Bauer et al. (Amsterdam, 1968–). For a bitter view of this process from the Jewish perspective, see the novel by Amir Gutfreund, Our Holocaust [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2000).
63 For a more extensive discussion and further references, see Omer Bartov, The “Jew” in Cinema: From the Golem to Don’t Touch My Holocaust (Bloomington, IN, 2005), 78–92. Hannah Arendt famously covered the trial for the New Yorker and subsequently published her influential but deeply flawed account, Eichmann in Jerusalem, in 1963.
64 I would argue that the Eichmann trial was far more instrumental in this regard than the 1967 Six Day War. See on this Peter Novick, The Holocaust in American Life (Boston, 1999). Further in Omer Bartov, “The Holocaust as Leitmotif of the Twentieth
Similarly, the decision of German courts shortly before the Eichmann trial to make use of victim testimonies, the vast amounts of records collected in preparations for these trials (however lamentable their outcomes eventually were), and the wide publicity they received in the media, combined to have a powerful long-term impact on German perceptions of the Holocaust. The publication of Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation*, which provided the gist of the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, was the beginning of a process that led a new generation of Germans to face up to the crimes of the past and tear away the pious euphemisms that obscured them in the first two postwar decades. There can be no doubt that these trials played an important role in the growing interest in what Germans came to call “Auschwitz” as a euphemism for the Holocaust. Indeed the preoccupation of the 1968 generation with the extermination camps would have been unthinkable without these trials and the manner in which they exposed publicly for the first time in Germany—and within the august spaces of German courts—the true horror of the Holocaust.

Testimonies have therefore played a major role in bringing perpetrators to justice and in transforming public perceptions. Yet historians have been very cautious about, at times openly hostile to, using them. One case that has recently been revealed by the German scholar Nicolas Berg exemplifies the extent to which Jewish testimonies, and Jewish historians writing on the Holocaust, seemed positively threatening to the very scholars who were researching the Third Reich and its crimes in the early postwar decades. In 1960 the historian Martin Broszat, member and spokesman of the influential Institute for Contemporary History at Munich, which he subsequently directed, launched a campaign to discredit the study on the Warsaw Ghetto by the Jewish scholar Joseph Wulf. In part, this had to do with Broszat’s own forthcoming book, which provided a very different picture of German policies in Poland. While Wulf presented the director of the health authorities in the city, Dr. Wilhelm Hagen, as a man who had betrayed his ethical obligation as a physician, Broszat described him as a resister to the murderous policies of

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66 For a literary rumination on the impact of these trials by a German judge, see Bernhard Schlink, *The Reader*, trans. Carol Brown Janeway (New York, 1997).


the Nazis. To be sure, Broszat was thinking of Hagen as saving Poles from epidemics; Wulf described Hagen as complicit in the murder of the Jews. And because Hagen held a senior position in the Federal Republic at the time of the dispute, the media also showed a great deal of interest.

The main point of contention, however, had to do with the fact not only that Wulf was a Jew of Polish origins who had himself survived the camps and lost most of his family in the Holocaust but also that he had given equal weight to Jewish documentation and testimonies along with German evidence in his account of events in the Warsaw Ghetto. It was for this reason that Broszat, along with the majority of other German historians at the time, could not accept Wulf’s writing as scholarly. Indeed, Wulf found himself isolated from the German scholarly community and eventually committed suicide in 1974. Ironically, many years after his own death in 1989, it was discovered that Broszat, who had always insisted on the greater objective and factual value of official documents, had actually been a member of the Nazi Party, a fact he had never conceded in his postwar lifetime. In a public exchange with the historian Saul Friedländer in the mid-1980s, Broszat had argued in defense of a detached and sober scholarly history of Nazism and dismissed what he saw as the mythic Jewish historiography of the Holocaust. He also presented himself as a member of the Hitler Youth generation who was “certainly stricken with but hardly burdened” (zwar betroffen aber kaum belastet) by Nazism. In fact, Broszat joined the Nazi Party on April 4, 1944.69

