The history of mass killing and the commemoration of that history are two separate subjects.¹ I would like to divide this chapter between these two topics, emphasizing that they are different, and, at the very end, I will make some modest suggestions about how they ought to be brought together. So, this is an essay about the last twenty years of my own work, which involved an attempt to bring together German and Soviet policies of mass killing in Eastern Europe in the volume Bloodlands. At the same time, the past two decades was a rich period of commemoration of Soviet and German crimes in a region where I was working. This is something we have all experienced, as we try to work on the history of the twentieth century, while simultaneously around us that history is being commemorated.

I am going to begin with reflections about the killing itself, and then move to a kind of analysis of why commemoration, or to put it in a way which is almost oxymoronic, satisfactory commemoration, has been so terribly difficult in the region we are concerned with in this volume. I want to be clear about something right away: in the first part of the chapter I will be discussing the history of deliberate mass killing, that is to say policies by which leaders deliberately killed large numbers of people. This is distinct from the history of the camps, although

¹ The text is based upon of the author’s keynote lecture at the conference, “Remembrance, History, and Justice. Coming to Terms with Traumatic Pasts in Democratic Societies” (November 11–12, 2010, Washington DC). This version is revised by the author.
it is related. It is distinct from demographic analysis of losses, which is a rather vague term used a lot, which includes children who might have been born had something terrible not happened. There are other matrixes that one could use; I just want to be clear that what I will be talking about is mass killing.

What I noticed in the years while I was working on the subject is something rather striking, that throughout all the space and time when the Nazi and the Soviet systems functioned, the huge majority of the deliberate killing happened during a specific time and place. That period is between 1933 and 1945, when both Hitler and Stalin were in power, and the place is what I call in the book the bloodlands, namely Ukraine, Belarus, Western Russia, most of Poland, and the Baltics. The regimes taken together deliberately killed about 17 million people. Of these 17 million, 14 million were in the bloodlands, in this time and place; the density of this horror inspired me to choose this as the premise for the book.

I would like to emphasize that in my mind, and I realize there is some disagreement about this, the numbers are extremely important. If we agree, as I guess we all do, that the difference between zero deaths and one death is very significant, and we do not have to think very long to agree about that, then we also have to agree that the difference between 700,000 and 700,001 deaths is equally significant. I am not going to claim that we will ever know these numbers with that kind of precision. What I would say, though, is that numbers are important, because every big number is a multiple of one, and although we can never reach perfection, I think we ought to be as careful with these big numbers, as we would be with small numbers, and to care about them for the same reasons that we care about the small numbers, only more so.

So, when you look at history in this way, when you take this time and place as your platform, as your premise, what do you find? You find the following six or seven major events that comprise the total of 14 million deliberate killings. The first is the deliberate famine in Soviet Ukraine in 1933, and then the Great Terror of 1937 and 1938. In general, what you see when you look at this period is that Soviet killing dominated in the 1930s. Then, there is a period between 1939 and 1941 when the Soviets and the Germans were allies, and they were killing in much the same way and at much the same rate. And then,
there’s a period from 1941 to 1945, when almost all of the deliberate killing is done by the Germans. So this period begins with a Soviet action—a distinct Soviet action—that has something to do with Germany in the sense that Adolf Hitler refers to it in his electoral campaign in the spring of 1933. Nevertheless, the famine in Soviet Ukraine was a result of the Soviet policy of collectivization that we now know was deliberately manipulated in the summer and especially the fall of 1932 so that 3 million people in Ukraine would die. The record of Stalin’s correspondence over this period and the record of Politburo meetings during this period are clear enough for us to know that Stalin knew what would happen and pursued policies such as blockading settlements, taking meat, and closing the borders of the Soviet Ukrainian Republic knowing it would lead to massive deaths. In fact, the way that he and Kaganovich discussed it makes it clear that they knew what was coming. And one of the reasons why they knew it, by the way, was because of what had just happened in Kazakhstan, where a famine had killed an even larger number of the population in 1930 and 1931. Often the way this argument is presented is as follows: if Kazakhstan happened, then there must not have been something particular about Ukraine. I see this in exactly the opposite way: precisely because Kazakhstan happened, in 1930 and 1931, the Soviet leadership knew what a combination of policies would bring about in 1932 and 1933 and pursued them deliberately. And, to be absolutely clear about this, the food which was exported would have saved almost all of the Ukrainians plus others who died in 1932 and 1933. Access to grain stock piles would have saved almost all of them. Simply not fulfilling requisition targets would have saved almost all of them. So, this was a deliberate policy and it also—to be clear—had a political backdrop and rationale. The political rationale involved imagined plots by Ukrainian nationalists, who had supposedly taken control of the Ukrainian branch of the Soviet Communist Party in league with Polish spies and others. So there was a political rationale, there is clear documentation of knowledge, and there is advanced knowledge of what would happen if these policies were pursued.

