

## The Historiography of the Holocaust

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Mark Levene

In 1987 Michael Marrus completed *The Holocaust in History*.<sup>(1)</sup> *A succinct, cogent, yet apparently comprehensive study, it appeared to cover the gamut of the subject, with state-of-the-art research and exposition of the critical disputes closely entwined. It was also a significant statement of how far the historiography had developed since the event itself, at a time when, especially in North America, scholarly and student interest was mushrooming.*

Getting on for twenty years later, this volume edited by Dan Stone suggests the degree to which exponential growth is matched by an octopus-like extension of Holocaust studies into all sorts of arenas. There are subjects hardly, or not remotely, touched upon in Marrus: gender issues, memorialisation, Holocaust topography, testimony and representation. Yet Stone has to acknowledge at the outset that, in spite of his 24 highly diverse chapters, there remains a tranche of subject areas which he has not covered: no discussion of rescue, of either Jewish or Gentile responses in neutral countries, nothing specifically on the Holocaust in Hungary, or on the Balkans or, to any notable extent, Western Europe.

With this degree of specialisation in the field, not to say the repeated revision of revisions of earlier works, Stone, however, has done well to organise a very fresh and vital team of contributors. Though names include Third Reich stalwarts such as Jeremy Noakes and Christopher Browning, this is a young and suitably global team, reinforcing further a sense that Holocaust studies has become a quite central platform of historical research, at least in leading *Western* centres. Some years ago, an august, albeit early modernist, professor at the university at which I then was happily teaching responded to a discussion on how the Holocaust was to be incorporated within a department-produced video on the Second World War by wondering what the one had to do with the other. He was, of course, quite in line with some early histories of the conflict. But the

professor was also implicitly stating a not entirely singular resistance to a subject, alongside Jewish history itself, whose place was felt to be firmly at the margins, and was decidedly unwelcome in the space of the disciplinary mainstream.

But if such conservative attitudes are rarely openly stated now days, one could equally turn the issue on its head by asking to what degree Holocaust historians themselves seek a ring fencing off their subject, or see it as part of a broader historical canon. Is the Holocaust an entirely exotic, if not utterly aberrant, creature and hence outside the 'normal' path of historical development (whatever that is)? Or is it something to which others, studying in entirely different fields, whether synchronic or diachronic, might seize upon as providing some keen insight into their own work? The question clearly mirrors the increasingly polemical debate about whether we should understand the Holocaust as unique or universal.[\(2\)](#)

Implicitly, though not always explicitly, Stone's volume raises this and a series of other, more general, questions about the writing of historiography. A more trivial one, perhaps, is how should a historian, in the thick of a debate, interpose him or herself into it? More portentously, how does one – or can one – deal with an absence, or even a counter-historiography, which denies either an event, or its relevance? Alternatively, are there other ways of creating a historiography without reliance on a corpus of historical writing? Moreover, when so much has already been written on a subject, how does one envisage understanding it afresh?

Let's consider some of these issues by passing reference to the contributors' essays. Comparative discussion – in this case, in relation to other genocides – is most keenly, indeed magisterially, developed in the last essay of the volume, by Dirk Moses. He challenges the very notion of Holocaust-centricity by reminding us that the coiner of the term 'genocide', the Polish Jewish international jurist, Raphael Lemkin, conceived it during the course of the war but with the intention of conveying more than simply Jewish destruction. Some later writers, like Stephen Katz and Yehuda Bauer, have questioned whether Lemkin would have taken this line if he had known the full extent of the Holocaust. Moses repudiates this notion, proposing that, in spite of his awareness of what was happening to his own family, it was the unique qualities of national, religious and racial groups, not of any specific group, which Lemkin sought to protect through international law.

Lemkin's position may not in itself – as Moses is aware – be a guard against the pitfalls of ethnocentricity, or the problems of a 'competitive martyrology.' Strongly influenced by North American cultural mores, comparative scholars there can be particularly prone in this direction, with Ian Hancock, in this volume, venting his exasperation on the repeated sidelining of the *Porrajmos* – the destruction of the Roma – from mainstream Holocaust historiography. This is a shame not because Hancock has more than a point, but because it gets in the way of what he might have been telling us about what has been written to date, and why there is still so much ground to cover. Equally, while Hancock is rightly insistent that there was a Roma 'Final Solution', he never seeks to consider why the chronological sequence is so drawn out, why high-level orders on the matter (just as very often in the case of the Jews) were at cross-purposes, or, indeed, why so much of the destruction, primarily in eastern Europe, is lost to view.

By contrast, there is among Stone's contributors an essay which really does successfully place Jewish suffering within a broader context. This is Dieter Pohl's piece on *both* Occupation and Holocaust in Poland. This involves a close and detailed survey of events, including Soviet occupation in the east, in 1939–41, a topic about which, he notes, 'very few historians have dared to try comparative approaches' (p.98). Interwoven into this is a model account of post-1945 historiographical debates about the Polish fate under occupation. And further interwoven is the way the specifically Jewish fate has – or has not – been approached within this frame; it even tackles issues of Polish anti-Jewish collaboration. All this is done meticulously and rigorously, without fanfare or apology. In many ways it is unprecedented and a clear marker as to what can be achieved in what is otherwise a minefield of controversy.

