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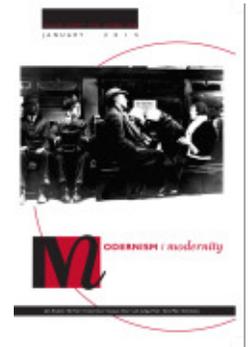
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## Commemorative Causality

Timothy Snyder

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## Commemorative Causality

**Timothy Snyder**

Without Hitler's anti-Semitism, his understanding and presentation of Jews as a global threat to Germany, the Holocaust would not have happened. To say so is to specify a necessary condition for the German attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe. But a plausible historical explanation of any significant historical event must be plural, entangling in prose multiple lines of causality that together are not only necessary but *sufficient*. For the purposes of explaining the Holocaust, then, anti-Semitism is not enough; for the purposes of its commemoration, however, it is: and the bad news is that ours is an age of memory rather than history. Commemoration requires no adequate explanation of the catastrophe, only an aesthetically realizable image of its victims. As cultures of memory supplant concern for history, the danger is that historians will find themselves drawn to explanations that are the simplest to convey.<sup>1</sup>

Before these last two decades, during which the Holocaust has come to be seen as the central event of modern European history, that place was held for two centuries by the French Revolution. François Furet, the great historian of its social and intellectual reception, wrote of the dangers of "commemorative history," wherein that which is most elegantly commemorated becomes that which is most felicitously narrated.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the Holocaust, the danger is what might be called "commemorative causality," whereby that which is most effectively and frequently commemorated becomes that which it is most convenient to present as causal in synthetic histories. The danger will be, and indeed already is, that commemorative causality will reduce the history of the Holocaust, as Hannah Arendt predicted, to a reflection of contemporary emotions.<sup>3</sup>

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78 **The Colonial Epistemic**

In the early postwar decades, the history of the Holocaust was a minor issue in the national history of Germany. The debate among German historians of the 1970s and 1980s was between “intentionalists” and “functionalists,” who stressed, respectively, the contingent nature of Hitler’s rise to power and the importance of his choices, or the continuities and creativity of German state institutions. The debate continued in the 1990s, as the Holocaust came to define the Nazi period. By then the crucial question seemed to be the role of Hitler and other Nazi leaders in the initiation of an ideologically-determined mass killing of Jews, as opposed to the initiatives taken within institutions in response to economic or military problems. These earlier and later forms of the intentionalist-functionalist disputes found highly satisfying resolutions, within the framework of German history, in the work of Ian Kershaw and Peter Longerich.<sup>4</sup>

Although intentionalists and functionalists seem to be on the opposite sides of a dispute, their apparent discord disguises a fundamental unity: the preference for internal, psychological, and national history over external, sociological, and transnational history. Even as intentionalists and functionalists disagreed as to how Germans came to rule over a good deal of Europe, they all assumed that these issues could be resolved on the basis of sources that, even in the best of cases and the wisest of interpretations, were limited by the German worldviews in which they arose and which they expressed.

Because most participants in these debates relied on official German sources, the discourse took on an implicitly psychological character. It is one thing to record and interpret how Germans saw the world and thought they were remaking it; it is another actually to describe and interpret this world. Especially after September 1939, German leaders and institutions encountered actors and forces that were not of their making, beyond their control, and untethered from their predictions. To be sure, a Polish government that refuses an alliance in 1939 or a Red Army that defends Moscow in 1941 appear in German sources; but no historians using only German sources can reconstruct the world from which those sources arose. Indeed, even the subjective side of the matter, the question of German aims and sentiments, remains opaque without an independent understanding of some of the surprising and unmistakable reality that the Germans confronted and considered but did not always themselves intelligibly record.

Though it would be a rare historian, today, who would admit to relying upon the notion of civilization, the methodology of many histories of the Holocaust seems to depend upon it. As a result of dependence upon German sources, indispensable but insufficient, the historiography of the Holocaust confirmed a certain idea of a single German or Western civilization. To be sure, historians of the Holocaust use their German sources critically, in both senses of the term. But they take for granted, in a way that is now unacceptable in comparable fields of historical inquiry, that the reality of conquest is exhausted by the records of the conquerors. The narrative of civilization is of its moral and imperial overstretch and resulting metaphysical and physical collapse. Thus histories of German civilization identify institutions that can be abused (as in Raul Hilberg’s pioneering work), or distinguish and describe the reasons for the “wrong turn” taken by German civilization (as in all the adaptations of the *Sonderweg*

idea), or absorb German civilization as a specific and extreme instance of the broader modern trend of alienation, concentration, and destruction (Hannah Arendt). But in order for a civilization to fall, reveal its contradictions, or mature to modernity, it must first exist. Without the assumption of German civilization and of civilization itself, the narrative arc of immolation would be nonsensical. **The fact that the storyline of the Holocaust is so easy to follow should arouse our suspicion.**<sup>5</sup>

A striking sign of traditional methodology is the colonial epistemic: **the unapologetic use of German-language sources to describe events that took place beyond Germany and affected non-Germans.** As two generations of historians have by now quite thoroughly demonstrated, multifocal methodology is necessary for colonial history. In most, if not all, colonial historiographies besides that of the Nazi empire in eastern Europe, this is taken for granted. The trend in, say, early modern histories of British rule in south Asia is toward the use of local-language sources as well as official British sources. It is becoming difficult to write of Spanish rule in the Americas without keeping Indian and African populations in the narrative. Even the history of the North American frontier has become multilingual, with outstanding recent studies depending upon French, Spanish, and indigenous sources. **For that matter, the history of the Nazi empire in western Europe has been written on the basis of local sources—try to imagine Robert Paxton's work on Vichy without the use of French.**<sup>6</sup> Most historians would be unlikely to advise a graduate student to write a history of French collaboration or resistance without the French language. These are issues of far greater significance and magnitude in the German eastern empire than in the German western empire, not least because the Holocaust took place in eastern Europe and concerned overwhelmingly east European Jews. **So in the history of European colonialism, only one exception is now made to the rule that local peoples have a voice: and that exception concerns the most significant case.**