The second stage of the killing in the bloodlands is that of the Great Terror in the Soviet Union, where, as we now know, 682,691 people were recorded as having been executed. We now know a great deal about the terror that we did not know twenty years ago. What has
not happened is that this particular knowledge has not worked its way into the general discussion that we have about the Soviet Union. The numbers are smaller than people had generally thought, the figure I just gave—roughly 700,000—added to the other recorded killings in the 1930s and 1940s, can get you up to a figure of about 1 million deliberate executions, but not much higher than that.

The other thing that we now know about this period in Stalinism is that parts of the great terror that were visible, the show trials and, to some extent, the executions of officers, which intelligence agents at the time had an idea about, are only the tip of the iceberg and not representative of the totality of the event. Party members and military officers were indeed affected in the tens of thousands, but other groups, identified as kulaks or as national minorities, were affected in the hundreds of thousands. In particular, the clarity with which the Great Terror targeted particular ethnic minorities has only been reached in the last twenty years. The Estonian, Finish, Latvian, Polish, German, Korean, and also Caucasian and Central Asian actions deliberately signaled out national minorities. About 250,000 people were killed predominantly because of who they were rather than anything they did. The methods for finding people were often as simple as looking through local records for a certain kind of last name. The largest of these was the Polish action in which 110,000 people were shot—essentially for being Poles—the charge being that they were Polish spies. I worked on this from the other end, and I do not believe a single person who was executed was actually a Polish spy. That is, I have a sense of who the Polish spies in the Soviet Union were at the time, it would be senseless to deny that another sovereign power did not have spies in the Soviet Union. But the Soviets managed to kill 110,000 people without executing a single one of them. That is what happens when ethnic criteria motivate mass killing.

The next stage in the killing in the bloodlands was when the Soviets and the Germans were allies, between 1939 and 1941. From the broad point of view of European history, this period is important, because it is when both the Soviets and the Germans were expanding territorially: the Soviets more modestly trying to invade Finland, incorporating Eastern Poland and Northeastern Romania. The Germans were much more ambitious, invading western Poland, the Low Countries and France, beginning the Battle of Britain, fueled by the
way, with oil from the Soviet Union. In terms of our subject of deliberate killing, this is a period when 200,000 people were killed, roughly in equal numbers by the Soviets and the Nazis. During this period the two were targeting the same kinds of groups, coming from different sorts of analysis: one racial and the other class. Both the Soviets and the Germans came to the same conclusion that the way to destroy, in the German case, or dominate, in the Soviet case, Poland, was to remove the group which both of them called the intelligentsia. *Intelligenz* in German, *intelligentsia* in Russian—there are long debates about where that word came from—but what I find interesting is a kind of convergence between those who destroyed and those who were destroyed. It was this group, this intelligentsia, the educated classes that were the most important. The profiling was so similar that in the number of cases that we now know about, one brother was killed by the Germans and one brother was killed by the Soviets, or one sister was killed by the Germans and another sister was killed by the Soviets, precisely because Moscow and Berlin were using the same kind of metric.

The next stage is the most dramatic, between 1941 and 1945, when the Germans betrayed their Soviet allies and invaded the Soviet Union. In order to understand what comes next, one has to have a sense of the scale of destruction which was envisioned by the Germans for the invasion of the Soviet Union, which was, in fact, far greater than anything the Germans managed to achieve, unthinkably horrible as that was. These plans imagined not only the elimination of all of the Jews who fell under German rule, which was a goal from the beginning, but also the starvation of some 30 million inhabitants of the Soviet Union after a victorious war. By the way, that would have meant the death of about three quarters of the Jews in the Soviet Union, who lived in the cities, which were targeted to be starved and then razed to the ground. The general notion of this plan, which was called the Hunger Plan, was that Soviet modernization, that is, all of the building of cities, the urbanization, all the development that took place in the 1920s and 1930s, especially under the first Five Year Plan, had to be reversed. The people who came into Soviet cities were to be killed by hunger, the cities themselves were to be removed, progress was to be undone, and this was to become a kind of German agrarian paradise. That was the foundational idea. The other plan, which is worth recalling, was something called *Generalplan Ost*, which was a postwar coloni-
zation scheme that envisaged a very large number of people, how many depends on what premise you start with, but somewhere between 30 and 50 million, to be forcibly deported across the Urals, enslaved, assimilated, or killed. So this was the vision of the Germans, and these were their plans, in the spring of 1941. They aimed at a transformation that is almost unthinkably murderous and unthinkably radical. These ideas to demodernize the Soviet Union and the racial and imperial assumptions with which the Germans entered the Soviet Union are necessary to understand some of the policies that followed. The most dramatic of these were the starvation of Soviet prisoners of war. About 2.6 million Soviet prisoners of war were starved to death in the camps, victims who are largely forgotten. Another half million Soviet prisoners of war, predominantly though not entirely Jews, were also shot at this time. The starvation siege of Leningrad was not just a military contingency; it was consistent with Hitler’s desire for that city to be destroyed. Smaller starvation policies were pursued with Kiev and Kharkiv, as such cities were not meant to exist by the end of the war.

