Holocaust Research in Germany: The History and Prospects of a Difficult Discipline

Ulrich Herbert

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On 2 July 1941, German troops entered the small town of Glubokoye in Belarus, located 80 kilometers east of the border with Lithuania. Initially, the Germans requested that the inhabitants hand over their stocks of grain. At the same time, they began to register the Jewish inhabitants and to assign them to forced labor. A report about the events in Glubokoye, later written by the brothers Rayak, states: “The Jews were forced to work much harder than they were able to, and, in addition, were humiliated and tormented. They had to endure the guards’ most disgusting whims: they were forced to sing, to crawl, to imitate animals, to dance, and to lick the Germans’ boots, etc.”

On 22 October 1941, the district commissioner ordered that all Jews had to relocate to the local ghetto within half an hour. There, the real martyrdom began. The ghetto was chronically overcrowded, and soon a famine occurred, given that it was prohibited to gather food from outside the ghetto. Individual inhabitants of the ghetto were repeatedly picked up, tortured, and killed by the Germans. The systematic extermination of Glubokoye’s Jews – referred to as an “operation” (Aktion) – began in December 1941, when the Germans singled out several hundred inhabitants and brought them to the nearby town of Borki, thus putting an end to the overcrowded conditions in the ghetto. In Borki, the brothers Rayak state in their report, “the Germans forced the young Jews to dance in front of the open pit; the older Jews had to sing Jewish songs. After being mocked in this sadistic way, the younger and healthy Jews were forced to carry the weak and the old and the invalids into the pit and to lay them down. Then, they had to lie down themselves. Afterwards, the Germans began, methodically and calmly, to shoot them all.”

In the following weeks, the Germans gradually brought all the Jews in the area to the ghetto in Glubokoye, assuring them that no more “operations” would occur. Instead, they were told that the Germans needed skilled workers who would be given an identification card which would guarantee their safety. Under this false pretense, the Germans successfully assembled Jews from forty-two towns into the ghetto. However, the German officers and soldiers were primarily interested in the Jews’ property.

For days, the Germans transported in wagons stolen clothes, shoes, linen, dishes, sewing machines, knitting machines for the production of socks and caps, as well as other household goods. [...] The laundry worked day and night to clean the clothes of the murder victims. Jews worked in the laundry (just as in the other “restoration workshops”). During the sorting and cleaning terrible scenes occurred. The workers recognized and identified undergarments and clothes of their agonized relatives. Rafael Gitlitz recognized the under-wear and the dress of his murdered mother. Manja Frejdinka had to wash the bloodstained shirt of her late husband Simon. The wife of the teacher Milchmann was forced to mend with her own hands her murdered husband’s suit into a ‘tidy’ condition. In Karl-Marx-Street 18, the district commissioner of Glubokoye had a special office that was tasked to monitor the workshops, to see to the bookkeeping, and to supervise the workers. Furthermore, this office prepared packages and sent them to Germany, filling orders from German authorities or individuals.

All German members of the district commissioner’s staff as well as the Gestapo were frequent customers of this office.

On the night of 18 June 1942, another “operation” took place. Mainly women and children were rounded up and brought to Borki the following morning. Several hundred people were led to the pits, where they were murdered. Those who survived knew that their days were numbered as well.

One year later, in August 1943, the Germans began with the ultimate clearing of the ghetto in Glubokoye. On 13 August, all surviving inhabitants, approximately three thousand people, were rounded up, marched to Borki, and murdered in front of pits. “The German newspapers reported that a major cluster of 3,000 partisans, led by a seventy-year-old Rabbi, had been eradicated in Glubokoye.”

The Rayak brothers’ report of the events in Glubokoye describes the daily routine of the Holocaust as it happened almost everywhere in Belarus, the Ukraine, the Baltic, and the German-occupied parts of the Soviet Union. Their report precedes the remarks that follow because it powerfully brings to life events that sometimes drift into the background in light of the multitude of political, artistic, didactical, historical, and pedagogical approaches that bear on anyone who has to deal with this subject.

The report is one of many of its kind, and not even one of the more spectacular ones. It describes the common succession of events that took place in a similar
way all over the occupied territories of the Soviet Union: the Germans invade an area – usually units of Einsatzgruppen, Ordnungspolizei, or sometimes the Waffen-SS, often accompanied by indigenous collaborators. Immediately after their arrival, the Germans begin registering the Jewish population. They compel the Jews to perform forced labor, and they mock and humiliate them. Shortly thereafter, the Jews have to vacate their homes and are forced to move into a completely overcrowded ghetto. This population is reduced repeatedly through mass shootings. At the same time, the Germans steal the Jews’ possessions, and an excessive trade in stolen goods sets in. The inhabitants of the ghetto have known for a quite some time that they will probably all be murdered eventually, but they remain hopeful nonetheless. They hope to be indispensable as skilled workers, that their children will be spared, that against all odds they will still be able to flee, that the Red Army will come and liberate them. In the end however, the children are murdered first, eventually everybody else is shot, and almost nobody survives. And we possess reports describing these terrible events only for those places where at least one person survived.

This is all very far from the popular image of the cold, almost clinical industrial mass murder that has over the years and decades generally shaped our understanding of the Holocaust, one in which the genocide of the Jews took place almost automatically at the hands of faceless perpetrators, and in which the victims likewise appear nameless and unreal. However, the genocide that took place in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union was not a secret known only to insiders. There was no mechanized, sterile mass murder exceeding all understanding. Rather, what unfolded there were apocalyptic, altogether primitive massacres conducted in cooperation with all of the German authorities that worked in the region; prepared and accompanied by virtually every conceivable form of humiliation and torment, marked by an almost incomprehensible cruelty and a constant, all-encompassing corruption.

In the Rayak brothers’ report, the victims do not appear as nameless figures, but instead as people with personal histories and fates, with jobs and families, embodying good qualities and bad, just as diverse as we would expect people to be. What is often forgotten is that among the victims, the number of children was disproportionately high. It is an often unacknowledged fact that approximately one quarter of the six million Holocaust victims – that is, 1.5 million – were children under fourteen years of age. When presented as the fates of individual human beings, this number becomes completely unbearable.

