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Rethinking the Holocaust, and: Sources of Holocaust
Research: An Analysis (review)

John K. Roth

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Book Reviews

***Rethinking the Holocaust*, Yehuda Bauer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), xvi + 335 pp., cloth \$35.00, pbk. \$16.95.**

***Sources of Holocaust Research: An Analysis*, Raul Hilberg (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 218 pp., \$26.00.**

Both Yehuda Bauer and Raul Hilberg, two preeminent Holocaust historians, published capstone books in 2001. Lucid and penetrating, disciplined and full of vitality, Bauer's *Rethinking the Holocaust* and Hilberg's *Sources of Holocaust Research* are stocktaking works that reflect the writers' distinctive approaches and augment their previous findings. A comparative reading shows significant differences between these authors. While Bauer calls Hilberg's pioneering study of Nazi bureaucracy, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, a "monumental, brilliant, and, in my view, unsurpassed" account (p. 55), he still finds fault in at least four ways: Hilberg's analysis underestimates the extent of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust; his discussions of ghettoization and the Jewish councils are too general to withstand the scrutiny of detailed empirical research; he minimizes the importance of oral and written testimony from the Jewish victims and survivors; and Hilberg's emphasis on bureaucracy precludes dealing adequately with the ideological motivations—specifically antisemitism—that drove Nazi Germany to genocide.

That said, overt disagreements between Bauer and Hilberg play a relatively minor part in these books. Hilberg scarcely mentions Bauer by name, although *Sources of Holocaust Research* leaves no doubt that its author remains convinced that German documents provide quintessential, though not exclusive, evidence about the Holocaust. In addition, Hilberg's rich discussion of the varied available research sources does much to clarify the prospects for and limitations of our knowledge about the Shoah. At least by implication, his perspectives put into bold relief some of the fundamental philosophical problems at the center of Bauer's work, as well as at the heart of every serious attempt to understand how and why the Holocaust happened and to grapple with that catastrophe's reverberations.

Hilberg, a master of understatement, has been heard to say that he is neither a philosopher nor an ethicist, much less a theologian; but often his scholarship says otherwise. Although he indicates that *Sources of Holocaust Research* is no "epistemological treatise" (p. 8), his book raises basic questions concerning knowledge about the Holocaust: What can we know about that event, and how do we know about it? "The researcher," writes Hilberg, "strives to recapture the past in its pristine state" (p. 71), but to what extent, if at all, can that ideal be achieved? Hilberg's response takes him back to the beginning—to the sources upon which scholars depend. This return to the

sources, however, does not make them “raw material” that would enable any scholar simply to describe “the event itself” (p. 7).

Two complications intrude to make us think about the relationships between the sources and the events they document. First, the sources are not the event—the Holocaust—itsself. Second, the sources are inseparable from the event, for if they were to disappear our best access to the Holocaust would vanish as well, and not least because the sources reflect aspects—sometimes small but still significant parts—of the event itself. If attention turns to sources so that “their own history and qualities” (p. 7) appear, what happens to our striving to recapture the past? Whether intended or not, the implications of Hilberg’s reflections are dual and paradoxical. The sources place us closer to the Holocaust than we may have imagined; they also leave us further from it than historical research may have assumed.

Hilberg is well known for saying that “big questions” leave him uneasy because they often produce small answers. Characteristically, therefore, he turns to the details. When he does so on this occasion, the result is a typology of sources that are as diverse as they are numerous. On the latter point, for example, Hilberg notes that the Germans had to use more than twenty languages to communicate their anti-Jewish measures. He also underscores that despite “the gaping holes” left after so much documentation was lost or destroyed, including materials that came from Jews in ghettos and camps, what remains “fills hundreds of archives” (pp. 21–22).