When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union, they also intended to eliminate its Jews, but they were not quite sure just how this could be achieved. They had considered a number of deportation plans for the Jews of Europe, none of which had proven practical: to Madagascar, to a reservation in Poland, to the Soviet Union (which of course declined). Now the idea, such as it was, was to forcibly deport Jews to Siberia. But what emerged instead was mass killing. The most important policy, within the years 1941–1945, although it is important to note that this is hard to put under one heading, is the policy that we describe as the Holocaust. It begins with shooting campaigns of Jewish men of military age in the East, after the invasion of the Soviet Union, which quickly became the destruction of women and children, then the elimination of whole communities. By the end of 1941, some 1 million Jews are already dead in the Soviet Union, most of them by gunfire; some of them by gas vans using a technology which had earlier been used on the handicapped. The Holocaust then shifts both in technology and geography, even as the shooting continues in the East and claims a total of about 2.6 million lives. Death facilities using carbon monoxide are built in occupied Poland: Belżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, Chelmno (a slightly different initiative), and Majdanek. The final stage of the killing that is very familiar to us is Auschwitz; Auschwitz is a bit
atypical and is very important because one in six Jews who were murdered died there. It is atypical in the sense that many Soviet Jews, who were the second largest group of Jews killed in the Holocaust, did not die in Auschwitz; they died in the killing fields. Polish Jews, who were the largest group of Jewish victims, died in significant numbers in Auschwitz, around 200,000, but they were mainly murdered at other killing facilities. Auschwitz is special because Auschwitz was the gathering point for Jews in Southern and Western Europe, and Hungarian Jews, in 1942 through 1944, especially in those last two years. That is a main reason why it is remembered. The other reason is that it was simultaneously a death facility and a concentration camp. The concentration camp had many survivors, the death facility did not, but the concentration camp survivors were able to recall and tell others about Auschwitz. It is much harder to recall Treblinka, Sobibór, Belzec, and Chelmno because the total number of survivors from those places is somewhere under a hundred.

The final policy that needs recalling, which is actually related to the Holocaust, is the German policy of “reprisals.” In occupied Belarus, well over 300,000 non-Jews were killed in what we categorize as “reprisals” for partisan actions. By the late stages all the women and children were shot, and then the men were taken as forced laborers in the Reich. The way that the Germans carried out reprisals involved herding people into barns, burning them, and performing mass shooting over pits. This policy was the same in terms of what was going on with the Jews. In fact, the same police units and security divisions would kill Jews one day and partisans the next day. In many cases, in their own records, they did not even bother to distinguish between them, which means that the records of these two events blurs together.

So, when you take all these events together, from 1933 to 1945, you reach a total of about 14 million people who were deliberately killed. People were deliberately killed in other policies, but these major policies embrace almost all of the numbers. The people in question were Jews, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Russians, and others. If you add people who were killed in the bloodlands but did not come from the region, the largest group would be the Hungarian Jews. There was a distinct, but related event, in a neighboring territory, which was the murder of Romanian Jews that claimed another 300,000 lives. If you add the horrible suffering of the Gulag and the concentration camps,
you add a few more million lives, but you do not change the basic geography of where and how the killing took place. Most of the civilians who died were not killed in camps; most of them never saw a camp.

I hope I have succeeded in showing you not only the depth of the destruction and the horror, but also, and now I am changing subjects, some of the reasons why this catastrophe might now be difficult to commemorate. The most obvious point is the simplest one and I am going to try hard to make it clear: we do not control time; people who commemorate do not control time. Commemoration is an attempt to fix an event at a certain point and describe it in such a way that it will be remembered in a certain way for the future. However, there is never any possibility of a fresh start. You’re always commemorating it some distance in time from the events. The current post-communist commemoration of the events that I am talking about, which took place between 1933 and 1945, begins in 1989, after forty-five years of already existent traditions of commemoration. This in itself is a normal situation of any act of commemoration, as the latter develops upon earlier strata of memory practices. When I speak of these traditions of commemoration, I am not trying to say that they are historically false. In each case, in different balances, they weld together historical truth with commemorative success.

One of these commemorative traditions is what you might think of as the “liberation from the West”: the Americans landed in Normandy and ended evil in the world; I am simplifying it a bit, but not too much. This is a view which is very powerful in the United States. In more sophisticated versions it also has a great deal of power in the UK. We see it repeated not only in film, but also in commemorations of Victory in Europe Day (V-E Day). There are a lot of problems with this, obviously. One of them is its particular connection, in the last 15 years or so, with the Holocaust. The idea that we landed in Normandy and somehow that had something to do with ending the Holocaust is, I think, something which many if not most Americans have come to believe. There are two fallacies in this narrative: the first is that we had no Jewish motive at the time; we took little action to save Jews during World War II, aside from a warning in late 1942 and Roosevelt’s War Refugees Board in 1944; we did not liberate any of the places where Jews died in large numbers. The second is that, at a different level, the Allies, in order to defeat the Germans, relied on the Soviet Union, which at the moment when we sealed
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the alliance had killed more people than the Germans had. Now, the Germans changed that over the course of the war, becoming the most murderous regime in the history of the world, even as we fought against them. All this is important, because it keeps the American contribution in perspective, but also reminds us of the moral compromise which was at the heart of the victory.