This striking report about the events in Glubokoye, with its many details, and containing names of victims as well as perpetrators and witnesses, dates from 1944. It belongs to the witness reports collected and prepared for publication by the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. This committee consisted of a group
of Jewish intellectuals chaired by Ilya Ehrenburg, and later by Vasily Grossman, who were (at the suggestion of Albert Einstein) charged with collecting reports about mass murders by Germans in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union for the purpose of publishing them in the Black Book: The Ruthless Murder of Jews by German-Fascist Invaders Throughout the Temporarily-Occupied Regions of the Soviet Union and in the German Nazi Death Camps Established on Occupied Polish Soil during the War 1941–1945. After requests for information appeared in newspapers, mainly Yiddish language ones, numerous eyewitness-reports about the persecution and murder of the Jews reached the committee’s editorial staff. The committee collected the reports, analyzed them, and selected 118 documents for publication. In 1947, the typesetting of the book was completed. In the meantime, however, Soviet authorities and party officials had developed considerable reservations about the project. Above all, the Soviets were concerned that the book would disproportionately emphasize the fate of the Jews compared to those of other peoples and ethnic groups. Eventually, the Soviet government prohibited the printing of the book, and the committee was suspended. In 1952, the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee were – with the exception of Ehrenburg and Grossmann – charged with nationalist tendencies in a show trial. The book was only published in a partial Israeli edition in 1980, followed by a complete version in German in 1994.\footnote{See Ilja Altmann, Das Schicksal des “Schwarzbuches,” in: Grossman/Ehrenburg/Lustiger (eds.), Schwarzbuch, pp. 1063–84; Arno Lustiger, Einführung des Herausgebers der deutschen Ausgabe, in: ibid., pp. 11–13; Arno Lustiger, Rotbuch: Stalin und die Juden. Die tragische Geschichte des Jüdischen Antifaschistischen Komitees und der sowjetischen Juden, Berlin 1998; Joshua Rubenstein (ed.), Stalin’s Secret Pogrom. The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, New Haven/CT 2001; Leonid Luks (ed.), Der Spätestalinismus und die “jüdische Frage.” Zur antisemitischen Wendung des Kommunismus, Cologne 1998.}

As an example, this report makes two things obvious. First, it demonstrates that a significant amount of nuanced, precise, and reliable information about the Holocaust in Eastern Europe was actually already available during and shortly after the war. Second, it shows the degree to which political interests prevented the dissemination of existing information that provided precise and substantial details about these crimes against humanity.

Diverse, nuanced, and detailed reports about the Holocaust were also presented at the Nuremberg trials. Nonetheless, the genocide against the Jews was not dealt with as a charge in its own right, but rather was categorized under the term “crimes against humanity,” a term which is still absurdly translated into German as Verbrechen gegen die Menschlichkeit, that is, “crimes against humaneness.” Even during the preparations for the Nuremberg trials, it was understood as a
rule that the crimes committed against the Jews would not be distinguished from crimes committed against other ethnic or national groups, especially since many nations insisted that nationality, and not religious orientation, should serve as the decisive criterion for defining the victims. Indeed, the genocide committed against the Jews was dealt with repeatedly and often in much more detail in the subsequent Nuremberg military tribunals, but it was never treated as the primary issue, and as a result, the Holocaust did not feature prominently in the world’s perception of the Nuremberg trials. After all, it was not the Western allies that had liberated the large concentration camps in the East and the remnants of the extermination camps, and they were poorly as well as very inconsistently informed about events that occurred in Eastern Europe during the war. For this reason, in the West, National Socialist mass crimes have been symbolized for decades by Buchenwald, Dachau and Bergen-Belsen rather than by Treblinka, Sobibór, Auschwitz, or Babi Yar, or any of the countless execution sites in the large territories of East Central and Southeast Europe. Over time, the perception of concentration camps and the Holocaust began to overlap, eventually becoming almost identical. Anybody pointing out today that the great majority of Western European Jews deported to Auschwitz never actually entered the camp itself, but were sent from the platform directly to the gas chambers, will encounter irritation and doubt. The onset of the Cold War further intensified this tendency, all the more so in those countries dominated by the Soviet Union – including East Germany – where the memory of the Holocaust was systematically suppressed since 1956 at the latest. Because the genocide against the Jews did not fit the narrative of capital and labor, imperialism and fascism, a long-lasting legend emerged in the Eastern Bloc as well: the Jews had supposedly been exploited as forced laborers by German enterprises and had been murdered in the process.

At the very least, however, the documents collected for the Nuremberg Trials provided an initial and broad source foundation for Holocaust research, and the first major studies by Reitlinger (1953), Poliakov and Wulf (1955) and Tenenbaum


(1952), as well as, of course, the extensive study by Raul Hilberg, were based primarily on these sources. Information was therefore available for an English-speaking audience, but for almost twenty years after the war, the Holocaust did not play a major role in American, British, or French research dealing with the time period between 1939 and 1945. These scholars, and those from other countries who had been involved in the war, were far too preoccupied with the consequences of the war as well the dangers of the Cold War. Nevertheless, reading these studies today, one is astounded by the amount of information that was already available and by the degree to which interconnected developments were already understood.

The situation was somewhat different in the Federal Republic of Germany. After all, hundreds of thousands of Germans had witnessed the actions taken against the Jews, especially in Eastern Europe, where Germans had very often participated directly in the atrocities. To protect themselves from prosecution and extradition after the war, and thus to save their own lives, they had to conceal their knowledge. Moreover, any public acknowledgement of these mass crimes had to be systematically erased. Therefore, for West Germans, into the late 1950s (and even beyond), the central question regarding the Holocaust was not so much what had happened, but rather whether it had happened at all. For a long time, even those Germans who were well-disposed towards the victims of National Socialism suspected that the post-war reports about the genocide of the Jews were the products of western or even Jewish propaganda (many equated the two). Since many Germans still remembered the propaganda battles of the First World War with its reports of Huns hacking off the hands of Belgian children, after the Second World War, the reports, and also the first books, about the mass killings in the East, most of which were written by Jews, were met with reservations – or, depending on the level of education, they were relativized in broad strokes following the pattern of “war is always terrible,” or by pointing out the hypocrisy of the accusers.

This refusal to acknowledge the truth was still evident during the first West German trials for National Socialist crimes in the 1960s. It was the victims who testified about the mass murders, and one of the main topics covered by the media

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in West Germany was the hardly-concealed suspicion that witnesses had perhaps fabricated everything, possibly for financial gain. The Holocaust became a story the Germans were confronted with from the outside, something about which they knew nothing at all – a Jewish story, not a German one.

The different forms that this externalization assumed can be found in the preface to the German edition of Gerald Reitlinger’s *The Final Solution* (*Die Endlösung*). There, the publicist Rudolf Hagelstange wrote:

> Thus the German who is seriously concerned with the dignity and honor of his nation may not, will not evade the subject of this book. The ambition of his spirit, his soul, should be for him to long for withdrawing from his everyday business for some hours and to start the dark journey to the dead souls of millions of his equals who were innocently slaughtered at the order of a tyrant who pretended to act on our behalf. No matter how dark this journey and how nightmarish the encounter with these sacrificed souls may be, our souls, the soul of our nation, will not find peace and will not be able to become certain of itself without this trip to the shadows that will only make the light in which we are walking precious and pure. Here the saying applies that gaining all the world is nothing if the soul is harmed.6

This text, with its mythological extravagance – the word “soul” appears six times alone – is a significant document, given that it attempts to bestow moral meaning on the act of a German audience reading an academic account of the million-fold mass murder committed by Germans, using Schiller’s “The Hostage” and the Gospel of Mark as support. The preoccupation with the Holocaust as catharsis for the Germans is revealing. Without this catharsis, the fortunate turn of history experienced by West Germans during the post-war period (the “light in which we are walking”) would have been unstable and not worth living for, that is, it would not have been “precious and pure.” Meanwhile, the Jews appear as “sacrificed souls,” “slaughtered” by an anonymous tyrant. It is difficult to imagine a text more distant from the report on Glubokoye quoted above, and it shows how attempts at gaining more accurate information on the genocide of European Jews were met with barriers of dull rejection, aggressive denial, mystic obfuscation, and especially constant efforts at offsetting one’s own afflictions against the suffering of the Jews.

