

Recent Books in Holocaust Studies

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Author:

Albert S. Lindemann

ISBN:

582369649X

Date of Publication:

2000

Price:

£9.99

Pages:

144pp.

Publisher:

Longman

Place of Publication:

Harlow

Author:

Yehuda Bauer

ISBN:

9780300082568

Date of Publication:

2001

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

335pp.

Publisher:

Yale University Press

Place of Publication:

New Haven, CT

Author:

Jan Gross

ISBN:

9780691086672

Date of Publication:

2001

Price:

£13.95

Pages:

261pp.

Publisher:

Princeton University Press

Place of Publication:

Princeton, NJ

Reviewer:

John Klier

The near-simultaneous appearance of the three works under review reveals much about the present state of publications devoted to Antisemitism and the Nazi persecution and mass-murder of European Jewry. Virtually any serious bookstore now boasts a whole section devoted to the Holocaust, filled with books targeting almost any type of reader. For better or for worse, genocide sells. The audience for these three books includes students in secondary school and university history survey classes (Lindemann), those who wish a summary of the life's work of a leading scholar of the Shoah (Bauer) and a general audience interested in recent research and controversy on the question of local collaboration in the implementation of the Holocaust (Gross). Taken together, they also reveal the difficult task awaiting scholars who navigate this particular field of academia where it has become increasingly impossible to operate *sine ira*. All three authors have been targets of scholarly ill-will, both of their own and of others' making. This situation can be illustrated by considering the works in chronological order: the history of Antisemitism, the Holocaust itself, and the legacy and resonance of wartime Antisemitism in contemporary Europe.

Albert Lindemann, in a series of books (*The Jew Accused. Three Anti-Semitic Affairs, 1894-1915*, Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1991; *Esau's Tears: Modern Anti-Semitism and the Rise of the Jews*, Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1997) has put forward an eminently defensible proposition – that there were objective aspects of Judaism, as well as Jewish activities and culture, which gave rise to manifestations of the phenomenon known as Antisemitism. It has been Lindemann's folly to elevate this idea to the status of an *idée fixe*, almost as powerful as the concept of 'Eternal Antisemitism' which he energetically (and correctly) rejects. Lindemann's primary claim is that the 'rise of the Jews' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries helps to explain (although not justify) the development of modern Antisemitism. He has been unable, unfortunately, to resist the temptation to read this hypothesis back into the whole history of Jewish/non-Jewish relations. His scholarly leitmotif, which gives the title to his most recent study of Antisemitism, is the biblical story of Isaac (who becomes Israel, the prototype Jew) and his brother Esau, who represents the gentile nations. The cause of their dispute is Isaac's theft of Esau's birthright from their father Jacob. For Lindemann this tale, which he admits was strange and problematical even for the rabbis, provides the general framework for his study of Antisemitism through the ages.

Lindemann has done little original research in the sources of Antisemitism, and so his major books have been works of synthesis, with generalisations based on a reading of the secondary literature. In areas where existing literature is thin, this often has unfortunate consequences. His treatment of Antisemitism in Tsarist Russia (which constitutes a major portion of *The Jew Accused*) is replete with factual errors great and small, and dubious over-generalisations. Hopefully it will not be judged as special pleading if I direct Lindemann to my own *Imperial Russia's Jewish Question, 1855-1881* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1996), especially since we share a common publisher.

Still, an author can be wrong – and even bloody-minded – and not be malevolent or dishonest. Unfortunately, a number of Lindemann's academic critics, especially Robert Wistrich of Hebrew University, have been unwilling to concede Lindemann's scholarly integrity. In the course of an ill-tempered campaign against his work, Lindemann has, perhaps inevitably, been accused of Antisemitism.⁽¹⁾ Given this situation, Lindemann might be viewed as both the best and the worst possible contributor to a series that seeks to provide 'new information and interpretations': his work does represent a new interpretation, even while it has been impugned by leading scholars in the field.