Even the outline of Hilberg’s typology is too complex to repeat here. Suffice it to say that his basic classification refers to three-dimensional materials (structures and objects), including the remains of concentration and death camps, and two-dimensional materials (pictorial and verbal) such as photographs, memoirs, and oral histories, but especially the published or confidential Holocaust-era documents—particularly those that bear the perpetrators’ marks. All of these materials tell about the Holocaust, but to make the evidence into *evidence*, an interpreter has to know much about the documents themselves.

Despite Hilberg’s denial that his book is an interpreter’s manual, it provides multilayered lessons. Noting that “each piece of paper was once an action” (pp. 31–32), he alerts one to the questions that must be brought to a document: What about its composition, style, and content, for example, or, to be more specific, what about a document’s security classification, its choice and use of words, its silences and assumptions? Such questions deepen the inquiry that the sources require if they are to give up their secrets. To the extent that research can make them do so, knowledge about the Holocaust is likely to be revised and increased. The extent to which the knowledge will increase, however, remains in question, and the reasons are deeply lodged in Hilberg’s reflections on the sources.

Absences, silences, unexplained routines, hidden or ambiguous meanings, cryptic references, details that “float in the text as unanchored fragments” (p. 165) are only a few of the factors that make the sources less than crystal-clear. As Hilberg empha-

sizes, the researcher “is not the addressee” of any Holocaust document (p. 165), and the background necessary to understand fully a piece of evidence may remain elusive. Nor do the complications end there. Although Hilberg makes the point primarily with respect to memory and hindsight, even contemporary documents may suggest that chunks of information are missing from perpetrators’ reports or victims’ accounts, let alone from the reticent statements of bystanders. No matter how vast the documentation may be, incompleteness forever haunts the Holocaust researcher. “Even micro-filming,” Hilberg observes, “is seldom comprehensive” (p. 200).

Hilberg is no epistemological skeptic, let alone a relativist, when it comes to historical interpretation. Nevertheless, while the book exhibits the importance of concrete detail—Hilberg’s discussion of Nazi laws, decrees, and announcements provides illuminating examples—*Sources of Holocaust Research* ends on a melancholy note, one that is fitting for an event for which no triumphal notes can be sounded. Hilberg’s closing words provide a counterpoint in a minor key to the notion that the historian’s goal is to recapture the past in its pristine state. “There is no finality,” he writes, “the reality of the events is elusive, as it must be.” What can be achieved, he concludes, are “small incremental gains,” for which it is essential to strive—and here the melancholy is coupled with determination to resist it—“lest all be relinquished and forgotten” (p. 204).

Bauer’s *Rethinking the Holocaust* is similar to Hilberg’s book insofar as it is not a history but a return to beginnings and specifically to “an attempt to rethink categories and issues that arise out of the contemplation of that watershed event in human history” (p. ix). Bauer refers to his work as “historiosophy,” the intersection of philosophy and history. It becomes apparent—much more so than in Hilberg’s case—that a mature scholar seeks to re-establish his claim to ideas and interpretations that he fears will be distorted, overridden, or eclipsed by scholarly competitors, such as Zygmunt Bauman, Götz Aly, and Daniel Goldhagen.

Five themes distinguish Bauer’s outlook from Hilberg’s: the Holocaust remains unprecedented; the Holocaust, at least in principle, is explicable; if we probe why the Holocaust happened, a task that many scholars tend to avoid, antisemitism looms large; understanding the Holocaust entails paying close attention to the Jewish victims; and finally, study of the Holocaust involves political aims.

Hilberg is not often associated with longtime debates about the Holocaust’s uniqueness, but Bauer steadfastly defends the affirmative response to that question, although he now prefers the term “unprecedentedness.” By changing the terminology, he tries to elude the criticism that “uniqueness” lacks meaning because all historical events are particular and therefore unique in one way or another. In ways never seen before or since, says Bauer, Nazi ideology, a “pure fantasy” that combined racial antisemitism with belief in a global Jewish conspiracy to control the world, condemned Jews “anywhere in the world” to death “just for being born” and murdered them in killing centers that constituted “a totally new stage of development” (pp. 265, 267).