The preface by Hagelstange also shows that, in the wake of Allied information campaigns, National Socialism, if not altogether damned, had become taboo among many West Germans. This development was accompanied at the same time by a process of abstraction and derealisation of the National Socialist past, which, to a certain extent, deprived that history of its actors and its locations. As

a result, Germans were able to publicly and passionately speak out against the previous tyranny without addressing concrete locations and actual people.

How long these processes continued to have an effect on German society becomes clear by casting a brief glance on Germany’s generational structure. Most members of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the SS-units in charge of the concentration camps, the Secret Military Police (*Geheime Feldpolizei*), the firing squads of the police battalions and the *Waffen-SS* – in short, the thousands of hands-on perpetrators – were less than thirty years old when the war ended, having being born between 1914 and 1924. In 1970, they were therefore only about fifty years old, and they retired in 1985. The commanders of these units, fairly young themselves, were about five to ten years older. In 1975, when the radical generation of 1968 believed that they were separated from National Socialist crimes by aeons, members of the generation of Nazi perpetrators were actually at the peak of their second careers.7

Accordingly, in West Germany, the academic examination of the Holocaust began very late and very reluctantly. Crucial for this delay was – apart from institutional rejection and individual bias – the fact that the majority of official German records from the Nazi period were brought to the United States after the war, while for a long time, the records of the Nuremberg trials were considered biased because they were compiled by the victors’ court and were not seen to meet academic standards of authenticity. Nevertheless, newly created research institutions in Munich and other cities began making more serious efforts to study the history of National Socialism. However, like for many historians of this period, the scholars working at these institutions asked the big question – how could this happen? – not in regard to the summer of 1941 and the beginning of the mass murder of the Jews, but rather in regard to January 1933, that is, how could the National Socialist tyranny develop in Germany? Initially, the policies of mass murder were only dealt with in passing, for example, by editions of important primary sources like the Gerstein Report (1953), Krausnick’s edition of Himmler’s memorandum on *Fremdvölkische* (ethnic aliens) in the East, Helmut Heibers’s documentation of the *Generalplan Ost* (1958) or the memoirs of Auschwitz Commandant Rudolf Höß (1958).8 But beyond moral entreaties or sweeping

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statements, no analytical connections were established between the pre-war years and the horrible, but somewhat erratic reports of mass murders in far-away Poland and Russia.

The diary of Anne Frank, on the other hand, published partially for the first time in 1949, gained considerably more significance. It was important because in this case, other than in the context of the Nuremberg trials or the reports about the atrocities at the concentration camps, the victims in the diary became visible as humans and were provided with names and their own histories. Indeed, the diary describes the time before Anne Frank was deported and murdered. It shows a life full of fear, but still a life, and one in the West at that. Anne came from Frankfurt and had fled to the Netherlands with her parents. The ultimate fate of Anne is only hinted at, while Bergen-Belsen, where Anne died, is not mentioned in the diary. Eastern Europe, the mass shootings, the ghettos, Auschwitz, Majdanek – all of this remains in the dark.9

For a long time, academic monographs remained isolated phenomena. The German edition of Reitlinger’s aforementioned Final Solution did not receive much public attention. Comprehensive, systematic research was not carried out. Even though the publications of several academic outsiders like Joseph Wulf, Bruno Blau and, especially, Hans Günther Adler were repeatedly reprinted, they were largely ignored in academic circles, where they were not seen as meeting academic standards.

The crucial change did not occur in the field of history, but in the field of law. The resumption of criminal proceedings for National Socialist crimes, and especially the establishment of the Zentralstelle in Ludwigsburg (Central Office of the State Justice Administrations for the Investigation of National Socialist Crimes) led to a broad, nearly all-encompassing investigation into the major National Socialist crimes. Even though the ultimate number and severity of verdicts seem quite inadequate compared to the crimes in question, the West German justice system nonetheless began an unprecedented historiographic experiment, in the course of which preliminary proceedings were conducted against more than 100,000 individuals, with an even higher number of witnesses being interrogated.

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In the context of the first large trials, especially the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial, the first significant studies of the persecution and murder of Jews that were published by German historians began to appear. Among them, to name only a few, were Hellmuth Auerbach, Martin Broszat, Hans Buchheim, Hermann Graml, Helmut Heiber, Helmut Krausnick, Hans Mommsen and others, who published their expert opinions for court cases in a first volume in 1958 and a second volume in 1966. Another historian was Wolfgang Scheffler, who provided a first short overview of the Holocaust as early as 1960, as well as Eberhard Kolb, with his book on Bergen-Belsen, published in 1962. This development reached a peak with the publication of the book *Anatomie des SS-Staates (Anatomy of the SS State)*, a compilation of expert opinions from the Auschwitz trial. For decades, these historical studies set the standard for knowledge of National Socialist extermination policies, and it took years until a similar academic level was reached again.¹⁰

In spite of these important publications, the Holocaust did not develop into a major subject for German historians. Instead, a rather paradoxical structure developed that has not been fully resolved to this day. In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the information collected by German law enforcement agencies regarding the deportations of Jews from all over Europe, the events in the ghettos, the countless shootings, the large concentration camps, the extermination centers, and the death marches reached such a magnitude, depth, and complexity, that historians – especially German historians, but those from other countries as well – could not begin to make sense of the material until the 1990s, and even then only in certain subject areas. Initially, the justice system’s enormous collection of information was rarely and only reluctantly used by historians. While the public prosecutors tried to find out *what* had happened, historians concentrated on the question of *why* it had happened – without defining exactly what they meant by *it*. Attention was focused on decision-making processes that were often difficult to reconstruct, as well as on contradictions within the regime’s political leadership. Thereby, the perspective remained very much centered on Hitler, although only few sources established a direct link between Hitler and the Holocaust.

Due to Martin Broszat’s study of *The Hitler State*, Hans Mommsen’s early essays on the structure of the National Socialist regime, and not least, the works of Uwe Dietrich Adam and the American historian Karl A. Schleunes, serious

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doubts emerged beginning in the 1970s over whether it was historically accurate to attribute the initiation of the Holocaust exclusively to Hitler’s worldview, will, and command.11 These historians, who would soon be called “structuralists,” argued that the initiation of the Holocaust was to be understood in the context of a number of mass crimes that had already been committed, or which were in the planning stages, and that German occupation policies for Poland, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union had to be taken into particular consideration. Moreover, non-governmental interests were involved in Berlin’s policies of exterminating the Jews, and therefore the one-sided focus on Hitler was not only wrong, but also contributed to the exoneration of other individuals and groups that had directly or indirectly participated in the Holocaust. The initiation of the genocide could not be traced back to a single trigger, and neither could it be traced back to an early direct order from the Führer. To the contrary, extermination policies had gradually developed over the years 1941 and 1942 in the course of a dynamic process – a process of “cumulative radicalization.”12 These approaches were, without doubt, an important innovation and had a significant impact on German and international research. However, these studies did not remain free of dogmatic strictures. The importance that racist and especially antisemitic ideologies played in the reasoning and actions of large sections of the population, as well as those of specific ideological elites, was disregarded. From this perspective, the genocide often seemed to unfold almost automatically, without actual people being involved. In addition, the perspective of the victims was missing from these narratives, and this despite the fact that numerous publications that included reports by surviving victims had been published all over the world. Even the per-


petrators were excluded – instead, institutions and structures rather than people appeared responsible for the genocide.