Another narrative, equally powerful in a different part of the world, can be called “liberation from the East.” This account goes as follows: the Soviet Union modernized itself and strengthened itself in the 1930s. It succeeded in liberating most of Europe, on the basis of heroic efforts. Again, this has a certain core of truth, but there are some problems with it. The modernization of the 1930s involved starving millions of people to death. The terror involved shooting hundreds of thousands of people. In neither case is it at all clear that this prepared the Soviet Union in a material way to win the war. The idea that it all somehow makes sense because the Soviets won the war is appealing, but I do not think it is actually very convincing. The scenario also overlooks that the Soviet Union was one of the initiators of World War II in Europe. The war in Europe might perhaps have begun in some other way, but the way that it did in fact begin was with an alliance between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. This narrative tends to overlook the Soviet crimes that led to deaths, which were then counted in the total number of losses that the Soviet Union suffered. In post-Soviet times, a new problem with this narrative is that in today’s Russia the distinction is not often made between the Soviet Union and Russia. So most of the losses, but also most of the fighting done by soldiers, was not done by Russians, it was done by Soviet citizens. Russia suffered horribly—the territory of today’s Russia—in the war, incomparably greater than any Western territory, but far less than Belarus or Ukraine, or for that matter, Poland. The greatest victim group on Soviet territories was the Jews. And so the conflation between Russia and the Soviet Union allows for both martyrdom and the triumph to be reapportioned in a way which is, in fact, inaccurate.

The final narrative or tradition of commemoration is that of the Holocaust. Now, the history of the Holocaust by 1989, and I would say even more since 1989, has established certain important facts and I by no means wish to diminish them. It established the numbers and Raul Hilberg was very close to being correct about the total numbers.
more than forty years ago. It established very precisely the victim group and how the Jews were different from other victim groups. It showed that the Germans meant to eliminate all the Jews and by the end of the war were tempted to kill every Jew who was under their control, anywhere they lived, and that makes the Jewish case different. It established, to a great degree of accuracy, the methods by which Jews were killed. All this historic narrative has improved with time and the last twenty years of scholarship on the Holocaust has been remarkable.

However, there are certain problems with the way that we have studied the Holocaust in the West, which has made commemoration in the East a bit harder. The first is that in general, and by that I mean about 99 percent of the time, we approach Holocaust history with the sources that were left by the perpetrators. This is appropriate if you are trying to establish their motives, and the debate about the German motives and the timing of their decisions has been one of the most impressive debates in the history of historiography itself. However, that optic leaves out the terrains where the Holocaust took place, which the Germans themselves understood very imperfectly. It also leaves out the majority of the victims, 97 percent of whom could not have left a trace in German because they did not know the language.

The second problem with the Holocaust tradition, as we know it, is the over-identification with the West. The victims whom we do know well, for example, Anne Frank or Victor Klemperer, are atypical victims. They belong to relatively small groups of Jews, whose chances for surviving in the German case, although it might seem ironic, were far greater than the chances for survival of Jews elsewhere. There is also the epistemic irony that the less deadly the Holocaust was, the more likely we were to learn something about it, because there could be survivors who could leave us with memoirs, recollections, or novels. The more deadly the Holocaust was, the harder it is for us to find things about it. This is consistent, all of it, with the image that had been consolidated by 1989, of Auschwitz as the center of the Holocaust, which again, is an important part of the truth. But there are at least two other things which you have to add, namely the carbon monoxide killing facilities in Poland and also the killing fields from the Eastern-occupied Soviet Union to get a more complete picture. Those things are generally left in the shadow of Auschwitz, although in each case there were more victims from more typical groups of victims.
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What this means is that by 1989 the countries where Jews actually lived in large numbers, which are the countries where the Holocaust took place, were far less present in the commemoration of the Holocaust than they were in its history. Why is that? Is it because all of the places where the Holocaust actually took place fell behind the Iron Curtain? They became something which was called Eastern Europe. They were studied within a Cold War framework or within a national framework, but for most people in the West they simply lost a great deal of the palpable reality they had before World War II. And so they came to be defined, in so far as they were thought of at all, in terms of these horrible terrains, these cities, these killing fields, these death facilities where the Holocaust took place. I do not want to overstate this point, but it seems to me that the fact that these countries came to exist chiefly in that capacity in the Western imagination makes it difficult for various kinds of commemoration later on.