All this seems to indicate the extent to which arguments of objectivity can merely serve as a cover for obfuscation and falsification of the historical record. They can also have to do with ideology. In 1958, three years before the dispute between Wulf and Broszat, Raul Hilberg was informed in a letter from Yad Vashem that it would not provide any assistance for the publication of his monograph, eventually known as one of the most important studies of the Holocaust, because “the book rests almost exclusively on the authority of German sources” and because of “reservations concerning” his “appraisal of the Jewish resistance . . . during the Nazi occupation.”70 Yad Vashem was concerned that Hilberg’s account seemed to assign a degree of responsibility to the victims for their own fate. But here one can also discern the vast difference between Hilberg and Broszat. Whereas Hilberg wrote the first meticulously documented history of the manner in which the Germans organ-


70 For more on this episode and relevant references, see Bartov, Mirrors of Destruction, 129–30.
nized the murder of the Jews, Broszat’s most influential book on the “Hitler State” contained only one paragraph that dealt directly with the Holocaust.\(^{71}\)

Thus the use of testimonies or the reluctance to do so does not necessarily make for good or bad, obfuscating or critical history. But it does direct one’s focus at certain aspects of the event while leaving others in the dark. Had Hilberg been more preoccupied with testimonies, he would have realized that some of his generalizations about Jewish behavior during the Holocaust (from which Hannah Arendt, who rejected his book for publication with Princeton University Press, freely borrowed in her own account of the Eichmann trial), were at best tenuous and probably largely wrong. He would have also shifted his focus from the Berlin-centered account of events (still largely repeated by his former student Christopher Browning in his most recent study, *The Origins of the Final Solution*) to the place of the genocide.\(^{72}\) And that site was Eastern Europe, from which the vast majority of the testimonies stem, providing a far richer and more complex picture of individual and communal responses to genocide than one can find in German documentation.

What is fascinating about this reluctance, or inability, to use testimony and the insistence on restricting oneself to German documentation, despite all the built-in constraints and biases that such a choice entails, is that there is a vast amount of testimony documentation, some of which has remained almost entirely untapped for decades. One major source is the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (Żydowski Instytut Historyczny or ZIH), which keeps some 7,200 personal narratives by Holocaust survivors, adults and children, that were written down mostly in 1944–48.\(^{73}\) Copies of these testimonies can be found at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. These testimonies, some of which are very detailed and others very brief, were recorded in several languages and collected right after the liberation of Polish territories from Nazi rule. Hence these are fresh recollections from the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, often by people who did not even know that a continent-wide genocide had taken place but had a very precise knowledge of what happened in their own communities. There are also several much longer accounts written as personal diaries during the Holocaust or in its immediate aftermath. A second large collection is in Yad Vashem, where one can find written testimonies, witness accounts submitted to postwar German courts for


trials of former Nazis, and audio and video testimonies, spanning the entire period from the end of the war to the 1990s. A third important source is the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University, a collection of over 4,200 videotaped interviews with witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust. To this one can add the recently rediscovered David Boder collection of over 120 remarkable interviews with Holocaust survivors recorded on an early version of a tape recorder in 1946 in displaced persons camps in Europe, of which Boder later transcribed seventy and published only eight. Another outstanding recent collection is the “Archive of Memory,” in which interviews conducted in 1995–97 with seventy-eight survivors of the Holocaust from the Brandenburg-Berlin area are collected and analyzed. Finally, a much vaster project was launched in 1994 by Steven Spielberg and the Survivors of the Shoah Foundation in Los Angeles, which contains some 52,000 testimonies collected in fifty-six countries. It is now located at the University of Southern California. The archives of the USHMM also contain important collections of testimonies as well as many other documents taken from Eastern Europe, Ukraine, and Russia, among others.