In most colonial historiographies, the answer to imperial history is social history. But the social history of which society? One of the minor themes of the *Historikerstreit* of 1986 and 1987 in West Germany was the legitimacy of *Alltagsgeschichte*, or the social history of everyday life among Germans during the Second World War.<sup>7</sup> Was it morally acceptable, critics asked then, to portray the integrity of family life and the reality of local suffering at a time when Germans were exterminating Jews?<sup>8</sup> Might this not suggest that the history of a society might be written in isolation from the greatest horror that a polity has ever committed? Clearly a social history of the Germans as Germans would not overcome the colonial epistemic. One important move that was made in the last two decades, in major popular and synthetic histories of the Holocaust and the Third Reich, was the inclusion of the experience of German Jews. Might this overcome the limitations of the colonial epistemic?

Richard Evans expanded the remit of social history, demonstrating by the use of Jewish and other German first-person accounts how daily life was transformed by the rise of Hitler and the consolidation of his regime, and how Germans transformed themselves such that normality, in the sense assumed by naive *Alltagsgeschichte* of the 1980s, no longer obtained. This was still the application of social history on a national

80 rather than a European scale, however, and so once again confirmed the framework of a German civilization. In the third volume of his study, Evans continued to treat Germans as a complex society requiring nuanced inquiry, while describing the neighboring societies Germans conquered by way of familiar (and inaccurate) stereotypes. Saul Friedlander responded to the same challenge by integrating, with a narrative success never before achieved, the daily life of German Jews within a history of political anti-Semitism and the mass murder of Jews. In his synthesis, as in Evans's, social history adds the dimension of experience to the history of the Holocaust, rather than artificially separating Germans from victims. But the experience of German Jews as a guide to the Holocaust also has its limitations, and indeed in some important respects confirms rather than overcomes the colonial epistemic.<sup>9</sup>

The inclusion of the small populations of assimilated German-speaking *Westjuden* and the marginalization of larger groups of Yiddish- or Russian-speaking *Ostjuden* in such histories of the Holocaust exacerbates the problem of civilization. For most readers of Holocaust histories, German Jews are unproblematic subjects of sympathy, precisely because their lives are familiarly bourgeois—civilized. Yet a narrative emphasis on German Jews, aesthetically convenient though it is, courts the reader to believe that they were typical victims of the Holocaust, which in certain objective senses they were not. Some 97% of the victims of the Holocaust did not speak the German language. German Jews' experience of Nazi power, dreadful, humiliating, and often lethal as it was, was quite strikingly different from that of the much larger groups of east European Jews whose members made up the bulk of the victims of the Holocaust. For one thing, most German Jews survived. For another, German Jews experienced German power inside Germany, if they remained, until they emigrated or were deported to their deaths. This meant as many as twelve years of life under Hitler, and often at least eight. Most Jews among the east European populations were killed within three years of their first contact with German rule, including about a million within the first six months after contact. More east European Jews were killed within two months of contact with German power in the summer of 1941 than were German Jews during the Holocaust as a whole. German Jews were only killed as Jews in significant numbers after the Holocaust began in the occupied Soviet Union. German Jews survived in Germany for reasons that would have been unthinkable further east, such as being married to a non-Jew.

Just as important for the character of Holocaust historiography is the subjective difference between German Jewish and other Jewish victims, which has importantly influenced both primary and secondary sources. For the most part, German Jews identified with the German culture, which some of them had played a prominent role in elevating, and with the German civilization in whose mission they very often believed. Unsurprisingly they understood their own fate as a betrayal of German national traditions or as a sign of the decline and fall of European civilization. Precisely because they were generally patriotic Germans, and precisely because they were persecuted as Jews, they tended to understand anti-Semitism as a perplexing and isolated blight on a history they understood to be their own. German Jews were in no position to observe the onset of the Holocaust, until and unless they themselves were deported

to the East. Thus a narrative that follows the experience of German Jews will overlook important causes and turning points.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, important histories of the Holocaust based on German-language sources, including the ones that cite the memoirs of German Jews, solidify the paradigm of German civilization that structures their accounts. The history of a modern catastrophe takes on the form of a classical tragedy: decline and fall, with anti-Semitism as the tragic flaw. From Hilberg (the locus classicus) to Friedländer and Longerich (the current standards) the basic story has two phases, usually formally arranged as two parts or two volumes: political anti-Semitism within Germany (decline) and the mass murder of Jews beyond Germany (fall). But if we can wrench ourselves away from the familiar and compelling storyline established by Hilberg and theorized by Arendt (discrimination, separation, elimination) to contemplate some of the basic facts of the Holocaust, we sense the tension between narrative power and actual power. If anti-Semitism could cause a Holocaust, then there ought to have been one in Germany before 1939. But although a few hundred Jews were killed and roughly half the Jewish population emigrated between 1933 and 1939, nothing resembling an anti-Jewish mass killing operation took place in prewar Germany. Indeed, for every Jew killed in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, about a hundred were killed in the Soviet Union. When the Holocaust began, it was among Jews who had not been subject to any prior systematic discrimination and separation. They were simply killed as German power replaced Soviet power.