Another source of difficulty lies in the contradictions of democratization and commemoration, which I would like to stress, are more complicated here than they might have been elsewhere. For example, in the case that I am referring to, one has this overlap of two different things that became the object of commemoration. In all of these countries you have an overlap of historical experience with both Nazi and Soviet power. So try to imagine how complicated this is, just structurally. You have one system that is in power for forty-five years. It ends, and then, in some sense, you want to commemorate the suffering at the hands of that system—communism. But before that system, there was a bloody occupation during World War II, and you would also like to commemorate that, perhaps differently, perhaps for different constituents. Making matters worse, that first period of suffering, under German occupation, has already been commemorated by the second system, the communist system, and any way you choose to commemorate it, you are in some sense working with or against the way it has already been commemorated. Then on top of it all, if I have not already lost you, you cannot actually distinguish in some of these places between one period of Nazi and one period of Soviet domination, because during the war itself, you very often had both experiences.

Sorting all this out would be incredibly difficult, in the best of circumstances. I would note that the positions that East European countries find themselves in are very hard to sort out within the frameworks
which we offered them, after 1989, the frameworks of commemoration: liberation for the West, liberation for the East, and liberation from the Holocaust. Each of these has a certain amount of purchase, and the Holocaust, I believe, has the most, but none of them can actually capture this complicated position that East Europeans, including East European Jews still in these countries, found themselves in. On this basis, let me try to run through briefly some of the problems that particular countries have found themselves in and the commemoration situation generally in some specific cases.

These are the special cases: Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland—the countries that are at the center of what I am calling the bloodlands. I am going to leave out Russia because David Brandenberger’s chapter covers this case, and the Baltics, because Leonidas Donskis discusses the topic extensively. In any event, these three countries are the core of what I am calling the bloodlands and most of the killing took place in these countries, so what has happened?

Ukraine, if you look at the history, is the country that between 1933 and 1945 suffered the most losses of deliberate killing, at least 7 million people through famine, Soviet terror, Soviet citizens dying in German prisoner war camps, and the Holocaust. There is nothing comparable to that in any European country, and not surprisingly, it has been very hard to find some kind of stable commemorative tradition. There are two very powerful and rival stories of the war. One of them is a version of liberation from the East, where the Red Army drives out the Germans. That is, understandably, the dominant story for most Ukrainians. There is an alternative story, which involves resistance to Soviet power by the Organization for Ukrainian Nationalists, because the latter did, in fact, resist with great persistence the Red Army. Tensions do exist, however. For example, in the summer of 1941, the same people who were involved in this resistance in many cases were then involved with the German police and took part in the execution of Jews. So then, there were those problems, which, of course, the other Ukrainian tradition of commemoration is very happy to note. That nationalist tradition of course records that the Red Army brought back a system that had killed millions of Ukrainians.

The consequence of all this is that you have had radical oscillations in memory policy in Ukraine. There is nothing that could really compare to this that has not involved a revolution. So, for example, the
Joseph Stalin was convicted of genocide along with a handful of other people, in early 2010, in the Ukrainian court of appeals. A few days after that happened, the very crime for which he was convicted, which was genocide in regard to the case of the famine, was removed from the presidential website entirely, because the president who supported this decision lost elections and another who did not agree to it won them. Within another few weeks, you have a new statue of Stalin being erected in an Ukrainian city, and then, a few weeks later, a communist is put in charge of the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance. Up until now, including the Yuschenko regime, there has been a kind of pluralism in Ukraine, which meant that various kinds of positions could at least be articulated. That pluralism has recently come under serious threat, which is unfortunate.

The second very important case and perhaps the most complicated one is Belarus. I said that Ukraine was a territory that suffered the most in the 1930s and 1940s. The territory of Europe that suffered the most during the war itself was Belarus. It suffered directly from the Holocaust, suffered disproportionately from the mass murder of Soviet prisoners in German camps, and it also disproportionately experienced the policy of “reprisals.” Although Serbs and Poles also suffered, Belarusians were hit hardest of all because of this policy of the Germans. Belarusians, for the most part, believed that they are alone with this history of suffering, and they are right. How many of us have even heard of Stalag 352, Maly Trostenets, Operation Hermann, or even the Battle of Bagration, which was arguably the decisive battle in the war? The first three are events which claimed huge numbers of innocent civilian lives and which simply have not found their way even into the historical discussions of the war. Yet, these are things which Belarusians remember and commemorate.