There are also important collections of testimonies by Poles who were ejected from their homes, towns, and villages during the war. Some were deported by the Soviets in 1939–41; others were ethnically cleansed by Ukrainians in the last phase of the war and immediately thereafter. These testimonies, many of which are very detailed, provide a valuable insight into events in former Polish localities that complement, even if at times they also contradict, the Jewish accounts of the period. Such groups experienced events

74 See http://www.yadvashem.org/.
75 See http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/.
78 See http://www.vhf.org/.
79 See http://www.ushmm.org/research/center/.
80 These testimonies can be found at the Archiwum Wschodnie in Warsaw and at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, California. See http://www.yale.edu/rusarch/pole.html and http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/. Gross, Revolution from Abroad, is largely based on the testimonies at the Hoover Institution.
differently and were struck by fate and the various occupation authorities in a different manner. Using them together creates a more balanced and richer picture of what happened on the ground. To this should be added also accounts by other ethnic groups. In the case of East Galicia, one would need to include mainly Ukrainians. In other regions, such as Volhynia, Belarus, the Baltic States, Bukovina, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and the Balkans, a large array of ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups would need to be examined. Often oral and written accounts in such areas as Galicia have not been carefully collected, and some collections seem to have been edited with a certain apologetic bent that may have biased the selection. Yet it is crucial to make use of whatever material exists and, when still possible, to interview people on the ground. For instance, in the case of Eastern Galicia, now in Western Ukraine, with very few exceptions it is only among Ukrainians that one may still find individuals who have been in the same sites their entire lives and have vivid memories of the war, although many of the current inhabitants also arrived there after the war.

It is also still possible to interview a few of those who survived genocide and ethnic cleansing—Jews and Poles in the case of Galicia—even though their numbers are rapidly diminishing. Publications by émigré communities such as memorial books, periodicals, occasional papers, and memoirs—all intended to preserve the memory of prewar communities and the horrors that put an end to them—are quite abundant. The emigrants may be found in relatively nearby locations such as Wrocław (Breslau) or in much more distant lands such as Israel and the United States, South Africa and Latin America, New Zealand and Australia, as well as Canada, Russia and France, Britain and Belgium, the Netherlands and Scandinavia.

Work with such testimonies provides access to a highly neglected aspect of the Holocaust specifically and of genocide more generally. As we have


82 Roman Szporluk, Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union (Stanford, CA, 2000), 109–50.

seen in the last decades, communal killings in interethnic communities are often an important and at times a central aspect of modern genocide. This of course appears to be a contradiction in terms. We would like to believe that it is precisely interethnic communities that can serve as examples of the ability of people of different ethnicities and religions to live together. Thus such communities would serve as a counterexample for and a bulwark against the essentializing rhetoric and dehumanizing imagery propagated by bigots, racists, integral nationalists, and other promoters of homogenic ethnicities and racial segregation. In fact, however, interethnic communities often explode into horrific violence when they find themselves in the midst of war, ethnic cleansing, and genocide. Rather than a bulwark, they serve as focal points of the worst and most brutal—because most intimate—violence. Hence the example they provide serves the goal of the perpetrators: to argue that the only solution to such communal slaughters is the separation, segregation, and expulsion or murder of those populations that do not fit into the desired ethnic mold—that is, the creation of homogeneous populations precisely along the lines proposed by those who propagated communal violence in the first place.

EASTERN EUROPE AS LIEU DE MÉMOIRE

This does not have to be the case and in fact is not always so. But the examples of Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia—indeed, also the Middle East—seem to show that in conditions of extreme ideologies and essentialist nationalism these situations are hard to prevent and often impossible to avoid. As we see now also in Western Europe, the relatively rapid introduction of new populations is the cause of much tension vis-à-vis the policies of integration and assimilation. If we want to understand the mechanism of intercommunal relations, then, we have to look at communities that had lived side by side for generations and ended up under a combination of circumstances—not only those of Soviet and German occupation but also going back to nationalism in the late nineteenth century and to the violence of World War I and its aftermath in Eastern Europe—as communities of genocide.