When we read synthetic histories of the Holocaust, the anti-Semitism-without-a-Holocaust of the 1930s works as dramatic tension, because we already know what comes next. But as causal explanation the political anti-Semitism of the 1930s is clearly inadequate, at best a necessary part of an explanation rather than an explanation itself. The hypothesis that emerges, usually implicitly between parts one and two of a Holocaust history, is that of a surplus of anti-Semitism generated in phase one spilling over to provide the motive force for mass killing in part two. This has enormous literary power, but makes no logical sense. If we assume that anti-Semitism alone is what causes a Holocaust, then there must have been too little of it in Germany in the 1930s rather than too much, because there was no Holocaust in Germany in the 1930s.

In histories of the Holocaust, everything happens in Germany—until it doesn't. Eastern Jews (the huge majority of the victims) and other east Europeans are absent from the story until German eyes see them and German stenographers record those perceptions. If the lands of eastern Europe are present in a history of the Holocaust before they are conquered, it is usually as Nazi mental geography; if the peoples of eastern Europe are present, they are only abstractions within Nazi planning. Then, during the eastern invasions of 1939 and 1941, territories and peoples rise over the epistemic horizon in order to be mastered or destroyed. A moral problem arises here, since the individuals belonging to the very large victim groups will be far less real to the reader than leading Nazis, Germans generally, or German Jews, who have all been present in the story for six or eight years.

A problem of context or setting arises as well. Try to think of a history of the Holocaust that notes that eight million non-Jews were murdered on the lands where the Holocaust

82 took place, while Hitler was in power, before or during the mass murder of the Jews. If this is not mentioned, then the reader lacks the basis from which to enquire about other causal mechanisms of mass killing that might be at work in the time and place. But the fundamental narratological problem in the eastern invasions of 1939 and 1941 is the absence of local texts, the absence of sources in the local languages. Sources in German can portray the decline and fall of civilization; the absence of sources in Yiddish, Polish, and Russian make the destruction of individuals and societies seem inessential to the story. The historian is left hanging at a certain distance from the worst of Nazi policies even as they begin. The reader is left (apparently) between a civilization that records its own decline in texts, and a zone of textlessness, the darkness of the *tabula rasa*.

### Commemorative Causality

Typically, anti-Semitism fills in the blank slate. In literary terms this is necessary, since the first part of the story seemed to generate an oversupply of anti-Semitism, awaiting the fulfillment of historical significance. And indeed one can make powerful and convincing arguments, as Longerich has done, to the effect that anti-Semitism as political practice was first proven successful in Germany, and then tried in the Nazi empire. This is an important part of an explanation for the Holocaust, but cannot be complete: as Longerich himself understands, it was the conditions that brought Germans beyond Germany—aggressive war and colonial planning—that provided the politics of anti-Semitism with a new setting among more vulnerable populations.<sup>11</sup>

The anti-Semitism that supplies the missing causal force is typically that of the occupied east European populations. The problem is that these populations have usually gone unstudied. After extremely careful historical study of the politics of German anti-Semitism, anti-Semitism in the lands where the Holocaust in fact took place appears suddenly as an ahistorical force. Unlike Germans, whose anti-Semitism is presented as worthy of study as a problem within a civilization, east Europeans simply figure as anti-Semitic. Their anti-Semitism is “inherent” in Yitzhak Arad’s indispensable study of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen offers “hallucination” as the way east Europeans regarded Jews.<sup>12</sup> Most striking in such categorical judgments is their explicit rejection of historical analysis. Inherency and hallucination are the kinds of terms that, by their very energy, extract the reader from historical argumentation while assuring the reader of its superfluousness. Thus once again the framework of German civilization is fixed, in opposition to eastern barbarism: the Germans may be fallen, but the east Europeans are simply low. The Germans create texts whose critical analysis reveals their fall; no texts are needed to know what we need to know about east Europeans.<sup>13</sup>

The point is not at all that anti-Semitism was not an important cause of the Holocaust. Of course it was. Along with tyranny, conformity, war, colonialism, and state destruction, it was one of the necessary conditions for the most calamitous campaign of mass murder in history. Hitler’s very special understanding of the Jews as an unnatural force that should be removed from the planet must be the beginning of an explanation.

The problem is that it is clearly not a sufficient explanation for the Holocaust. Just as there was no Holocaust in Germany between 1933 and 1939, there was no Holocaust in eastern Europe during the half millennium when the region was the world homeland of the Jews. This was not for lack of anti-Jewish sentiment. Anti-Semitism was practically ubiquitous in eastern Europe; for precisely this reason it cannot logically be seen as the crucial cause of an explosion of murderousness that began in the summer of 1941. It is more or less a constant, whereas at that moment there are some striking variables: the destruction of east European states, during a double occupation by Germany and the Soviet Union, after the failure of initial German plans for a Final Solution, and so on. So much was in motion as the Holocaust began that east European anti-Semitism, important though on this timescale static, is an improbable candidate for the major cause. During a given week in 1941 or 1942 more Jews were murdered in eastern Europe than in all historical pogroms combined. Clearly the Holocaust was an event of a different order than traditional anti-Jewish violence, and requires a different kind of explanation. Moreover, the Germans themselves were dissatisfied both with the levels of local anti-Semitism and by the chaos that ensued when Jews were murdered in pogroms. They did not rely on local violence, provoked or unprovoked, as their method of eliminating Jews.