What is more remarkable is that these lines of argument did not initially result in more intense research, but merely led to a war of interpretations, as there remained a lack of empirically-sound, region-based research. However, this obvious deficiency was not, as was sometimes assumed, the result of an insufficient availability of sources. Indeed, most archives in East European countries remained closed to Western historians until 1990/91, but those archival collections available in the West, and especially the records produced in the course of West German investigations and criminal proceedings against National Socialist perpetrators, were substantial enough to allow for intensive research. Studies like those by Wolfgang Scheffler and Adalbert Rückerl, as well as the publication of court decisions – some of them quite extensive and sophisticated – provided important evidence. However, the mainly theoretical debates among West German historians gave rise to the view that enough was known about the facts of the mass murders, while the actual challenge lay in their political categorization and historical interpretation. This conviction, which actually reflected a common and persistent outlook held by the general public, also reveals that historians refused openly and directly to engage with the past. The focus on interpretation of the genocide produced an exonerating effect at the exact moment when a discourse marked by avoidance became clearly prevalent – as with the so-called 1986/87 Historikerstreit (“historians’ debate”).

An important result of this development, however, was that the Holocaust was now recognized as a subject of academic research. Historical overviews of Nazi Germany published in the 1970s and early 1980s continued to struggle to find a perspective that allowed them to integrate the Holocaust into the overall history of National Socialism. Nonetheless, the work of German historians aligned increasingly with international research, above all, that which was

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being produced in Western countries, a trend that is noticeable beginning with Hilberg’s study, first published in German in 1982 (and then finally more widely distributed through publication in the “Black Series” of the S. Fischer Verlag). By then, the overview by Leni Yahil had also been published, even though it was not widely noticed in West Germany.16

One should not forget that the Holocaust was also not exactly a focal point of historical research in the United States or Great Britain, and that studies published there showed similar gaps and deficits to those produced by German historians. The exception were studies from Israel that focused on the victims, given that Yad Vashem, a distinguished research institute focusing on the murder of the Jews, had been established shortly after the Second World War. However, these studies, like the work produced by Polish historians, were long neglected by West German scholars.

The situation was different in East Germany. For decades, East German historians interpreted the Holocaust not as the result of a murderous strategy motivated by racism and focusing on the Jews, but as the outcome of a different objective, one that was only indirectly aimed at the Jews. First, in the 1950s, the persecution of the Jews was interpreted as an attempt to intimidate the working classes. It later came to be understood as the side effect of a strategy aimed at controlling and exploiting the occupied territories, as it had been devised in the Generalplan Ost. Only with the work of Kurt Pätzold and the relevant passages in an overview titled Germany in the Second World War was there any noticeable change in East Germany during the 1980s. Nonetheless, “Holocaust research” in the strict sense of the term never existed in East Germany.17

By contrast, in West Germany, as a consequence of the growing critique of the mainly theoretical debates over the theory of fascism and structuralism, beginning in the early 1980s a new turn toward the concrete and empirical eventually gave rise to new approaches such as the history of everyday life under National Socialism.18 In combination with the analysis of National Socialist extermination

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policies, the significance of these new approaches lay in re-concretizing and re-historicizing the history of the National Socialist regime. The history of everyday life attempted to place the victims of National Socialist terror and extermination policies at center stage, and in fact increasingly focused on all victims. Such initiatives, which generally occurred outside of universities and research institutions, were eventually taken up by professional historians, a development that found expression in a growing number of studies of “Gypsies,” handicapped persons, “asocials,” homosexuals, prisoners of war, forced laborers, and other persecuted groups – but then, remarkably, they said less about the genocide against the Jews. Nonetheless, this development gradually made it possible to understand the regime’s racist politics as something that was real and whose traditions could be uncovered in German history. As a consequence, it was recognized that the racial-hygienically motivated persecutions of various groups of victims in Germany, and the ruthless actions taken against Slavic peoples and especially against Jews, were closely interconnected, and subsequently, more research began to focus on these interconnections.

At the same time, the Wehrmacht and the part that it played in the regime’s war and occupation policies, above all in Eastern Europe, received more attention, not least because of the voluminous series Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg (Germany and the Second World War). It was above all the early volumes of this series, published over a span of almost forty years, that advanced

marked self-critically, his influential book dealt with the persecution of the Jews only in passing when compared to other groups of victims.


research in this field, especially studies such as the one by Stig Förster about the beginning of the war against the Soviet Union, or the one by Rolf-Dieter Müller about the economic objectives of the so-called *Ostfeldzug*, that is, the Eastern campaign. Christian Streit’s study of the deaths of millions of Soviet prisoners of war in German captivity also proved very influential over the long run, as did the first academic study of the *Einsatzgruppen* in the Soviet Union, published by Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, which in part built on Wilhelm’s dissertation from 1974.22

It would require an historiographical project of its own to depict the extraordinarily intense, at times almost hysterical public debate over the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust that took place in West Germany between about 1985 and 2000. The dynamic development of Holocaust research in Germany can only be understood in the context of this long public debate about the past. Bitburg and Bergen-Belsen in the context of Ronald Regan’s visit to West Germany, President Weizsäcker’s speech given on the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war, the *Historikerstreit* mentioned above, the Jenninger debate, the discussion on Daimler-Benz and forced laborers, the Goldhagen debate, the dispute about compensation for forced laborers, and finally, the sometimes bitter dispute about the *Wehrmacht* exhibition and the debate over the Berlin Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe – all of these events created an extensive level of public attention to the long-suppressed National Socialist past, and especially to National Socialist mass crimes, which had been unprecedented as well as unanticipated in unified Germany. Indeed, following reunification, many observers who had expected or hoped for an end of the German “history mania” were disappointed. Moreover, all attempts to suppress these debates through nationalistic battle cries about so-called *Sündenstolz* (pride in one’s own sins) or *Gutmenschentum* (starry-eyed idealism) were not successful.23

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From an academic perspective, the *Historikerstreit* was soon considered largely fruitless. But then it is also true that within the context of this bitter and very personal debate, the National Socialist mass murder finally received major attention, and our insufficient knowledge and our lack of insight, which had been ignored for so long, became obvious. At the same time, Eastern European archives now became accessible as well, even though those in Russia remained open for only a few years. But it turned out that the Polish archives in particular, as well as those in the Baltic countries, held enormous amounts of material, opening up the opportunity for investigating the German policy of mass murder in the various occupied territories of Eastern Europe in detail. The same was true for Western and Southern Europe, even though the native historians of these countries treated and interpreted the deportation and murder of the Jews very differently in their own studies. Frequently, these historians focused primarily or even exclusively on the fate of Jews in their own countries, with the result that the French, for example, knew little about developments in Belgium or the Netherlands, remaining oblivious to substantial parallels. In the international context, this is currently one of the most significant obstacles to Holocaust research.\(^{24}\)