Linking research on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe to general work on this event, and at the same time linking the history of the Holocaust to local histories of East European countries, is the challenge to a new generation of historians. Some work has been and is currently being carried out on specific communities; but this field is still in its infancy. The use of testimonies in a

sophisticated and comprehensive manner is still very much lacking. Testimonies have been used as anecdotal evidence by historians, and increasingly as part of educational programs geared to teaching against intolerance. But whatever one might think of the use of atrocity to teach humanism, this is certainly not a scholarly but a pedagogical undertaking. As far as historical reconstruction is concerned, the moment one attempts to use testimony in specific cases, one immediately realizes how many of the generalizations and conventional theories about the origins, nature, and effects of genocidal violence—indeed, even about the nature of testimonies—have to be discarded or at least substantially revised.

Suffice it to examine such works as Jan Gross’s *Neighbors* and Shimon Redlich’s *Together and Apart in Brzezany* to realize how much more can be done by combining testimonies with a focus on a specific location. Indeed, in the case of the Holocaust, we would do well to return, in a modified form, to the historical methodology of the 1970s and 1980s of local studies by applying it to specific multiethnic communities in Eastern Europe. William Sheridan Allen’s study of the Nazi “seizure of power” in a small German town taught us a great deal about the nature of the process in the country as a whole. So, too, such focused but sophisticated local studies, combining the use of more traditional documentation with a variety of personal testimonies recorded over the decades that have passed since the event in a variety of very different contexts, will give us clues as to the manner in which the war and the Holocaust were experienced—not by the bureaucrats, who rarely ventured out of their offices, but by those who actually were on the ground to see and experience it all.

Here we will also find that the increasingly recognized link—in the Holocaust and in other genocides and cases of ethnic cleansing and “population policies”—between the higher and the lower levels can be grasped much more clearly from the local perspective. Thus, for instance, issues of motivation become more complex and yet more easily understandable when we bring in the urge for

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85 This is now being prepared at the Shoah Foundation; the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance has also been engaging in this practice for awhile.

property, career advancement, access to political and professional positions, and subsequently the perceived need to erase the traces that this trajectory to success left through the path of mass murder. In fact, the local level provides particularly vivid examples of why the present is so reluctant to deal with the past, since the contemporary implications are clear to all but the very old, the very young, the ideologically driven, and the simpleminded. The urge to suppress the compromising tales of the past is based on the perceived need to legitimize the present. But a present founded on an acknowledged—though rarely articulated—necessity to erase and suppress the past is and will always remain tenuous and under siege, since there is no telling when some revelation might crack the crust of denial and forgetting. The only way to build a self-assured and confident present is to return to the past and reveal its secrets. And the only way to do that within small communities with long, and long-suppressed, memories is through the words of the members of these communities, mostly dead or in exile now, but still capable of telling their stories by means of the words they wrote, dictated, or uttered into an audiotape or video camera.

Eastern Europe is thus not merely the site of the Holocaust in the physical sense that most of Europe’s Jews lived there and were murdered there. It was and remains the heart of the Holocaust in that it was where Jewish and Christian civilizations formed a long, though troubled, tradition of living side by side, and where that social and cultural fabric was ultimately shattered in World War II and the Holocaust. Eastern Europe was not “only” the site of industrial, impersonal, production-line mass murder but also where the Holocaust occurred in its most intimate, personal, and thus also most vicious form, multiplied thousands upon thousands of times as endless communities were transformed into killing fields. Here the Holocaust has also remained so close to the surface precisely because its memory has been neglected and suppressed so thoroughly that it reemerges unscathed and undiminished. When one travels in Galicia today and sees the now rapidly disappearing ruined synagogues and overgrown cemeteries, one can still glimpse the last artifacts of a civilization that is determined to remind us of its past as a live and creative entity, whose memory can still regenerate and enrich the lives of those in whose midst its ruins jut out of the black earth. If there is any true lieu de mémoire in Europe (and one that Pierre Nora and his collaborators never seem to have contemplated), it is in the fields and hills, the river banks and towns of Eastern Europe.

87 This is the fundamental assertion of the report by Brown University’s Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice. See http://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice; http://www.brown.edu/Research/Slavery_Justice/documents/SlaveryAndJustice.pdf.