Precise causal arguments about local anti-Semitism are and should be made, especially in a series of recent important books by Polish historians, and in Christoph Dieckmann's remarkable synthetic treatment of the Holocaust in Lithuania.<sup>14</sup> But these arguments can never be formulated convincingly on the basis of German sources alone, which can provide little of substance on the motivations of their local collaborators, and which tend to portray locals as barbarians. Although east European anti-Semites certainly took part in the Holocaust, it is not clear that they were much more likely to do so than others. The salience of local anti-Semitism depended, of course, on the drastic military, political, economic, and social change brought by occupation, and especially by double occupation. The Holocaust began in the zone of Europe that was doubly occupied, requiring us to attend to powerful external forces to an extent to which the study of occupied France or even Nazi Germany offers very little preparation.

If there is a single region where historical attention has been concentrated upon the role of local anti-Semitism in the Holocaust, it is western Ukraine. By "western Ukraine" historians usually mean Galicia, which was in the Habsburg monarchy while most regions of today's Ukraine were in the Russian Empire, and then in interwar Poland when most regions of today's Ukraine were in the Soviet Union. Galicia was indeed home to a violent terrorist movement known as the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. A significant (and successful) effort has been made to document the role of Ukrainian nationalists in the Holocaust. But it is perfectly clear that this demonstration is chiefly of moral rather than practical importance. It means that Ukrainian nationalists do not have clean hands, which is not a great surprise; it does not at all mean that the Germans needed Ukrainian nationalists in order to perpetrate a Holocaust. In central and eastern Ukraine, which is to say in the occupied Soviet Union, Ukrainian nationalism was of little significance as a sentiment and no significance as a political

84 movement. Yet here, as in the rest of the occupied Soviet Union, the Germans had no trouble finding local assistance, and the murder rates of Jews were as high as, or higher than, in western Ukraine. To locate anti-Semitism in eastern Europe and associate it with the course of the Holocaust allows some historians to ignore the complexities of east European history, which appears to be inherently contaminated. This geographical distancing allows readers the more easily to distance themselves from sentiments they know they are supposed to reject, while such an ahistorical perspective makes east Europeans appear less human than the more fully contextualized Germans. The familiar civilizational gradient has been once more confirmed.<sup>15</sup>

The lack of interest of historians of the Holocaust in the history of the lands where Jews lived and died is symptomatic of commemorative causality. The revolutions of 1848 are remembered as a turning point where history failed to turn. The revolutions of 1989 are likely to be recalled as the turning point where historiography failed to turn. Because the Holocaust took place entirely in lands that then fell behind the Iron Curtain, access to postcommunist archives was the opportunity of a lifetime not only for students of communism, but also for students of German atrocities. Since the field was moving towards a concern with experience, this was all the more true, since the vast majority of the Jews who were killed in the Holocaust had lived in lands that became part of the communist bloc. Unfortunately, in the more than two decades since 1989, the historiography of the Holocaust has followed the broader move in European historiography towards visual and memorial history. Experience of the Holocaust never quite became the subject, only its representation did. These moves were everywhere highly conservative, since they must always depend upon a prior understanding of just what is envisaged, remembered, or represented. We might personally wish to believe that these moves were in some sense progressive, but in fact they tend to enshrine an outdated account of the historical past.

This conservatism meant that the understanding of the Holocaust that was emerging in the late 1980s informed an older generation of historians seeking synthesis as well as a younger generation of historians seeking new approaches to what seemed like an old subject. To be sure, the better historians of the Holocaust knew that the events now could and should be set in eastern Europe, and that their arguments must account for the experiences of the peoples who lived there in the early 1940s. They were swimming against the tide.

### **The Comfortable Controversy**

Commemoration is the siren song of signification, appealing to emotions but fatal for thought. The victims must be brought nearer to us, and the perpetrators banished, ideally by reference to a belief they held that we can find intolerable, and which we can see as fatal to the victims. The cost of ignoring factors besides anti-Semitism, and ignoring historical setting when anti-Semitism is the subject, is a startlingly incomplete public understanding of the Holocaust. This is all the more startling, precisely because this incomplete understanding is as, if not more, common among those who actively seek

out historical perspectives on the Holocaust, whether through books, documentaries, or other media sources. The cost of using east European anti-Semitism as the narrative glue that holds together shaky explanations of the Holocaust is the maintenance of the familiar civilizational gradient between West and East.

This is a serious intellectual problem for historians, but thanks to its conventionality it has all of the advantages (and charms) of inertia. It is familiar to us from the Nazis, and it is familiar to us from the Cold War. The fall of the Berlin Wall, a moment that seemed to end both the postwar and the Cold War, has done less than might have been expected to alter the presumption of a higher civilization in the West (to which Germany now again unquestionably belongs) and an absent or lower civilization in the East. Political revolution, economic dynamism, and European integration will no doubt in the end have some effect on this sensibility, but it is noteworthy that two decades of change have altered rather than abolished the framework of Western civilization.