Nonetheless, in Germany as well as almost all other European countries, the 1990s marked the beginning of a long period of intensive empirical research on the murder of the Jews. German research abandoned the exclusive focus on Berlin as the center of decision making, and began to concentrate on a large number of perpetrators, sites of crime, circumstances, and victims. Studies by Dieter Pohl and Thomas Sandkühler of the murder of the Jews in Galicia, by Walter Mano-

schenk about Serbia, by Christian Gerlach about Belarus, and finally, Christoph Dieckmann’s voluminous study of the Holocaust in Lithuania, to name just a few, shed light on the relationship between the regional German authorities – civil, military, as well as police authorities – and the central agencies in Berlin, and connected concrete developments in the respective regions to decisions and reactions in Berlin.25 Furthermore, it became obvious that National Socialist “Jewish policy” in Eastern European regions occupied by Germany did not uniformly go into effect during the first weeks of 1942, but rather that each region had its own specific development and its own history, although the general direction was the same everywhere. Thus the “fateful months” between June and December 1941 proved to have been a phase of formation and standardization of the genocide.26 The concentration camps were now also analyzed in more detail, for example, in studies by Karin Orth, Sybille Steinbacher and others. These studies shed light on the structure of the National Socialist camp system and the relations of the camps to their immediate vicinity, whether Dachau or Auschwitz.27

In 1991, Susanne Heim and Götz Aly presented a book titled *Vordenker der Vernichtung* (*Masterminds of Extermination*) that attracted much attention.28 In the course of their research, the two authors unearthed a variety of manuscripts and plans in universities and institutes in which developmental deficits and a


lack of modernization in Central and Eastern European states were explained by overpopulation in these regions, and according to which a reduction in population was a precondition for the sustainable improvement of these countries’ economies. During the war, more than a few of the experts who had produced these studies found employment with the German occupation administrations in Eastern Europe. According to Heim and Aly, this is where the “rational” starting point of Nazi Jewish policy in Eastern Europe was to be found, above all, for Poland after 1939/40 – a thesis that found much support, but also met with considerable criticism.²⁹ That such concepts and scientific elaborations had existed at all was what made the book sensational, even if one does not agree with Heim and Aly’s very far-reaching conclusion that these ideas actually served as the impetus behind the initiation of the Holocaust. In this case, as Dieter Pohl put it, the socio-technological component of the Final Solution was raised from “peripheral phenomenon to the main factor of the story,” while the significance of antisemitic convictions had almost disappeared.³⁰ It remained unclear how these allegedly technocratic concepts were connected with the political principles of National Socialism as a whole. From here, further questions arose. Was antisemitism merely propaganda for the masses, behind which lurked the cold-blooded, sober calculation of the elites? Was the widespread hatred of the Jews only used to facilitate the implementation of demographic objectives at the expense of a group that was already marginalized?

Similar criticisms were raised about the arguments made by Heim and Aly in a study titled “The Economics of the Final Solution,” in which the authors stressed economic and demographic interests.³¹ According to the authors, the murder of the Jews in the Polish cities was above all a means of making room for the non-Jewish peasant population in the East, which was to be resettled from the...
countryside into the cities in order to enforce the economic modernization of the region. Such arguments, which structurally fell in line with Marxist interpretations of rationalization, were certainly exaggerated. Nevertheless, they indicated a correlation between the National Socialist policy of mass murder and the megalomaniac restructuring plans of German economic planners, if only in the minds of German geographers and spatial planners, as they found expression in various versions of the Generalplan Ost.

Several years later, Aly presented another reinterpretation of the origins of the Holocaust. 32 Markedly departing from his previous point of view, he now emphasized that a precondition for the initiation of the Holocaust was not so much the various concepts and plans, but rather their manifold and constant failures, which he demonstrated with the proposed “resettlement” plans for the so-called Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans) from East and Southeast Europe that had been agreed upon in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In order to make room for these settlers, large numbers of Poles and especially Jews had been expelled from the Warthegau and other regions. As a consequence, a process of more and more extensive deportation plans set in, and at the center were the Jews, who were to be completely pushed out of Germany’s sphere of influence into the eastern regions of the General Government, to Madagascar, or somewhere in Northern Russia on the Arctic Ocean. Ultimately, this process resulted in a system of interim solutions and compromises that only ended as a consequence of the failure of the various deportation plans, thus leading to the murder of the Jews, who were considered dispensable and could not be resettled.

With this, an empirical foundation was laid for an argument that had only been suggested up to this point, namely, that policies toward the Jews gradually grew more radical as alternative projects failed. From this perspective, the initiation of the Holocaust was placed within the context of German attempts to undertake a völkische Flurbereinigung, that is, an ethnic redistribution of the land in Central and Eastern Europe that began immediately after the war with Poland, and that was eventually supposed to result in a restructuring of Eastern Europe, reaching as far as the Urals. 33 However, this view did not explain why the

Jews alone were the victims of a policy of total extermination, and neither did it explain how the relationship between politico-ideological motives, above all, radical antisemitism, and so-called rational motives, especially economic intentions, was to be understood. Subsequently, these questions moved to the center of scholarship that followed.

From this point, Michael Zimmerman’s extensive study of the Nazi persecution of Sinti and Roma, the so-called Gypsies, took the next step. Zimmerman demonstrated that the National Socialist policy of persecution was indeed based on the traditions of anti-Ziganism, but that these traditions became drastically radicalized when socio-biological approaches provided a scientific legitimization for existing prejudices. Furthermore, neither a unified decision-making process nor a direct link back to Hitler (who was, in fact, disinterested in the “Gypsy issue”), nor a corresponding command structure could be established in regard to the murder of the “Gypsies.” The racial stigmatizing of this group had, in fact, spread so far and had reached such an extent that the Einsatzgruppen in the Soviet Union killed the “Gypsies” they encountered during their murderous activities without explicit orders, in each case giving reasons that somehow seemed to be obvious: the “Gypsies” were spies, they posed a threat to the troops or the population, they were spreading diseases, and so on. Thus, the combination of an established, widely held prejudice with its “scientification” by numerous experts resulted in a racist construct that found its way into the convictions of the leading personnel of the criminal and security police and influenced locally-operating troops and the decisions that they made. This picture of a convergence of factors at various levels was very plausible, and in many ways could be transferred to the policies pursued against the Jews, although the dimension of purposeful, ideologically determined extermination was much more distinctive in regard to the Jews.

More recent research has focused on the study of the perpetrators themselves – their modus operandi, their motives, their worldviews, and their biographical backgrounds – and this has included the murderers on the ground who held the gun or shut the doors of the gas chambers as well as the decision-makers who were ultimately responsible. In his analysis of the members of Police Bat-

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talion 101, the American historian Christopher Browning showed that for these policemen, the prevalent motive was not the result of ideological indoctrination, extreme hatred of the Jews, or other ideological beliefs, but rather other factors: a dull climate of brutality, a pronounced esprit de corps, considerable peer pressure, and excessive drinking, all of which were wrapped together with progressive indifference toward atrocities of every kind. Browning’s study did not focus on the specific individual antisemitic motives of the members of the murder squads, but emphasized a general disposition toward violence that found an outlet when it was steered against the Jews by a political agenda. Daniel Goldhagen, on the other hand, whose book of 1996 attracted public attention in Germany like no other book on Nazi history before or since, construed that same unit’s disposition toward violence against the Jews as an expression of “eliminationist antisemitism,” which, he claimed, had been common in Germany. Peer pressure, an inclination toward violence, and indifference were now no longer seen as German characteristics limited only to the Nazi period. However, the actual environment in which these men found themselves was indeed very specific to the Nazi period, and this general disposition toward violence became specifically charged with ideological and political beliefs, leading to a disappearance of inhibitions. The killings were backed by political and ideological constructs provided from above. In other words, the members of killing squads did not need any individual ideological motives to justify murder, it was sufficient that such motives were issued and believed, in any case accepted by the leadership.