If the Holocaust is unique then it could be argued that the Holocaust defies ex-

planation. Bauer rejects such reasoning, arguing that the Holocaust's unprecedentedness depends upon the fact that its horror was inflicted by one group of human beings upon another. Unless we claim that human beings cannot be understood, which we do not, the Holocaust can be comprehended by historical analysis because it was a human event from start to finish.

Bauer underscores that he is not saying that anyone has fully comprehended how the Holocaust happened and why. Not only do historians' efforts involve alternative and even competing views, but these accounts do not—indeed cannot—encompass everything. They are incomplete, subject to correction as errors are discovered, and revised as new evidence is found.

Rethinking the Holocaust hedges its bets on the question of explicability, but, lacking insights akin to those in Hilberg's book, Bauer's account does not probe deeply enough. Because historical analysis is a human endeavor that inevitably lacks omniscience, there is no good reason to assume that full historical comprehension is possible. Thus claims that the Holocaust is explicable—even “perfectly explicable” (pp. 22, 27), as Bauer sometimes says—are in more trouble than he thinks. God might possess the comprehension necessary to make the Holocaust fully explicable, but while Bauer finds Holocaust-related theology fascinating, he concludes it is “a dead end” (p. 212). Still, Bauer the rationalist historian insists, the Holocaust remains explicable *in principle*.

Unfortunately, Bauer's rationalism deceives him at this point. If no one can fully explain the Holocaust through historical analysis—and that is where the logic of Bauer's “historiosophy” leads—then does it make sense to say that, in principle, the Holocaust is explicable historically? At best, we seem to be left with hypotheses that are “likely stories”—some far better documented and more accurate than others—but probably no more than that. Bauer would be on firmer ground to settle for the fact that our historical comprehension, real though it is, has serious limits, in part because of our finite and fallible human capacities, in part because the sources upon which we rely are not entirely free of ambiguity, and in part because the event itself entails questions and implications beyond what historical analysis alone can address.

Bauer stresses that the factor of antisemitism must loom large if we are to grasp why the Holocaust happened. Scholars such as Hilberg and Bauman have rightly emphasized that an immense bureaucracy—involving expertise from virtually every sector of German society—was necessary to implement the Nazis' genocidal intentions. Bauer contends, however, that ideology was the decisive factor that activated the bureaucracy. At the core of Nazi ideology, racial antisemitism took Jews to be so threatening and detestable—politically and cosmically—that their elimination from Nazi Germany's “superior” culture became imperative.

Bauer acknowledges that his interpretation constitutes just one among many. But he goes on to say that he naturally finds his own views convincing, and he rarely misses an occasion to argue that the interpretations of other scholars are wanting, particularly that of Goldhagen. Bauer insists that Goldhagen has a simplistic understand-

ing of antisemitism, and that the latter fails to account adequately for ways in which political and administrative structures were necessary to promote genocide. On the other hand, whenever Bauer finds that Goldhagen is on target, he is quick to argue that Goldhagen is a latecomer whose views are neither original nor properly credited to his scholarly predecessors—including, predictably, Bauer himself. The modest tone that helps to make Hilberg's book convincing is harder to find in *Rethinking the Holocaust*.

Because Bauer thinks that they have so much to teach us, his "predilection is to deal with the Jewish victims of the Holocaust" (p. xv), another approach that differs from that of Hilberg. Hence, Bauer says that the core of his interpretation is found in two chapters that focus on Jewish responses, especially resistance, to the Nazi onslaught. He interprets resistance in relation to the Hebrew term *amidah*, which means "standing up against." Understood in that way, resistance could be armed or unarmed, individual or communal. It involved, for instance, food smuggling to keep life going in Jewish ghettos as well as violent escape attempts at death camps such as Treblinka and Sobibor. Resistance also involved what the Jewish tradition calls "sanctification of life," which in the Holocaust context included efforts—such as educating children or practicing religion—to keep life meaningful on Jewish terms.