What is perhaps surprising is how comfortable this has been for historians and intellectuals in eastern Europe as well as those further west, allowing both to project arguments from the 1980s and even earlier into the world of today. The source of the problem, I think, is that commemorative causality was taking hold in western Europe and the United States in the early 1990s, precisely as the opportunity to do new research on the German empire in the east was presenting itself. On the internet, in the press, and in the European Parliament, the dispute is between Westerners who emphasize the singularity of the Holocaust and Easterners who emphasize Stalinist crimes. The energy and durability of this dispute arise from certain intellectual commitments of what might be called western "civilizers" and eastern "nationalizers." The civilizers' view of the past includes the tragedy of the decline and fall of (German) civilization. It does not admit the possibility of other civilizations to the immediate east of Berlin, be they in Polish, Lithuanian, or Yiddish. Thus the slow destruction of the rule of law in Germany in the 1930s (undoubtedly a very important subject) is generally accorded a good deal of attention, whereas the total destruction of the states to Germany's east is usually not considered at all.<sup>16</sup>

In 1939 and 1940, as a result of the alliance then in force between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, the Germans and the Soviets together destroyed Poland, while the Soviets destroyed the three Baltic States. These countries were home to roughly ten times as many Jews and twenty times as many Holocaust victims as was Germany itself. The destruction of states was of decisive importance for Jews: in places where prewar state authority was destroyed or displaced, Jews had about a one in twenty chance of surviving; in places where the prewar state remained, even if that state was the Nazi state or a Nazi ally, their chances were more like one in two. But to note the importance of the state for Jews (and of course for other citizens) would require historians of the Holocaust to consider political life and tradition beyond Germany. This is impossible to achieve within the decline-and-fall narrative, and impossible within the limits of the colonial epistemic.

Yet for many civilizers there was one civilization east of Germany: the Soviet Union. Despite all of its flaws, which are sometimes acknowledged, the USSR figures

86 as civilization under assault, the power that in **rescuing itself rescues humanity**. The crucial image for this redemptive theme is that of the “liberation” of Auschwitz by the Red Army. This standard trope, trotted out whenever civilizers feel threatened, is more than problematic. Why Auschwitz, rather than the killing fields further east, where far more Jews were murdered, or the death facilities further east, where far more Jews were also murdered? These sites too were liberated by the Red Army, but lack the resonance of Auschwitz, some of whose victims are known to us, and some of whose victim groups belong to a more familiar central and west European geography of civilization. Unlike the killing fields, unlike the death facilities of Treblinka, Bełżec, and Sobibór, Auschwitz was a large concentration camp as well as a killing site, so there was something physical to be liberated.

Perhaps above all, Auschwitz is resonant because it has come to stand for the depths of a fallen civilization. It is seen as evil, but also as modern. It reveals a tragic flaw. For this reason, its liberation by soldiers who seem to dialectically represent a healthy and victorious civilization is all the more poignant. **If the Soviets freed Auschwitz, imply the civilizers, then they must have stood for values opposite to those of the Nazis who built it.** Although many of the prisoners who awaited the Red Army at Auschwitz were not in fact Jewish, they have come to stand for those Jews who awaited the coming of the Soviets as their only chance for survival. The liberation of Auschwitz thus fits perfectly the civilizers’ assumptions and literary needs, wedding as it does the emotionally irresistible force of the desperate hopes of Jewish survivors to the implicit notion that civilization itself has returned and triumphed.

**This tempting literary move can only be made if prior references to Soviet power and policy are absent.** Thus one can read a library of books about the Holocaust without learning that it began in doubly-occupied lands where the German invasion of 1941 undid Soviet structures established after the Soviet occupation of Poland in 1939 or the Baltics in 1940. **Soviet power was present everywhere the Holocaust took place, either immediately after or (usually) both before and after the mass murder of the Jews. The Soviets themselves murdered some four million people on the lands where the Holocaust took place while Hitler was in power.** Many of the non-Germans who killed Jews or who guarded the death facilities were double collaborators and Soviet citizens. Auschwitz, the symbol of evil, modernity, and liberation, had been a town in Poland; it was ceded to Germany by the Soviet Union by the terms of the German-Soviet military alliance of 1939. It was the destruction of the Polish state (with Soviet help) that expanded the population of Jews in Germany from a few hundred thousand to more than two million. There followed, in German-occupied Poland, expulsions and ghettoizations of Jews, as well as an acceleration of the planning for a Final Solution. One Nazi plan, in early 1940, was to deport two million Polish Jews to the Soviet Union, then a German ally. Unsurprisingly, though problematically for the civilizers, the Soviets declined.

During the German-Soviet alliance, Soviet propaganda played down German anti-Semitic policy. This meant that when the Germans invaded Soviet territory in mid-1941, the region’s Jewish citizens were almost entirely unprepared for the new reality.

During the course of the German-Soviet war of 1941-1945 the worst places to be, for Jews and for everyone else, were those territories (doubly) occupied by both the Soviets and the Germans. The Soviets indeed played the crucial role in the victory over the Germans but, like their allies, were not fighting to stop the Holocaust. When Army Group Center of the Red Army halted at the Vistula in August 1944 and watched the Germans brutally suppress the Warsaw Uprising, it was also giving the Germans time to deport the 67,000 remaining surviving Jews of Łódź to Auschwitz, both of which were just a few days' march away. They also waited as most of the remaining prisoners of Auschwitz were death-marched towards Germany. The point is not that the Soviet Union was as bad as Nazi Germany, or should be seen as complicit in the Holocaust. The point is that this burdensome history is excluded from histories of the Holocaust because it interferes with the image of the liberation of Auschwitz as the simply moving return of civilization.