Goldhagen’s book quickly met with severe criticism, and today it has almost completely disappeared from serious discussion. However, the book has lasting merit inasmuch as it had the effect that the question regarding the participation, the knowledge, the consent, or the indifference of ordinary Germans toward the Holocaust was recognized as an important, indeed, crucial topic not only for the history of the war, but for German history in general – a point that was even conceded by those, such as Rudolf Augstein, who saw Goldhagen’s arguments as a renewal of the accusation of collective guilt.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the perpetrators also began to shift toward the center of German research, and they did so independently of the debate menti-

ioned above, which had, in any case, taken place mainly among American historians. An analysis of the biographies and actions of the leadership of the Reich Security Main Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt or RSHA) was able to identify a group of relatively young men, most of them well educated and with a middle-class background, who had been politically socialized under the influence of nationalist youth organizations and student groups, and who were quickly promoted within the National Socialist persecution apparatus after 1933. To be sure, any attempt to ascribe the crimes committed by the leadership of the RSHA solely to the political socialization of this specific generation is misguided, as is an exclusive focus on the perpetrators as a generational group of academically-educated mass murderers. Still, it became apparent that a connection could be drawn between the antisemitic radicalization of young, especially middle-class Germans during the Weimar period and Nazi policies of persecution that were undertaken against the Jews, further refuting the idea that the murder of the Jews was primarily an extreme act committed by subordinate brutes, or that it was the special obsession of Adolf Hitler and his inner circle. That there was some agreement that existed between the ideas of the technocrats, as analyzed by Aly and Heim, and the worldview of academics in the RSHA and the Einsatzgruppen, as analyzed by Michael Wildt and others, and that this particular convergence of ideas was based on a political worldview which had developed in the aftermath of the First World War, is a plausible connection that has since appeared again and again in existing scholarship.37

Since 1997, international research, especially research in Germany, has been increasingly and strongly influenced by Saul Friedländer’s masterpiece, which not only called for an integration of the perspectives of both perpetrators and victims, but actually met this challenge as well.38 Friedländer’s book presents such an abundance of quotations from diaries, letters, memories, and reports


by Jewish victims of Nazi persecution that it seemed absolutely strange in retrospect that it had ever been acceptable to write history from the perspective of the perpetrators alone. Friedländer’s argument in favor of an integrated history of the Holocaust that includes the perspectives of all involved parties had first been implemented by Raul Hilberg, who introduced the categories of perpetrator/victim/bystander, a conceptual framework that became a basic prerequisite of international Holocaust research. The integration of this multi-perspectival method is exhibited in the first overview of the Holocaust written by a German historian, Peter Longerich’s *Politik der Vernichtung* (*Policy of Extermination*), and perhaps most evidently in the structure of the editorial project *Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden* (*The Persecution and Murder of the European Jews*). 39

The image of the Wehrmacht has also been thoroughly revised since the 1980s and 1990s. A number of studies have confirmed that the *Wehrmacht* collectively contributed to the mass crimes of National Socialism, while particular Wehrmacht units actively participated as executioners in mass murders. However, this research, as well as some early exhibitions about this subject, did not attract much public attention. Rather, the image of a “clean” Wehrmacht that had only participated in National Socialist crimes in exceptional cases largely remained intact, especially among the generation of World War Two veterans. 40 The results of newer research into the “crimes of the *Wehrmacht*” were presented in an exhibition organized by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. The exhibition opened in the spring of 1995 and was shown in various German and Austrian cities. It documented the involvement of *Wehrmacht* units in the murder of Jews, in addition to the *Wehrmacht’s* responsibility for the death of more than three million Soviet prisoners of war and the mass murder of Soviet civilians. After an initial delay, a very loud public protest was raised against the exhibition, while the exhibition’s organizers were accused of “sullying the honor of millions


of Germans” and “waging a moral scorched-earth campaign against the German nation.”41

Since the quintessence of the exhibition regarding the crimes of the Wehrmacht was academically substantiated and could hardly be disputed, the main criticism was directed against the format in which the exhibition was presented. It was criticized as being too suggestive and insufficiently nuanced, especially in regard to its use of photographic documents. Two years later, the exhibition was reopened after undergoing revision and expansion. Although the style of the presentation had been changed, the historical information was strengthened and corroborated. The debate finally culminated in the Bundestag, where the Wehrmacht exhibition and the questions it raised were discussed on 13 March 1997.

The discussion began with a contribution by Alfred Dregger, former chairman of the CDU/CSU in the West German Parliament, who – speaking on behalf of World War Two veterans – stressed that:

The soldiers of the Second World War and their family members did not make up a small, definable group of our people, but rather, they constituted the entire population of that period. Almost every man was drafted [...] Therefore, this question [of responsibility] affects our relationship to an entire generation of our nation. Those who attempt – and such efforts are being made – to label the entire war generation as members and accomplices of a criminal gang, intend to cut Germany to the quick. This is what we object to [...] We cannot tolerate this.42

This speech struck at the heart of the matter. Since May 1945, the consensus had identified a small, definable group of our people as murderers. Connecting the Wehrmacht to National Socialist crimes, however, met with resistance and denial, regardless of the evidence produced by historical research.

Representative Otto Schily responded to Dregger. In his remarkable and widely-received speech, he not only criticized Dregger’s remarks, but also included some personal comments. He told the story of his uncle and his brother, who, in spite of having being opponents of National Socialism, still had been forced to serve in the Wehrmacht – something his father would have also gladly done for reasons of patriotism. Schily then continued:

My wife’s father, Jindrich Chajmovic, an extraordinarily courageous person and one who was also exceptionally willing to make sacrifices, fought the German Wehrmacht in Russia

as a Jewish partisan. Now I am going to say something that, in all its harshness and clarity, must be accepted by all of us: the only person of the four people mentioned – the only one! – who risked his life for a just cause was Jindrich Chajmovic. For he fought an army behind which stood the gas chambers in which his parents and his entire family were murdered. He fought an army that waged a war of extermination and annihilation, an army that assisted in the mass murders of the notorious Einsatzgruppen, or, at any rate, did not interfere. He fought so that women, children and old people would not continue to be brutally slaughtered by the thousands. He fought a German Wehrmacht that had demeaned itself to such a degree that it had become an executioner of the racial fanaticism and the inhumanity of the Hitler regime, and had thus lost its honor.43

This debate marked the turning point. It indicated that a far-reaching, though certainly not quite complete, consensus had been reached across party lines. From this point onward, the fact that the Wehrmacht had been highly involved in National Socialist mass crimes during the war was only publicly denied by the right-wing fringe of society.44 Subsequently, intensified research, especially at the Institute for Contemporary History, strongly confirmed Schily’s position. Particularly the studies by Dieter Pohl and Christian Hartmann, whose major study of the Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg (The Wehrmacht and the War in the East) has not received sufficient attention, have described the hitherto unappreciated dimensions of the crimes, going considerably beyond anything that was presented in the Wehrmacht exhibition.45