This particular work appears in the Longman Seminar Series in History, intended, as already noted, for students. Besides offering new information, it also provides 'a selection of documents to illustrate major themes and provoke discussion', as well as a guide to further reading. The reviewer thus faces a triple task of evaluation: how well does the author fulfil his informational task; how effective for the stated purpose is the

selection of documents; and what is the merit of the reading list?

It must be admitted at the outset that it is an impossible task to encapsulate the entire history of Antisemitism from its origins (whatever they might be perceived to be) up to the year 1939 in 109 pages, with 17 pages for documents, and seven pages for a 189-item bibliography. We must reconcile ourselves in advance to oversimplifications, omissions and sweeping generalisations. That said, Lindemann writes the book we might have expected him to write. He juxtaposes two well-established interpretational antipodes. The phenomenon of 'Eternal Antisemitism' locates all the basis for hatred of the Jews in their 'peculiar kind of separatism, itself related to their sense of superiority to others' and to 'the themes of their religion, particularly those that denigrate other beliefs and customs' (pp. 4-5). At the other extreme is the claim that 'eternal antisemitism' is 'blaming the victim', and that Antisemitism is 'uniquely a non-Jewish problem' (p. 5). Lindemann offers his own brand of compromise: 'Antisemitism is most usefully conceptualised as hatred/fear of Jews that includes a key element of irrationality or emotionally fraught fantasy. But that fantasy is typically intertwined with elements of more accurate or concrete perceptions.'⁽²⁾ Having separated these strands, the task for the historian is to demonstrate and explain their inter-action. Lindemann promises to do this in regard to his more general theme: 'I have tried to understand the way that fantasy (ideologies, myths and other less formal productions of the mind) and reality (developments in the material world) interact' (p. 11).

This is, regrettably, what Lindemann often fails to do. This is particularly apparent in his discussion of the crucial period in the early Christian Middle Ages, when the Jews were effectively 'demonised', a process through which bizarre charges, such as ritual murder and desecration of the sacramental host, were attributed to them. This was also the era of the first mass violence against the Jews, in the form of the Crusades. Despite citing the rich and suggestive work of Gavin Langmuir in the reading list, Lindemann does little to integrate it into his text, perhaps because it largely locates the sources of violent Jew-hatred in the collective mind and religious insecurities of Christians, rather than some objective characteristic of the Jews, such as their wealth and identification with oppressive rulers (p. 29). He simply fails to demonstrate his claim that 'fantasies about Jews continued to be fed by realities, in a complex and nearly impenetrable interplay' (p. 30). It is strange that, given their significance for the development of Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards the Jews, the Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation receive no more than one page of text, which is, it might be noted, twice as much space as that devoted to the expulsion from Spain (pp. 30-31).

This haste to be rid of the pre-modern period is perhaps explained by Lindemann's desire to consider more familiar territory, and to reassert his claim that a major ingredient of modern Antisemitism is 'the rise of the Jews'. Ironically, while this theme bubbles in the background, the later pages of the book are largely an overview of antisemitic policies (Tsarist Russia) and ideologies (Austria-Hungary and Germany). Lindemann does confront one crucial theme, however: the links between European Antisemitism in the nineteenth century, and National Socialism in the twentieth. He implicitly rejects the thesis of Daniel Goldhagen, in *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Little, Brown; London, 1996), that the rise of 'eliminationist' Antisemitism in Wilhelmine Germany paved the way for the Final Solution. It would be useful to have Lindemann's disagreement with Goldhagen (whose work will certainly be encountered by students but is not included in the reading list) more overtly spelled out.

In summary, this book displays the strengths and weaknesses of Lindemann's approach to Antisemitism: a comprehensible and vigorously-argued thesis that relates best to the phenomenon of modern Antisemitism, combined with a surprising number of gaps and omissions that weaken that same thesis for two thousand years of Jewish/non-Jewish interaction in pre-modern European civilization and culture. The documents add very little to the text, in which they are cited, but hardly explicated. I was unable to find much logic in the selection – I wonder if students will do better. A set of four maps are appended 'to help students place developments discussed in the text'. They are, alas, replete with spelling and factual errors, exemplified by the map illustrating Tsarist Russia: the Pale of Settlement is mis-identified (it did not include the Kingdom of Poland), and the confusing lines which are meant to illustrate the territory of the pogroms between 1902 (sic) and 1906 are simply wrong. The reading list, with some notable omissions noted above, offers students a suitable guide to further reading.