But then Pohl is unusually modest in not putting his own highly important work to the fore. There are a number of variations on a theme here. Robert Ericksen, writing with Susannah Heschel, in a particularly stimulating contribution on the role of the German churches, considers his own significant work in the third

person. Tim Cole somewhat too keenly foregrounds his own role in the 'Ghettoisation' debate in the first person. Browning, with whom Cole has bones to pick, also does so, but with the caveat that he makes no pretence that what he is doing is 'an inextricable mix of analysis, academic memoir and advocacy' (p.173). His efforts to be fair to others engaged in similar research, however, are well-met.

Not surprisingly, it is Browning-type debates which have been at the heart of Holocaust historiography, though with a general consensus in these pages that the old intentionalist-versus-functionalist dichotomy is either exhausted or simply passé. Historians now, says Browning, for the most part agree that 'there is no "big bang" theory for the origins of the Final Solution' only a debate about which decisions should be considered more important, more pivotal, than others' (pp.184–85). A more specifically Jewish discourse about the nature of leadership, grass-roots survival and 'resistance' also receives stimulating treatment from Dan Michman, Robert Rozett and equally Tim Cole, showing the degree to which debate has moved on from Hannah Arendt's and Raul Hilberg's arguments about Jewish 'passivity'. Also resurrected here are earlier studies by Phillip Friedman and Samuel Gringauz, further reminding us that rigorous scholarship on the destruction of European Jewry was getting underway in its very ashes.

A strength of Stone's volume, thus, is his effort to broaden the parameters of this historiography, though not denying that problems might be encountered en route. For instance, no less than three chapters attempt to tackle eastern Europe and Russia under communist and post-communist rule. This is surely fundamental to events whose murderous epicentre was in the 'Lands Between'. Yet the more the contributions by John Klier and Thomas C. Fox on the pre-1990s develop, the more it is apparent that any serious indigenous Holocaust scholarship was politically thwarted, submerged or, indeed, strangled at birth. This impression is only further heightened in Florint Lobont's discerning contribution on the post-1990 scene, which suggests that the post-communist situation may even be worse, not least in the way that resurgent nationalist writing now seeks to rehabilitate Antonscu, Horthy *et al.*, even to the point where they are meretriciously recast as saviours rather than persecutors of Jews.

This is both important and alarming for the long-term health of Holocaust historiography, because its effect could be to divert attention away from the broader European, as opposed to specifically German, dimensions of mass murder, in the countries where it took place. Martin Dean makes clear that collaboration in what had been the historic Polish *kresy* was integral to the evolution of the Holocaust, giving a further bite to the debate goaded by Jan Gross's recent book on the self-willed communal massacre of Jews in Jedwabne and elsewhere in the Białyystok region, at outset of Operation Barbarossa.<sup>(3)</sup> But the simultaneous state-willed Romanian extermination of Jews, as its troops re-entered Bessarabia and the Northern Bukovina, en route to Transnistria, continues to be overwhelmingly sidelined in the broader historiography, as do other direct assaults – over and beyond assistance to the Nazis – by the Hungarians and Ustasha in particular. How these events, or, indeed, elements of Western European collaboration in the deportations to the death camps, are to be fully incorporated within that amalgam of human eradication we call the Holocaust is not evaluated here, though the ambiguities in the approach of the critical bystanders – the Western Allies – are, in part, well outlined in Tony Kushner's contribution.

Arguably, where Stone's volume is most successful is in teasing out new areas of research, or old areas in the process of marked re-evaluation. Oded Heilbrunner's plea for more research on pre-1933 German antisemitism, given his thesis about an emerging Weimar alliance between 'racism and respectability' (p. 12), for instance, neatly dovetails with Frank Bajohr's treatment of local initiatives post-1933 towards 'Aryanisation' – otherwise expropriation – of Jewish livelihood and property. This is an immensely important area of research which we ignore at our peril. Genocide may ultimately involve the killing of human beings, but the stages by which victims are degraded and deprived of their wellbeing and *raison d'être* – often through the forcible removal of simple material objects whose personal value defies quantitative assessment or audit – is as significant here as is the degree to which other 'ordinary' people are willing to be complicit in the process. Bajohr's own research suggests as many as 100,000 Hamburgers alone were implicated in this societally-legitimised form of plunder.