For the civilizers' opponents in eastern Europe, the "nationalizers," the key concept is not civilization but national sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> While students of the Holocaust tend to ignore or understate the significance of other German or Soviet crimes that took place in the same regions as the Holocaust, nationalizers emphasize (and often overstate the significance of) the German or Soviet crimes associated with the loss of statehood. East Europeans cannot overlook the destruction of their states, as Holocaust historians tend to do. Since it was the Soviet Union that was the main destroyer of states (either in the wars after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, during the German-Soviet alliance of 1939-1941, or at war's end in 1945) nationalizers cannot see the USSR as the redeemer of civilization. It figures instead as an aggressor that sought to destroy the local national communities into which most nationalizers were born, and to which sovereignty was restored only in 1989-1991. Unlike the civilizers, who usually (with the exception of an older generation) have little or no personal experience of tyranny, the nationalizers (apart from a younger generation) were raised under communism, and cannot reasonably be expected to dismiss the USSR from history. As they know, Soviet policy was not only to destroy states but to liquidate the elites that might one day restore them; they see themselves, in writing national history within sovereign states, as defying what the Soviets presented as the verdict of history.

Nationalizers tend to see western colleagues as too willing to accept that verdict, and in the best case to write of east European lands as though they lacked elites, states, and traditions, and in the worst case not to write about them at all. Because the Holocaust began in the occupied Soviet Union and happened entirely on lands that fell under Soviet power, east Europeans take for granted that a history of war and atrocity includes both Hitler and Stalin. Taboos about comparability and the like make little sense to people whose families were very often struck by both Soviet and German power. The physical and architectural environments of eastern European cities and countryside are marked by both regimes, which means that even younger and coming generations have and will have difficulty seeing Nazi occupation of their homelands as something completely distinct from the rest of history.

88 The Holocaust was never unknown in eastern Europe, because it took place in eastern Europe, and because the huge majority of its victims were east Europeans—“neighbors,” in Jan Gross’s memorable phrasing.<sup>18</sup> National myths of unadulterated heroism during the war and innocence during the Holocaust have been challenged with varying degrees of success from one east European country to another since 1989; historiographical debates about the Holocaust have taken place at higher or lower levels. Civilizers seem to expect more of nationalizers: a repetition of German acknowledgments of guilt, followed by an acceptance of the current state of Holocaust historiography, with all of its problems, limitations, and taboos. This is impossible. While it is incontestable that hundreds of thousands of east Europeans took part in the Holocaust in one way or another, and almost certain that most killers of Jews were not Germans, the Final Solution was a German policy led by Germans (and Austrians) on occupied territory. The standard of civilization as national recognition of a single national crime simply cannot be met beyond Germany, because the crime in question was above all a German one. The standard of civilization, as collapse or as apologia, is set by Germany; the confusion arises when civilizers confuse universalism with *the German experience* and expect that elites in eastern Europe can simply work from the German template.

In the last two decades, we have seen the dispute between civilizers and nationalizers vex attempts to construct a common European history, and indeed cause problems for the project of European integration. Each side, after all, is sure that it represents the best of Europe: the Europe of experience in the East, the Europe of enlightenment in the West. The dispute endures, and can continue to endure, because each of their stories has a certain coherence that, far from challenging the story of the other, helps to anchor it.

This is the central feature of the controversy: despite appearances, it is extremely comfortable for both sides. The cliché runs that a dispute generates more heat than light: this one produces a kind of cozy warmth. Each side is so palpably wrong about so many major issues that the other cannot help but feel that it must, in turn, be right. But the secret community at the heart of the comfortable controversy is the general concord over commemorative causality. Both research colonially, using the sources of the colonizer to portray the fate of the oppressed; both see like the state in order to feel like the victim. They define the victims differently, but treat them similarly. Elements of contemporary history of representation that we might experience as postmodern or liberating actually serve the conservative function of the perpetuum mobile of the comfortable controversy. Four examples are discourse, language, terminology, and representation.

The discourse of the uniqueness of the Holocaust produces a contagious exceptionalism that aids both civilizers and nationalizers. To be clear on the historical issue: the Holocaust was an unprecedented crime, both in intentions and outcome. The problem begins not with historical writing that seeks to prove this, but with a historical discourse that simply presumes it (and seeks to establish a taboo against attempting to decide the issue with evidence). Civilizers take for granted that nationalizers should accept the discourse of presumptive uniqueness, and take it as a sign of barbarism when this does

not occur. But the civilizers' problem is not exactly that the history of the Holocaust fails to impress. Their problem is that it impresses in a different way than expected.

The discourse of Holocaust uniqueness is understood by east Europeans, not entirely wrongly, as an endorsement of local conventional historiographical practices. Consider the methodological assumptions of Holocaust discourse: (1) assertions of the uniqueness of the experience of the victims, accompanied by the suggestion that the suffering of the one group might somehow redeem all of humanity; (2) the colonial epistemic, or the critical use of colonial sources; (3) determined monolingualism, or **the strong preference not to use bodies of sources that will complicate the account**; (4) careful delineations of insiders and outsiders. Once these assumptions are made explicit, we see immediately that they describe traditional east European national historiography, as established in the nineteenth century, and practiced to the present day. The history of the Holocaust can be received not as a challenging new sort of discourse, but rather as another example of national history, and thus confirming the legitimacy of national history as such. Thus exceptionalism turns out to be contagious. The history of the Holocaust in the late twentieth century was written according to the model of east European romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century, which it then reinforces in the twenty-first.