A sure candidate for inclusion in the category of 'scholars behaving badly' is Norman Finkelstein, the academic gadfly who condemns and campaigns against what he has branded 'the Holocaust industry'. Small wonder that he is less than complimentary about what he sarcastically calls Yehuda Bauer's 'crowning achievement of his life's work', *Rethinking the Holocaust*. In Finkelstein's summary,

Bauer manages both to affirm and deny every major thesis on the Nazi extermination of the Jews: it can and can't be rationally understood; did and didn't spring from the Enlightenment and French Revolution; was and wasn't comparable to the extermination of the Gypsies ... He bizarrely criticizes 'most of German historiography' on the Nazi holocaust because it 'avoids the murder itself and instead agonises over who decided what and when regarding the murder of the Jews'.[\(3\)](#)

So much for Bauer's stated intention 'to rethink categories and issues that arise out of the contemplation of that watershed event in human history' (Bauer, p. ix)!

This 'rethinking' is the basis for Finkelstein's condemnation – to what extent is it warranted? In fact, Bauer is generally clear and precise in his arguments. Early on he defines his terms: the Holocaust was an example of genocide that can be compared with other types of this phenomenon. It was 'unique' in the same way that all historical events are, with special characteristics and unprecedented attributes. Something like the Holocaust could, Bauer believes, happen again. The task of his work is therefore 'political', in that it seeks to ensure that the Holocaust serves as 'a warning, not a precedent' (p. 3).

The Holocaust, therefore, is totally explicable, and Bauer's chapters represent an overview of the diverse scholarly attempts to find explanations. If there is an occasional reluctance to come down on the side of one interpretation or another – although Bauer is not shy in asserting his critical assessment of fellow scholars – it is because Bauer shares Saul Friedlander's reluctance to admit 'closure' into Holocaust debates: the assumption that historians have found satisfactory answers to the myriad problems that the Holocaust raises (pp. 7-8). This is a point worth pursuing. I would argue that one of the indicators of the health and validity of the study of the Holocaust is precisely the lack of scholarly consensus. Besides the negative features of the 'Holocaust industry' that so displease Finkelstein – especially what he sees as the unseemly scramble for compensation for survivors and the subsequent direction of such funds into Holocaust scholarship, education or memorialisation – one might note an extremely positive feature: the manner in which the study of the specific case of the Holocaust of European Jewry has helped to crystallise the more general field of Genocide Studies. By providing a model for comparison, and a demand for explication, the Holocaust has served as a driving engine for the comparative study of other twentieth-century genocides and their origins.

Given Bauer's emphasis on the historiography of the Holocaust, his book can serve as a solid introduction for students or the general reader. Bauer shows how the field developed. The first studies, exemplified by Raul Hilberg's classic *The Destruction of the European Jews* (W.H. Allen; London, 1961), sought to determine exactly how the German National Socialist state implemented the mass murder of European Jews. This line of research was followed by explorations of how various groups, such as the Jews themselves, and the various western powers, responded to the Nazi genocide. Only in the last decades of the twentieth

century did a substantial number of scholars begin to ask the 'why' questions, and to attempt to analyse and explain the Holocaust as a whole.

Bauer devotes two chapters to the 'why' question. As Bauer acknowledges early on, he himself assigns central importance to the role of an elite antisemitic ideology. He is thus critical of more instrumental interpretations, such as Zygmunt Bauman's use of the concept of 'modernity'. Bauer's own stress on the role of ideology makes him willing to offer a sympathetic hearing to Daniel Goldhagen's reliance on the idea of a strong tradition of 'eliminationist' Antisemitism. This was the decisive element that turned ordinary Germans into 'Hitler's willing executioners', a monocausal explanation that has been widely criticised by academic scholars. Bauer praises Goldhagen for re-emphasizing the role of ideology, even while 'stumbling badly' in his efforts to apply it.