The German discussion of the National Socialist past reached its peak in these debates of the late 1990s, but in a way it also came to an end. There was still public controversy about the Nazi period, and more and more personal scandals were brought to light. However, when it became known that hundreds of highly compromised former officers of the SD and SS had worked for the West German secret services, or when it was leaked that German authorities had protected mass murderers such as Eichmann or Mengele from criminal prosecution, this did not

44 The new version of the exhibition, ordered by Reemtsma in accordance with the results produced by the commission, was officially opened in 2001, and its statements on the crimes committed by the Wehrmacht greatly exceeded even those made in the first version. However, the presentation was more modest and completely abandoned the use of private photographs made by Wehrmacht soldiers. Although this exhibition was also rejected by the right wing, there were no longer objections against the historical substance of the exhibition. See Christian Hartmann/ Johannes Hürter/Ulrike Jureit (eds.), Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Bilanz einer Debatte, Munich 2005.
lead to bigger eruptions.\textsuperscript{46} At this point, everything seemed possible and even probable, and whoever doubted this was obligated to produce evidence. Since there were no more taboos to break, no previously-hidden secrets to be aired out, except in the form of apocryphal theories about Adolf Hitler, dealing with the topic was once again left to libraries and the lecture halls of historians – still an important, indeed essential topic, but nonetheless, a topic for the history books.

Since at least the turn of the millennium, it is no longer possible to speak of German Holocaust research in the strictest sense. Unlike any other subfield of contemporary history, research on this particular subject is transnational both in regard to the subject as well as in regard to the level of cooperation among scholars. In this context, I would like to emphasize six points in particular. First, Holocaust research is highly concentrated on regions. Eastern Europe is increasingly moving to center stage, and Christian Gerlach’s study has set new standards in this respect. Studies of individual units and forces, of concentration camps, ghettos and individual Jewish communities have extended and deepened our knowledge to an unprecedented extent. At the same time, certain regions have, for various reasons, received almost no attention thus far. Among them, for example, is the Ukraine, but most of all, Southeast Europe. In regard to Greece, for example, little more than vague ideas and a few local studies, e.g. on Thessaloniki, exist. The same is true for Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. On the other hand, we are much better informed about Hungary since the publication of great studies by Randolph Braham and later by Aly and Gerlach.\textsuperscript{47} On the whole, those regions in which the mass murders actually happened are finally being investigated.

Furthermore, Timothy Snyder’s evocative study has raised a new, important question. Snyder pointed out that Stalinist mass crimes, especially the deliberate starvation of millions of Ukrainian peasants, took place in the same clearly definable region – the Baltic, Belarus, the Ukraine – as most of the Nazi mass crimes


committed against Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, and civilian populations.\textsuperscript{48} It seems to me that this debate has not yet come to an end. However, the discussion does not – as some have already assumed – point to the Holocaust as an “Asian deed” or as a putative act of German self-defense, as once described by Ernst Nolte. Rather, it has become apparent that both totalitarian dictatorships executed their policies of mass murder in the region between the West and the Russian core territory, a region that was not characterized by national state structures, but by ethnically mixed populations of poor and backward peasant farmers.

\textit{Second}, the perspective of the victims has moved closer to center stage than it had been, with the exception of Israeli research, which was already doing this twenty or thirty years ago. For a long time, Holocaust studies were dominated by the perspectives of German bureaucrats. Even the best studies of the Holocaust lapsed into an antiseptic analysis of events, keeping them at a distance and avoiding closer descriptions, making them seem flat and monolithic. Subsequently, the search for the aims of the perpetrators, the political, economic, and ideological motives, vaulted over the actual crimes. The manifold suffering of the victims thus became a mere expression of a wider, somehow more important context. The objections raised against the testimonies of the victims, that they are too subjective, too mythical, or not reliable enough, have, at least since the debate between Saul Friedländer and Martin Broszat, turned out to be misguided and even absurd, especially when one considers that, for decades, the sources of the perpetrators were accepted as more authentic.\textsuperscript{49} If one considers what the history of the Warsaw Ghetto would look like from the perspective of the German ghetto administration or the German police units serving as guards, this absurdity quickly becomes obvious, especially in light of studies by Andrea Löw and others. On the other hand, some studies as well as exhibitions have a tendency to reduce the life of Jews, even in the period \textit{before} the war, to their victimhood and their endurance in the face of antisemitism and persecution. This is understandable if one wants to shed light on the path that led from tacit separation via marginalization to the first outbreak of hostility toward the Jews, continuing on to the stages of persecution, and finally to murder. Still, on the whole, this is a misleading portrayal that adopts certain elements of the conventionalized image of the Jew as the outright \textit{other}. In this context, the biographical approach helps to avoid such exaggerations and tells life stories from within their societies – only

\textsuperscript{48} See Timothy Snyder, Bloodlands. Europa zwischen Hitler und Stalin, Munich 2011.
then is it possible to avoid reducing individual lives to their share in the collective fate of the Jews.\textsuperscript{50}

Third, the connection between the Holocaust and other German mass crimes is increasingly coming into focus. Lest we forget: when the Soviet prisoners of war in Kaunas, who were originally tasked with construction work at the airfield, were dying from starvation in their barracks on the outskirts of the city, the cries of the starving were heard all over the city. Eventually, the shooting of the Jews in Kaunas was suspended and Jewish forced laborers were detached to repair the airport.\textsuperscript{51} The murder of the Jews in Eastern Europe took place in the midst of an inferno of violence against prisoners, against the Red Commissars, against “Gypsies” and partisans, as well as in the midst of the mass deaths of the starving inhabitants of Leningrad and other big cities.

And yet, we still know little about the Germans’ mass crimes that occurred during their retreat beginning in the summer of 1942. The enhanced focus on the various directions of German policies of mass murder changes our perspective on the so-called decision-making of October and November 1941. In the fall of 1941, the \textit{Einsatzgruppen} were already shooting hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Soviet prisoners of war were dying in the \textit{Wehrmacht’s} regular and temporary POW camps due to starvation measures. In Leningrad, as well as in many other regions of the East, the civilian population was purposefully starved, again resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths. In Poland and the Warthegau, the number of casualties in the ghettos was rising by the week. Overall, in the six months between June and December 1941, at least 1.4 million people in Poland and the Soviet Union were, in addition to combat-related casualties, killed by German units or starved to death. In light of this situation – and given the rapidly rising German casualties on the Eastern front, which were of particular significance to the German leadership – it was obviously no longer too great a leap to kill the Polish and Western European


Jews living in the areas of German control instead of deporting them to Siberian camps, as originally planned, in order to let them die there – but rather, to kill them immediately (perhaps one should say: to kill them immediately as well).52