Bauer does not contend that resistance tells the whole story of Jewish responses during the Holocaust, but he thinks that the best explanations require more focus on German power than on flawed Jewish character. In cases where resistance was not evident or sustainable, especially in the "sanctification of life" dimensions of *amidah*, Bauer finds that minimal conditions necessary for its appearance were lacking. For example, the chances for organized resistance among ghettoized Jews were scant whenever German rule early on combined factors such as "totally ruthless exploitation, starvation, and the mass murder of young men" (p. 164). As Bauer assesses the evidence, Jews were anything but passive, although the conditions brought to bear against them could and did become so devastating that death prevailed.

By focusing on the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective, Bauer believes, we may find "a lesson, possibly, or a warning, possibly, or an encouragement, possibly" (p. xv). Thus, *Rethinking the Holocaust* makes a final point clear: Study of the Holocaust involves political aims. The book ends with a speech that Bauer gave to the Bundestag on January 27, 1998, the German Holocaust Memorial Day. Bauer alluded to the Ten Commandments, suggesting that where mass murder, genocide, or "a Holocaust-like tragedy" threaten, the Decalogue should be supplemented by three additional imperatives: You shall not become a perpetrator. You shall not allow yourselves to become victims. You shall not become bystanders.

More focused on post-Holocaust ethics than Hilberg's book, *Rethinking the Holocaust* shows that we study the Holocaust not only because it happened. "Too many humans have been murdered," says Bauer, "and the time has come to try and stop these waves that threaten to engulf us" (p. xiv). The Holocaust commands attention because, unprecedented though it has been, we continue to need the warning that it could—

and to some extent already has—become a precedent in our time. Bauer's book contains more flaws than Hilberg's, especially where the issue of explicability is concerned, but the moral intentions that inspire *Rethinking the Holocaust* are not among them.

John K. Roth

Claremont McKenna College

***Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), viii + 226 pp., cloth \$42.20, pbk. \$18.95.**

Dominick LaCapra's insightful and compassionate *Writing History, Writing Trauma* concerns the interpretation of historical traumas such as the Holocaust and the traumas' enduring effects. LaCapra both uses and transcends contemporary critical theory in assessing the influence of trauma on present-day historical writing. Specialists conversant with the concepts of postmodern literary theory will read this work with great ease. However it will also reward nonspecialists who make the extra effort to understand the author.

Among the issues explored by LaCapra is the distinction between two approaches to historiography: the documentary research model and the radical constructivist model. In the documentary model, the historian seeks to establish objective facts from archival sources and other primary documents in order to show what "really happened" in the past.¹ In radical constructivism, referential statements that make objective-truth claims apply "at best" only to events and are of marginal significance. Instead, the primary focus is on the aesthetic, ideological, and political factors that "construct" the narratives in which referential statements are embedded (p. 1). Moreover, while radical constructivists acknowledge a distinction between history and fiction with regard to actual events, they nevertheless see an "identity or essential similarity" between history and fiction at the structural level (p. 8). A central thrust of LaCapra's book is that the relativism implicit in this position can have unacceptable implications, especially for the representation of traumatic historical events. When radicals claim that historical representation consists of little more than the historian's distinctive political or ideological distortions, the gates open both to Holocaust denial and to the ascription of sublimity to some of the most destructive historical events.

LaCapra is especially critical of Hayden White, who asserts that the "middle voice" is the only mode of representation appropriate to the Holocaust.² In the middle voice, action rather than the subject or object is emphasized. LaCapra argues that its use can obliterate the distinction between perpetrator and victim.³ Following Jean-Paul Sartre in *Nausea*, White holds that life is simply a congeries of experiences that are transformed into a meaningful story only when narrated retrospectively. In view of the various ways experiences can be organized retrospectively, no definite criteria exist by which one narrative may be privileged. Given the logic of White's position, Holocaust history can be told in many ways, some of them quite vicious. Nevertheless,