Bauer's selection of problems, or areas of possible investigation, reveal much about his identity as a Jewish scholar, living and working in Israel. His academic address is Yad Vashem, created originally to memorialise the victims of the Nazi genocide, but lately grown into a major centre for the study of the Holocaust. From this perspective, Bauer is especially drawn to the problem of the 'sheep to the slaughter' syndrome – the apparent passive acceptance of Holocaust victims of their fate. This has always been a contentious issue, first identified and lamented in the very midst of the Warsaw ghetto. Bauer thus devotes two chapters to the problem of resistance. He correctly raises the question of the extent to which Jewish resistance has been exaggerated and inflated in response to this implied rebuke. As his survey shows, the question of active resistance – and the actual options available to Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe – requires further research.

More contentious is the issue of unarmed or passive resistance. One of the first chroniclers of the Nazi genocide, the Soviet-Jewish writer Vasily Grossman, argued that the very act of leading a normal, human life in the ghettos – creating libraries, organizing a cultural life, engaging in the provision of welfare – represented a form of 'spiritual resistance', that was often the only option open to the Jews. This view has come to be incorporated into a view of resistance that goes under the Hebrew term of *amidah*. As Bauer admits, this term is elastic and imprecise. *Amidah*, he suggests, 'includes both armed and unarmed actions and excludes passive resistance, although that term is almost a non sequitur, because one cannot really resist passively. When one refuses to budge in the face of brutal force, one does not resist passively; one resists without using force, and that is not the same thing' (p. 120). One can almost hear Finkelstein in the background demanding, 'All right, so what doesn't *amidah* cover?'

In the course of his discussion, Bauer also deals with the enduring controversy of the role of the Nazi-imposed Jewish councils in the ghettos, the *Judenräte*. Here again terminology is elusive. Did the operation of the *Judenräte* represent cooperation or collaboration, or something else? We have gone far beyond Hannah Arendt's provocative claim, in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Faber and Faber; London, 1963), that more Jews would have survived without Jewish participation in these bodies, but much research still remains to be done on the councils, and the concept of *amidah* in general.

Bauer's concluding chapters deal with his own area of specialised research, the rescue of Jews from genocide, while also suggesting areas for future research. He investigates the case of Gisi Fleischmann, one of the very few women to participate actively in rescue efforts (in this case, of Slovakian Jews). He considers the extent to which her gender helped or hindered her efforts. This study provides Bauer the opportunity to note the lack of research on women in the Holocaust, and to suggest that this could be a fertile field for specialists in gender studies.

Bauer also provides a survey of Jewish theological responses to the Holocaust. A substantial literature has grown up around the topic of Christian religious and philosophical responses, so this chapter may introduce readers to parallel, and often unknown, perspectives. Bauer concludes his study with a brief survey of the relationship of the Holocaust to the creation of the State of Israel.

Jan T. Gross' book is another roadblock on the path through the tangled thicket of Polish-Jewish relations in

the twentieth century. The topic of the book has escalated from a skirmish into a fully-fledged engagement in the website wars that have become the special battlefield of this relationship. The book has spawned so many spin-off works that we may now even speak of the 'Jedwabne Industry'. Unfortunately, the noisy polemics have drowned out some of the more interesting propositions that Gross advances in the book.

The subject of the book is straightforward and tragic: on 10 July 1941, the Catholic Polish inhabitants of the town of Jedwabne in Lomza county, in the Podlasie region of north-eastern Poland, massacred almost all of their Jewish neighbours. The German role in the affair is disputed; Gross demonstrates that the mass-murder occurred largely through local agents, and that the actual murders – cruel and vicious – were carried out by local inhabitants. The massacre was investigated by the Polish authorities in 1949, and 21 residents of Jedwabne were tried for their role in the massacre. Before that time, in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of the region by the Red Army, those few Jedwabne residents who had assisted the few Jewish survivors were driven out of town by their neighbours. Gross' sources are the protocols generated by the trial, the testimony of Jewish survivors, and a few additional archival documents that cast some light on the identity of the leaders of the massacre. While the book has its scholarly foundations, it is clearly meant for a general audience. It has certainly found one in Poland, where a Polish edition appeared in 2000, and generated an outcry that it sought to blacken the name of Poland. On the other hand, it was welcomed by many Jews in the West who welcome any confirmation of their assumption that Poles have always imbibed Jew-hatred with their mother's milk.