What dominates in Belarus is a version of liberation from the East due to Alexander Lukashenko, who himself was raised in the 1970s, which was the time when the Soviet version of liberation from the Germans became so popular and widespread that it turned into something which was taken for granted. What is interesting in Belarus today is the extent to which Lukashenko is trying to pass on that very narrative to the next generation, and he might as well be successful. Perhaps the most palpable and ridiculous instance of this situation is that of his illegitimate son, Kolya, who is ten years old and whom Lukash-
enko has mentioned as his preferred successor. Kolya, on the relevant days of commemoration, wears a tiny military uniform. It is absurd enough that Lukashenko pretends to have—he was born in 1954—liberated the Soviet Union, but the implication that his ten-year-old son liberated the Soviet Union is taking the whole thing to another level. In this narrative of liberation from the East, there is very little room for the Holocaust. Belarus is one of the very few countries where you can even compare non-Jewish to Jewish losses during World War II, in absolute numbers, not in proportions. Nevertheless, the Holocaust is a crucial event in Belarus. The way that this works is that Jewish citizens are counted as Belarusian citizens, just as they used to be counted as Soviet citizens. Therefore the Holocaust is molded into a larger story of the suffering of Belarusian civilians, which has enough appeal that most people would simply accept it. This is done explicitly. Lukashenko has a court historian who postulates his verdicts on these issues. One of his verdicts is that it is unjust to take into account ethnicity when counting victims of the war. Of course, once you say that, what you are saying, in fact, is that it is unjust to actually distinguish the Holocaust from other traumatic events.

The other important thing about the way this narrative functions is that it is anti-Western. It is much more anti-Polish than it is anti-German, because it is more convenient to be anti-Polish than to be anti-German. What it does is that it presents Belarus as being in a sort of vanguard of protecting civilization. This is a kind of Western narrative à rebours: the barbarians were in the West and we in Belarus are the ones who were protecting Russia from the aggression of the West. This particular story makes it very hard to imagine that the Byelorussian foreign policy could change any time soon. However, I would point out that there are weaknesses of this commemorative policy and that a better discussion of history might exploit them. I will try to get to that in the conclusion.

The third case is Poland. Between the 1930s and 1940s, Poland suffered in numerous ways, some of which were forgotten. Even Poles sometimes do not remember the Polish action of 1937–1938. There is no commemoration of this in Poland, even though four times as many people were killed as in the Katyn massacres. From 1939 to 1941, there was social decapitation, which I mentioned earlier. Then there was the Holocaust, which touched above all Jews who were Pol-
ish citizens. There were reprisals; at least 120,000 Polish civilians were killed during the Warsaw uprising, there were concentration camps, and forced labor, and so on. What has Polish memory policy been like? I cannot really summarize. There have been a couple of unusual bright moments. One was the Polish-Ukrainian discussions about ethnic cleansing in the 1990s, where a historian from each side had to give a paper under the same title. This meant that each of them used the sources that he knew the other was going to use. The consequences were that the papers ended up being much more reasonable and (more) scholarly than one might have expected. You had nine volumes of publications, which was, in fact, quite an accomplishment.\(^2\)

The other high point of Polish commemoration was the debate after the publication of Jan Gross’s book, *Neighbors*, about Jedwabne, which led to the densest discussion of the Holocaust which has ever taken place in any country. It is often compared to the *Historikerstreit*, but the degree of social participation and influence seems to have been much greater. It led to a huge jump upward in general Polish knowledge about the Holocaust, including subjects that have little to do with the actual events at Jedwabne—for example, Poles being able to say where Treblinka was and what Treblinka meant.

The problem (there were many others, but I am going to focus on one for our purposes) with both of these discussions—about Ukrainian-Polish ethnic cleansing and about Jedwabne—is what I would call *agency inflation*. In both of these cases, Ukrainians and Poles (in the first case) tended to talk about World War II as though it were chiefly about Ukrainians and Poles, and as though Ukrainians and Poles had more to do with what actually happened than in fact they did—which is perhaps inevitable within a framework of the national history. In national history you tend to shift from being an agent to being a victim, but when you are a victim, you want to be an agent as much as you can. The same holds for the Jedwabne debate. It was incredibly important when Jan Gross pointed out that Poles had killed Jews and this led to other important research. But, as German historians have pointed out since, this was part of a larger policy of self-cleansing which the Germans were carrying out, using locals. While Polish participation is incredibly

\(^2\) Published by Karta as *Polska-Ukraina: trudne pytania*. 

important morally, the debate lost some of the larger framework, which is important if one is to understand the true horror of it all.

Poland is also exemplary of a particular problem which has spread throughout Eastern Europe and that is the problem of the memory ministries. These are extremely well-funded government institutions that were charged with functions which perhaps do not all go together nicely: control of critical archives, prosecuting criminals, lustration, and also public education. Arguably, it might be a good idea to separate some of these functions, because when they are together in one institution, as they are in the Polish model, and then in the Ukrainian model (which is a kind of cousin to the Polish one), one creates endless possibilities for abuse. This even applies in scholarly terms and I will give an example of this: After Jan Gross published his book *Neighbors*, there was a two-volume publication by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), which was the best treatment of the subject.\(^3\) It was excellent in terms of documentation and analysis. It brought to light and confirmed a number of cases similar to Jedwabne. That, in my view, was the high point. However, a few years later, as IPN leadership changed as a result of a new government coming into power, Jan Gross wrote another book called *Fear*. The reaction of IPN was preemptive. A Polish book came out ahead of the publication of Gross’s book, with a preface which misled readers about what the subject of Gross’s book was going to be about, let alone what actually happened during the 1938 pogrom at Kielce.