After contagious exceptionalism, the second mode of cooperation in the comfortable controversy is the linguistic truce: if you promise not to learn our languages, we will promise not to learn yours. **No historian of the Holocaust who was significant in 1989 took the trouble to learn an east European language thereafter, despite the incredible availability of sources in the lands where the Holocaust took place.** No synthetic history of the Holocaust written in English spells the names of localities correctly. Consider, just for a moment, how seriously you would take a history of Cromwell's rebellion that misspelled the names of English towns. One of the grimly predictable tasks of Russian and Polish translators is to standardize the eccentric topologies of western histories of the Holocaust. **All too often historians simply use German transliterations of local place names, some of them invented on the spot by German officials, rather than checking what a given locality might have been called by the people who lived and died there.**<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, and just as strikingly, a new generation of Polish Holocaust researchers has emerged who do not seem to read German. If anything, east European historians of today are less multilingual than they were under communism. These Polish researchers have nonetheless produced the most interesting body of new work on the Holocaust within any national community in the last few years. Unfortunately it goes unread, since **precious few historians of the Holocaust in Germany, Israel, or the United States know the language of the land where most of the Holocaust took place.**<sup>20</sup>

The terminology that permits the civilizers and the nationalizers a durable if contentious truce is **genocide**. The civilizers tend to maintain that there was only one genocide, the Holocaust; the nationalizers counter that there were two, the Holocaust and a Soviet crime (which one depends on the country). Of course, everyone is wrong; **by the legal definition, both the Germans and the Soviets committed multiple genocides.** So any debate as to whether the proper number of genocides is one or two is political, and likely

90 carried out in either ignorance or bad faith or both. What its persistence reveals is the valuable ambiguity of the term “genocide” for both the civilizers and the nationalizers.

For nationalizers, the broad legal definition of genocide permits claims (very often correct) that a given crime against their people was genocidal. But the appeal of the term is not that it can be correctly applied. The appeal of the term for nationalizers resides in its popular association with the Holocaust. Many people believe that genocide means the same thing as Holocaust, and therefore nationalizers can score polemical points when they call a crime genocidal. But why do some people hold the incorrect view that the Holocaust was the only genocide? This is thanks to the civilizers, who insist on limiting the application of genocide to the Holocaust as a way of preventing such comparisons. Of course, such defenses simply invite comparisons from those who would like a similar aureole to surround their own national tragedies. The question must then arise: why do civilizers think that the Holocaust, which in simple historical terms was clearly unprecedented, will be further clarified by the obviously incorrect application of a legal term? In all likelihood, this is because historians of the Holocaust lack confidence in their claims to uniqueness and therefore seek a nonhistorical buttress to their views; if so, this lack of confidence is little more than an invitation to nationalizers to use “genocide” on every possible occasion. However that may be, the accord among civilizers and nationalizers about the indispensability of a term they make ambiguous allows the discussion to continue indefinitely.

Since 1989, civilizers have unwittingly helped nationalizers to establish parallel histories of victimhood grounded in commemorative causation. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem are, in the most literal sense, inspirations for the memory ministries and new historical museums that are now so popular and well-funded in much of eastern Europe. Scholars and curators do not seek to imitate their own traditional national museums, but rather the effective formats of museums of the Holocaust. They believe that the techniques used to isolate the Holocaust from history can also be applied to other episodes of mass killing and repression in eastern Europe.

Commemorative causality is thus not a problem for historians of the Holocaust only because it generates poor histories of the Holocaust; it is a problem because it generates poor histories of events that are related to and will be compared with the Holocaust. It permits the comfortable controversy between civilizers and nationalizers to be institutionalized.

### **Circular History**

Commemorative causality, the confusion between present resonance and past power, denies history its proper subject. The explanation of the Holocaust becomes circular, no longer a search for the terms to express the horror of Jewish experience and the concepts to explain the whole of German policy, but instead the unreflective insertion of today’s common sense into gaps of historical expression and understanding. Of course, the balance between present and past is always difficult to strike; finding it is

the business of the historian. The task becomes impossible when the commemorative impulse of the present is confused with the past itself, such that what is easiest to represent becomes what it is easiest to argue. Then we have no serious explanations, only emotional reflexes. With commemorative causality, the boundaries of history are set by the contingencies of empathy, which then becomes a precious commodity. Writing about episodes of mass killing besides the Holocaust, according to Omer Bartov, “precludes empathy.”<sup>21</sup> If this is true, the fault lies with the writers of Holocaust history, rather than its readers. Certainly people who survived the Holocaust had empathy for those who survived other horrors; its students should do no worse.

Jews during the Second World War knew about the murder of Soviet prisoners of war by the Germans. But who will commemorate these three million mortal victims of Nazi oppression? No one, because they do not belong to a commemorative community. Because they are not commemorated, they go missing in synthetic histories of the Holocaust, although their experience is indispensable for an adequate explanation of the Holocaust. Their plight forces us to consider Nazi planning for the east: to create a racial empire after starving and deporting tens of millions of people. These plans are needed to understand why Germans conquered the lands of Jewish settlement. The experience of the Soviet prisoners of war also confirms the Nazi ideological priority of the destruction of Jews. When German plans broke upon Soviet resistance, Hitler was willing to use captured Slavs as laborers, while accelerating and escalating the Final Solution such that it became the Holocaust. Many of these individuals were starved twice: not just in horrible German hunger camps in 1941, but in Soviet Ukraine in 1933. These lives thus recall for us the issues of modernization, empire, and political economy that we must have in mind if we are to hope to understand the Holocaust. These categories cannot be commemorated because they are not of the past. They are of the present—which is precisely why they should be remembered.