The massacre was led by the mayor of Jedwabne, Marian Karolak, with the participation of members of the town council and a cross section of the local Polish population. These people can hardly be placed in the categories of 'scum', or 'hooligans' who are usually blamed for any Polish mistreatment of the Jews under Nazi rule. The leaders met in advance with the Germans (who had eleven gendarme officers actually in the town), and agreed on the elimination of all Jedwabne's 1,600 Jews, almost two-thirds of the entire population. Jews were rounded up on the town square, mocked and abused, and then murdered in a variety of ways: drowned in a pond, beaten to death, buried alive. The culminating act of the pogrom came when the surviving Jews were driven into a barn, which was then burned down around them. All of this occurred virtually in the centre of town.

The narrative of the Jedwabne massacre is brief and gruesome. Critics in Poland have responded in a number of ways. Some have claimed, on the basis of one piece of disputed trial testimony, that there was a large German presence in Jedwabne on the day. The Germans either carried out the mass-murder, or forced the Poles to do so. Others have sought to blame the victims, by reasserting the clichéd claim that Jews had eagerly welcomed the Soviet occupation of the region in 1939, and collaborated whole-heartedly with the Soviet administration. (No proof has emerged, however, that any Jedwabne Jew was such a 'collaborator'.) Nationalists on the political right have characterised the Jedwabne affair as yet another attempt of 'ungrateful Jews' to smear the good name of Poland before the wider world.

In the main, this response was anticipated by Gross, who takes the time, in this short book, to ponder Jedwabne's implications for Polish-Jewish relations. He calls for Poles to have the moral courage to face up to the difficult events of their past, as well as the episodes of glory. But, it can be argued, what does this massacre, carried out over half a century ago, have to do with the modern citizens of Jedwabne, to say nothing of Poland as a whole? Gross has an answer:

Can we arbitrarily select from a national heritage what we like, and proclaim it as patrimony to the exclusion of everything else? Or just the opposite, if people are indeed bonded together by authentic spiritual affinity – I have in mind a kind of national pride rooted in common historical experiences of many generations – are they not somehow responsible also for the horrible deeds perpetrated by members of such an 'imagined community'. Can a young German reflecting today on the meaning of his identity as a German simply ignore twelve years (1933-1945) of his country's and his ancestors' history? (135)

This is even more the case, because hiding behind the facade of collective amnesia, Gross demonstrates throughout his book, the present-day citizenry of Jedwabne well-remember what happened there sixty years

ago. As Gross, and scholars such as Joanna Michlic have argued (5), if Poland is to build a modern, democratic society, and a collective identity that does not rely on xenophobia and Antisemitism as binding agents, her citizens must confront events from the 'dark past' such as Jedwabne.

The work of the three scholars discussed here, whatever their strengths and weaknesses, will hopefully demonstrate, *contra* Finkelstein, that the area of Holocaust-related scholarship is neither an 'industry' nor a 'scandal'.

Notes

1. Robert Wistrich, 'Blaming the Jews', *Commentary*, February 1998, 60-3. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. In my own studies of 'Judeophobia' in Tsarist Russia, I have distinguished between phenomena that I term 'objective Antisemitism' (i.e., based upon observed realities of Jewish life, such as their concentration in the trade in spirits or propensity to evade the military draft) and 'occult Antisemitism' (i.e., the Blood Libel or the International Jewish Kahal). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Norman Finkelstein, 'Whither the Holocaust industry? Further reflections on a growing scandal', *Jewish Quarterly*, 185 (Spring 2002), 60-1. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Joanna Michlic, *Coming to Terms with the 'Dark Past': The Polish Debate about the Jedwabne Massacre* (The Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism; Jerusalem, 2002). [Back to \(4\)](#)

Jan T. Gross is happy to accept this review and does not wish to respond further.

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