There have also been other strange features. For example, I fondly remember when a friend and colleague from Poland wrote to me and said, “I am looking forward to sharing a prison cell with you and with other friends because a law has just been passed about defaming the Polish nation.” It turned out that if you claimed that any representative of the Polish nation had been involved in either National Socialism or communism, you committed a crime. A prosecutor actually planned to make a case against Jan Gross. Fortunately, that never came to anything.

Something which is particular about Poland and distinguishes this country from Ukraine and Belarus, is what one might think of as—for lack of a better word—normality. This is a country of economic success, which has joined the European Union (EU). But what normality has

\(^3\) Under the title, *Wokół Jedwabnego.*
brought with it were a couple of strange consequences. One of them is a new generation. We now have a young generation of Poles who, in many cases, are not that concerned with the past in so far as the past is a way to get rid of those annoying people above them, who might have some dealings with the communist regime, which, of course, everybody over age 45 did, in some way or another, because it was a communist system. But young people, who often thirty years ago would have been the very people who would have joined the Party for opportunistic reasons, are now very much in favor of lustration for the same opportunistic reasons that would help them clear out the people who were above them. So, that is something which comes with normality.

Another paradoxical situation couched as normalcy is that joining the EU leads to greater irresponsibility in commemoration policy. Here is why: when a country is trying to join the EU, it is necessary for it “to be good”; it is necessary not to have scandals about, for example, the Holocaust, at least not to react to the scandals in a way which is going to make your candidacy look worse. I am simplifying somewhat, but this is the general drift of things. However, once you are actually within the EU, you can do whatever other members do and treat history entirely as your own internal affair. Therefore, your scandals can become national or local, and it does not matter, you are not going to be expelled from the EU for your history discussions any more than Portugal or Greece are going to be expelled. So, ironically, the level of Polish discussion of difficult historical events has decreased since 2004 when Poland joined the EU.

To sum it up: what then are the limits of commemoration, of the event of mass killing, which I tried to describe? Obviously, if I am correct to say that it is fair and reasonable to describe European mass killing as this one long event with certain important episodes such as the Holocaust, then we have to observe that nothing like this has been commemorated. There is not even vaguely this kind of transnational commemoration, or even commemoration of events, as opposed to selected groups of victims. Why is that? There is the problem of the outside narratives that existed—liberation from the West, liberation from the East. The Holocaust offered some but limited help to countries who were trying to pursue national commemoration policies. There is also another problem which is a little bit more subtle since it is an absence: there has not been, after 1989, a second wave of Ger-
man commemoration of another group of German victims. The Holocaust commemoration narrative in Germany has become, if anything, crisper in the last twenty years. However, the turn that has been made in Germany was more toward “We have our groups of German victims now. And we would like to have it discussed in some way.” This point has been formulated more or less politely and more or less correctly. There has not been a move to integrate or to add, for example, the Soviet prisoners of war. Now, of course, educated Germans—very educated Germans—know that 3.1 million prisoners of war were deliberately killed by the Germans, but that group has not been brought into a larger German story. Polish victims, too, are, to a large extent, not brought in or added to this story. Had that happened in the last twenty years, I think it would have been easier to commemorate in Eastern Europe, but it has not really happened.

Another thing that has not happened is that rather than Russia developing a Russian historical policy, Russia has unsurprisingly modified Soviet narratives. If Russia had pulled back in, and concerned itself with events that took place on the terrain of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland would have had an easier time, but it has not happened. Russia, predictably, has instead worked within the framework of the Soviet narrative of the war, though it modified it in certain ways. But the fact is that there is a kind of a modern matryoshka imperialist going on—in typical official Russian proclamations, the victims who are discussed lived well beyond the territory of today’s Russian Federation. This makes it hard, because you have victims who have been claimed by numbers of states at the same time. If everyone in the German-occupied Soviet Union was a “Russian” victim, we get some strange consequences. For example, a victim of the Holocaust in west Ukraine could be simultaneously claimed by four different states, counting four different ways: Israel, obviously, but also Poland, since the person was a prewar Polish citizen; Ukraine, since the land in question is now Ukraine; and Russia, since the territory in question was annexed by the Soviet Union after the invasion of Poland in 1939.

I would like to conclude by making some recommendations, not about what East Europeans should do, because I think that is too easy, but about what people in the West might do to make commemoration policies a little bit less unsatisfactory. The first is—this is where I say
my word of thanks—to the Romanian Cultural Institute, the Romanian Embassy, and to Vladimir Tismaneanu and Bogdan Iacob personally, for organizing a conference of this sort. In general, money which is available for commemoration is not used for multinational conferences: the fundamental problem is that commemoration is always national. I only mentioned the word “Romania” in this text once, now twice, and I am not going to mention it again. I think it is very important that discussions of memory and history take on a multinational framework, as this one has done.