The development of this particular type of study, largely over the last decade, is in considerable part

indebted to a regional – not necessarily Holocaust related – *Alltagsgeschichte*. But this backdoor the approach has entirely demolished – at least in Germany – an earlier, including *marxisant*, historiography which sought to put the blame for the Holocaust entirely on political-economic elites, or, even more conveniently, on a handful of culpable leaders. The Nuremberg Trials, arguably quite intentionally, helped pave the way for this black hole, demanding in turn a reassessment of the legacy of the judicial history and its impact on memory, again here adroitly interrogated by Donald Bloxham. Both Jurgen Matthäus, and Christopher Kobrak together with Andrea Schneider, fill in the score on further, recently well-developed subjects for reconsideration, in the former, ‘perpetrator research’ – even if, as Matthäus admits, pinning down the subject seems ‘elusive’, and the usefulness or possibility of a typology ‘open to debate’ (p. 211) – in the latter, the role of big business in Nazi hyper-exploitation of slave and forced labour. Of this tranche of German-centric essays, however, the best is certainly that of Ericksen and Heschel, which superbly unravels the culpability, or failure, of the various faith groups, including Martin Niemöller’s *Bekennende Kirche*, the implicit-where-not-explicit anti-Judaism from the churches’ pre-Nazi antecedents, as well as the residual apologetics in a number of recent studies of key German clerics from this period.

If the churches, however, have been for a long time a subject of debate, ‘Gender and family’ (Lisa Pine), ‘Testimony and representation’ (Zoe Waxman) and ‘Memory, memorials and museums’ (Dan Stone) all relate to emerging lines of current Holocaust research, while suggesting close linkage to broader, if not necessarily fully developed, historical trends of the moment. One essay, however, particularly stands out in this group though also, in some sense, apart from it: Andy Charlesworth’s ‘Topography of genocide’.

One might suggest that this is not really a historiographical essay at all, though this may, in part, be due to the scarcity of other like-minded studies, not to mention the novelty of the discussion. It is certainly at the boundaries of historical research, more about how we might culturally and psychologically map often quite ‘ordinary,’ even beautiful, landscapes which became killing sites, and how we then might intrude ‘people’ – victims and perpetrators – into them. In so doing, Charlesworth manages to reach entirely beyond ‘normal’, empirical terms of reference. The results certainly are dissonant and unsettling. He cites Richard Glazer, one of the very few Treblinka survivors, who describes the transient qualities of the camp as being like a Wild West settlement, or a Yukon gold-mining town; it was a very ‘male’ place, in which the wealth came thick and fast, the prostitutes flocked in and there was spending galore. Nor does Charlesworth stop there, imagining how Nazi victory against the Soviets might have turned the steppes into an eastern equivalent of the Wild West, with SS troops sallying forth from their ‘cavalry forts’, battling against remaining Slavic ‘hostiles’, to be, in turn, iconically captured on celluloid Easterns ‘in cinemas across the Reich’ (p. 248). Charlesworth is not being facetious. His whole piece may be a shot across the bows of convention, but in his exposition of what is actually entirely modern and contemporary, this is *the* piece in the volume in which we get closest to seeing none other than ourselves in the Holocaust.

But should we want to? Or be forced to? Is it necessary in a historiographical study to try and get at some ineffable essence? But perhaps that is exactly what makes this subject different from others; it is, in fact, so huge, grotesque and beyond the bounds of decency that notions of some strict disciplinarity become quite irrelevant. Perhaps this is the reason why Charlesworth’s approach comes across as an albeit highly controlled scream; and why others wilfully turn away. Genuine engagement, however, can certainly take very different forms. Josh Cohen’s difficult but profoundly reflective essay, for instance, attempts to chart a post-Holocaust philosophy in which a number of North American Jewish writers have tried to derive meaning and transcendence from it, while other, notably European philosophers, of the ilk of Adorno and Levinas, have resisted the temptation. For some of us ordinary mortals, perhaps, it is some of the recent memorials which ultimately might help us to get there. One is the Kassel counter-monument by Horst Hoheisel – described here by Stone – of a an upside down replica of a fountain built by a Jewish architect, Sigmund Aschrott, demolished by the Nazis in 1939. The description evinces not just absence – not least of the Jews of Kassel – but a further conscious, provocative dissonance. If this is intended to make us all sit up and think, is it surely pertinent to *The Historiography of the Holocaust*.

Inevitably, in such a big project, one might carp somewhat about lapses in consistency and coherence. There

is a quite a lot of overlap, and though most essays are excellent, a couple fall a little short. There is, too, that niggling anxiety that a contemporary Western zeitgeist, in which the Holocaust is very firmly centred, is increasingly at odds with other political and cultural imperatives which want to use it more selectively, abuse or demolish it altogether. Yet this is a reflective, often profound collection, highly suggestive of the enormous range of often brilliant works which have been written on this grim topic. It offers enormous food for thought on the field so far and potential directions that it could still take. And that will surely make it an indispensable guide to current and future researchers of the Holocaust and, indeed, those trying to make sense of it within a broader historical frame.

## Notes

1. Michael Marrus, *The Holocaust in History* (1987).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, 'The politics of uniqueness: reflections on the recent polemical turn in Holocaust and genocide scholarship', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 13.1 (1999), 28-61.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jan T. Gross, *Neighbours, The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland, 1941* (2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)

The editor is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

## Other reviews:

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