The commemorative impulse not only separates ideology from history, it limits ideology to what can be represented in non-textual forms. Ideology becomes what can be aestheticized today, rather than what was desired in the past. Without a full understanding of ideology’s own claims on the world, and without a lively understanding of past worlds altered by ideology, we can neither understand anti-Semitism nor prepare ourselves for its return (or for the revival of similar ideas). Like the Nazis who sought to conquer eastern Europe, and for that matter the Soviets who did, we live in a world of scarcity. It is not too difficult to imagine other ideas that will justify radically unequal distributions of resources, and the destruction of groups who seem to stand in the way. Can such a marriage of ideas and destruction happen again? It already has, in various forms, in China, Cambodia, and Africa. Has it been exactly like the Holocaust? Of course not. But is it productive of historical understanding or political judgment to attune research about the past to the commemorative practices of today? Can we afford to replay the ideological disputes of the twentieth century as a comfortable controversy while ignoring the connections between the material and the ideational? Should we rest our case upon an idea of civilization that depends upon mastering the unmasterable past in the service of sustaining an unsustainable present? Of course not.

92 **Notes**

1. This essay draws from three lectures, delivered at the Wilson Center in Washington DC, Cambridge University, and Princeton University; my thanks are due to Vladimir Tismaneanu, Rory Finnan, and Jan-Werner Müller for the invitations.

2. In the first part of *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Collection Folio/Histoire, 1978).

3. In her 1965 lectures at the New School for Social Research, collected as *Über das Böse: Eine Vorlesung der Ethik* (Munich: Piper, 2007).

4. Inter alia Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Peter Longerich, *The Unwritten Order: Hitler's Role in the Final Solution* (Stroud: Tempus, 2001); Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: Biographie* (Berlin: Siedler, 2008). See also my review of Longerich in the *New York Review of Books*, June 23, 2011, 54–56.

5. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), three volumes; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951).

6. Notably, but not exclusively, Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

7. Still invaluable as English-language introductions to the *Historikerstreit* are Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), and Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988). See also Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Entsorgung der deutschen Vergangenheit?* (Munich: Beck, 1988).

8. The simple factual problem with this approach is that German families were perfectly aware of the Holocaust and other German crimes, not least because so many of them materially benefited from them. Although this was no doubt known in the 1980s among Germans of older generations, it was not as well documented then as it has been since.

9. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Saul Friedländer, *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939–1945* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). I discuss these works in *The New York Review of Books*, September 30, 2010 and December 3, 2009.

10. A fascinating example of a violation of the taboo on making this rather ordinary observation is Jan Patočka's discussion of Husserl in his analysis of Heidegger's famous *Spiegel* interview. Jan Patočka, commentary on "Entretien avec *Der Spiegel*: Réponses et questions sur l'histoire et la politique," *Le Messager Européen* 1 (1987), 21–73.

11. See the longer discussion in *The New York Review of Books*, June 23, 2011.

12. Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Worse than War: Genocide, Eliminationism, and the Ongoing Assault on Humanity* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2009), 358; Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press and Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), 89.

13. The distinction I seek to make between commemorative and causal history is much the same as that Isaiah Berlin introduces between the methods of Voltaire and those of Vico. *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 92.

14. Christoph Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941–1944* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2011). See also my reviews in the *New York Review of Books*, December 20, 2012 and June 21, 2012.

15. Important work on the role of the OUN in the Holocaust is being done by John-Paul Himka and Marco Carynnyk. For my own work on Ukrainian and Polish nationalist ethnic cleansing, see "The Causes of Ukrainian-Polish Ethnic Cleansing, 1943," *Past and Present*, 179 (2003), 197–234; "The Life and Death of West Volhynian Jews, 1921–1945," in Ray Brandon and Wendy Lower, eds., *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, and Memorialization* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 77–113; relevant chapters in *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); and *Sketches from a Secret War: A Polish Artist's Mission to Liberate Soviet Ukraine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

16. In Yehuda Bauer's indispensable and otherwise excellent study of the *shtetlakh*, where prewar sovereignty cannot be ignored, it is dismissed: "Polish society imploded under the weight of its own corruption, economic failure, and uselessness." Yehuda Bauer, *The Death of the Shtetl* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 360.

17. Although I presumably owe the invitation to contribute to this collection to my work on the Holocaust, I have devoted most of my career to the problem of national history and national myth in eastern Europe. In one way or another, this was the subject of the four books that preceded *Bloodlands*.

18. The title of Gross's book (*Neighbors*) has a meaning in English that it lacked in the Polish original. In English translations of the Bible, Leviticus 19:18 commands us to love our neighbors as ourselves. In the Gospel of Luke, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus defines a neighbor as one who shows mercy, which of course is just what Poles in Jedwabne did not do. This painful irony is absent in Polish, since the book's title "sąsiedzi" is not the word used in Polish translations of Leviticus and Luke (which is "bliźni").

19. The use of one reference book would solve this problem: Paul Robert Magocsi's *Historical Atlas of Central Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 2002.

20. Jan Gross's books appear in English, as has Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak, *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009). Deserving of attention and translation inter alia are: Marek Szapiro, *Nim słońce wszędzie. Dziennik pisany w ukryciu 1943–1944* (Warsaw: Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, 2007); Barbara Engelking and Dariusz Libionka, *Żydzi w powstańczej Warszawie* (Warsaw: Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2009); Adam Puławski, *W obliczu Zagłady. Rząd RP na uchodźstwie, Delegatura Rządu RP na Kraj, ZWZ-AK wobec deportacji Żydów do obozów zagłady (1941–1942)* (Lublin: IPN, 2009); Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd* (Warsaw: Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2011); Barbara Engelking, *Jest taki piękny, słoneczny dzień...* (Warsaw: Polish Center for Holocaust Research, 2011).

21. Jürgen Matthäus, Martin Shaw, Omer Bartov, Doris Bergen, and Donald Bloxham, discussion of Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide, Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 13, Nos. 1–2, 128.