A second recommendation: I think it is very important that, within the next twenty-five years, the United States and the EU members bring Belarusian and Ukrainian elites, historians, and others, through educational institutions and allow them to go back, or encourage them to go back. There is no perverse incentive here, by the way, because there is very little chance that Belarus and Ukraine are going to join the EU in the next couple of decades, so that process that I have mentioned about Poland is not going to happen. In the meantime, that will, at least, multiply perspectives.

A third item which Western institutions could do would be to recognize the existence of memory ministries as a phenomenon, just as we recognize the existence of say, police forces, and think about how they might be coordinated. International policing is coordinated. There is no reason why international memory work might not be coordinated. For example, it would be a good thing if Polish historians working in the Polish memory ministry and Czech historians working in the Czech ministry, and so on, spend one year in each other’s institutions. They would learn languages; they would break out of national frameworks; they would get to know other scholars. A much more ambitious plan of this sort would have them rotating through the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC or Yad Vashem in Israel. I would point out this kind of rotation of cadres, which would freshen up the discussion on what happened in Eastern Europe immensely, would cost almost nothing. The EU could just spend a few hundred thousand dollars a year to finance post-docs or other programs, the condition of which being that you leave your own ministry for another. Everyone could profit from that and it would do a great deal, over the next generations, to make these discussions more realistic and fresher.
A fourth thing that we can do, and here I am following Omer Bartov in an important article he wrote in 2008,4 is to regard the Holocaust, among other things, as an event in East European history. We should do this for a number of reasons, one of which is because it is just correct. The Eastern part of Europe was the region where the Holocaust took place; it is where most of the victims lived. But there are other reasons which have to do with commemoration. One of these is that if one learns local languages, and sadly, Yiddish is an exception, then you are suddenly in contact with these countries’ historians in a way that you would not be otherwise. If you start to treat the East European Jews as the central object of your scholarly concern and write about the Holocaust, you are then embracing East Europeans. In other words, you can go through the Ostjuden, who are often not attended to with the kind of detail one would hope, to the other Osteuropäerin. You go through the Eastern Jews to East Europeans. Once you’re working on Eastern Jews, then you’ve already started working on Eastern Europe. That can enable you in all kinds of ways to address other problems of commemoration. The obvious example is bringing into the discussion difficult issues such as collaboration, but in general, it would create a situation in which West and East could talk to each other much better. I think the Holocaust divides Western historians from East European historians to a large extent, but it need not.

My final point is that if we are going to keep pace with historical discussions in Eastern Europe, if for no other reason, we have to drop the taboo on comparing Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in so far as anyone believes in it. There are a number of good reasons to overcome this taboo. One is that it never really made any sense. If I say to you that you cannot compare Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, I am issuing a comparative judgment. Once I say that, all I have said is “I have compared the two and I would prefer that you do not and I have the microphone.” It has no other logical content besides that one. The other reason we should abandon the taboo is that when we enforce it, we are denying the experience of Jews and others. Almost everyone who lived and suffered under one regime had some kind of contact with the other regime, precisely because the zone I am talking

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4 Omer Bartov, “Eastern Europe as the Site of Genocide,” *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 80, no. 3 (September 2008), 557–593.
about—where most of the victims died—is a zone where both powers ruled. Most of the victims, at some point in their lives, even if their lives ended very quickly, had an occasion to think about which regime was better and what one should do. This is at the heart of the history of the event and comparison runs through the primary sources, Jewish and otherwise. These people were condemned to compare.

Another reason why I think it is important to compare is that if you do not compare you cannot make a convincing judgment about the singularity of the Holocaust. I think once you have gone through the other German and Soviet crimes, then you are in a position to talk about the singularity of the Holocaust in a convincing way. If you do not do that it is going to be very hard to convince East Europeans, or, in the long run, anyone else. My own book makes the most radical case for the singularity of the Holocaust ever made, precisely because all of the other German and Soviet policies are in view.

Additionally, if we retreat to a discussion of the Holocaust which relies only on the Germans and is focused on the West, we then drift away from the East European historians, including those who have bad intentions, who talk about the Holocaust in different ways. There is no contact, no way to refute them. If we do not learn East European languages and talk about the Holocaust in ways that account for ongoing discussions in East European historiographies, in a comparative context, then we do not know the things that local historians know, for better and worse, and they are going to dominate the discussion about these things.

The original question of my paper was the relationship between history and commemoration. At the very most, I think the kind of conservative approach to history that I have recommended could place some limits on some of the worst kinds of commemoration; it could make it a little bit less unsatisfactory. The paradox of this is that the only way that history could work is if we continue to think of it precisely as history, rather than as a policy of memory.