Fourth: the economic aspects. By now, significant studies of “Aryanization” have been published that shed light on this issue as it affected the territory of the German Reich and some of the countries occupied by Germany. The first studies for France and Belgium as well as for the Netherlands have appeared. In fact, the persecution and deportation of the Jews in these countries has been more intensely researched in recent years – for example, in studies by Dan Michman, Ahlrich Meyer, Insa Meinen and others, to name but a few.53 The issue of Jewish forced labor has often been discussed, in which the hope, for example, of those Jews who lived in ghettos and believed that their value as labor would protect them from murder, proved deceptive. That these Jewish expectations, which relied on the Germans’ rationality and self-interest, were disappointed, has been described by Dan Diner as the core meaning of the term “rupture of civilization.”54

We know little about the connection between the plundering of the Jews and their persecution and murder in Eastern Europe. However, in Germany as well as in Western and Eastern Europe, the motive for self-enrichment, for robbery, in the context of the persecution and murder of the Jews has moved much more into the foreground than it was fifteen or twenty years ago, and this includes, in addition to the Germans, various collaborationist governments and movements.55 Here, extensive projects about the history of the Reich Ministries will provide further information. For the Ministry of Finance, a fairly detailed picture of the actions of German financial authorities in Poland and the Soviet Union will emerge, emphasizing how this aspect of self-enrichment as a motivation for persecution functioned in the state bureaucracy.

A fifth point concerns the role of the German people. In one regard, this refers to the question of what “ordinary Germans” knew about National Socialist mass crimes in the occupied territories – important works on this issue are already available with studies by Bankier, Pohl and Bajohr, Longerich and others, even though the scarce availability of primary sources makes such studies extremely difficult, producing results that are only approximate.\(^{56}\) We have more and more detailed knowledge in regard to office holders at the middle levels, especially in Eastern European territories, providing insight into the quasi-colonial structures of the German occupation. It seems to me that the connection between the German Empire in the East and colonial policy are indeed striking and must be taken into greater consideration. In this context, the assertion of a direct road from Windhoek to Auschwitz has obscured rather than enhanced our comprehension. But the German campaign in the East cannot be understood without taking into consideration the continental-imperialist ambitions of both the political leadership and many ordinary Germans.\(^{57}\)

Most of all however, as a result of the rapidly growing debate regarding the concept of \textit{Volksgemeinschaft}, historians have increasingly turned to an examination of the inner structures of German society, although until now the focus has been on the pre-war years and the results have not been overly impressive. In my opinion, the somewhat deadlocked debate over the \textit{Volksgemeinschaft} as an academic “approach” or even a “concept” will ultimately be incorporated into the comparative study of racist societies in which the privileged are pitted against the racially or biologically excluded – even if the privileged are opposed to this principle of inequality or even to the regime as a whole.\(^{58}\) It is of paramount importance to integrate the war years into this line of research, especially by analyzing


the German administration in the occupied territories. The studies that have been presented so far paint an unbelievable picture: infamy, malice, unprecedented brutality, humiliation of the victims in every conceivable form, sexual abuse on an unfathomable scale. And above all there was corruption, unjust enrichment, misappropriation, robbery of the victims, and the lifestyle of the colonial overlord as long as the situation at the front permitted it. Glubokoye is an example of this – the number of parcels sent to loved ones at home containing the possessions of the murdered was so high that the local German occupation administration was unable to handle the packages for the district commander and his staff members and started its own cardboard box production.

Sixth and finally: the history of the survivors. Each Jewish eyewitness report of the Holocaust conceals a special fate. For those who survived, extraordinary circumstances must have played a role. Testimony of these circumstances is contained in the stories of those who fled from the Germans and who endured endless escapes – from Vienna to Prague, from Prague to Paris, via the Pyrenees to Spain, from there to Lisbon, to Morocco, to London, to Boston, to Shanghai, always in mortal peril, always fearing denunciation, discovery, and capture. The story of those who were able to escape and find refuge, such as Marcel Reich-Ranicki, are full of coincidences and absurd developments.\(^{59}\) The stories of those who joined the partisans or the resistance – and survived – also belong to this topic (which has not received adequate attention in Germany). There are also the stories of those who stood at the pits, waiting to be shot by the execution squads, but were only injured, who then fell into the pits, survived there covered by corpses and dirt, waited until the killing was over, and managed to free themselves, to find shelter, and to survive until the end of the war. Some fifty or a hundred such reports exist which, from a distance, almost seemed too horrible, too unlikely, like news from a distant hell – until we suddenly began to hear such stories again, from Bosnia, for example, and from Rwanda.

Finally, it must be emphasized that Holocaust research is not an academic field like any other. Certainly, the strict rules of academic research also apply to this subject. However, nobody working in this field can shake off the disturbing, horrible, shocking feeling one experiences while reading the primary sources and personal accounts. It is not easy to analyze precisely and coolly when a source provides information about the deportation of orphans or the last letters written by those about to be executed. It is therefore tempting to switch the focus to the cold world of the perpetrators, especially those sitting behind a desk, or to retreat

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\(^{59}\) Such as, for example, Jalowicz Simon, Untergetaucht; Klüger, Weiter leben; Reich-Ranicki, Mein Leben.
to studying the perception of the Holocaust in the decades following the end of the war – a field that has produced almost twice as many studies as research on the Holocaust itself.

Studying the Holocaust produces a picture that is both terrible and multifaceted, and which shows various impulses and motives: triviality, a lust to kill, racial hatred, and narrow-minded false morality on the side of the perpetrators; a lack of interest, indifference, shrugging or desperation among many bystanders; and on the side of the victims, all possible modes of behavior in this most extreme of all imaginable situations. As a matter of fact, this extraordinarily multifaceted story does not lend itself to being a compelling and effective metaphor for civic education. It is, in a matter of speaking, impossible to identify with, and as recent research has emphatically confirmed, the history of the murder of the Jews challenges enlightened thinking because it is impossible to explain the Holocaust with short formulas and simple, usable concepts or theories.

Let us finally turn to Glubokoye once more. In March 1943, Salman Fleischer, an inhabitant of the ghetto, had been accused of having purchased a piece of butter from a farmer, thus violating the strict prohibition on such purchases. Salman Fleischer was forewarned and was able to flee. As a consequence, the chief of police, a man by the name of Kern, had the first pedestrians coming along the ghetto’s main street arrested and executed. These were Leiwe Driswjazki, Chawna Driswjazki and Lipa Landau. They were picked up by the Germans, tortured, and finally taken to Borki, where they were murdered. What do we know of these three people? Leiwe Driswjazki was an educated man, a mathematician, linguist, and teacher of the Talmud, a man well known and respected in Glubokoye. Several weeks earlier, his oldest son Owesi had already been taken to Borki during the course of an “operation” and had been killed there. Chawna was his youngest son, eighteen years old. He was walking in the street with his father when they were both arrested for the “crime” committed by Salman Fleischer. Lipa Landau, who was also a man with a university education, had already been sent to Borki once before; his wife and children were killed there, but he himself had only been injured, and miraculously he had survived. He had then wandered through the woods for some time until he had finally reached Glubokoye, where he met Leiwe Driswjazki and quickly became friends with him. The fate of people such as Salman Fleischer, Leiwe Driswjazki, Chawna Driswjazki and Lipa Landau stands at the center of Holocaust research. If we succeed in studying and explaining the fate of these men and women and their families as well as others who shared their fate – how it happened and who was responsible for it, locally and at headquarters – we will have achieved what is most important.