How to make sense of the Holocaust? This question was crucial for many actors behind the Iron Curtain. The contributions of this book challenge the black-and-white picture that was drawn of the state-socialist past, not only in the Western world during the Cold War but also within the former People’s Republics after the upheavals of 1989. The general assumption was that it was not possible during those years to elaborate any discourse on World War II without an underlying political agenda in which the Jewish experience’s specificity could not fit. Yet, the careful examination of actions undertaken by various actors demonstrate that Eastern Europe did not completely suppress Holocaust historiography and memory.

To do so, the authors first focus on how people expressed memories of the Holocaust, underlining many understudied memorialization efforts and historical projects. Rather than seeing them as merely instrumental tools for the regime, they prove that these actions were legitimate and authentic for the actors who undertook them. Second, they reject the so-called “Eastern Bloc” as a monolithic entity, pointing to the diversity of realities within it. Third, they show how the many forms of relationship with the Holocaust that existed—memorialization efforts, literary and artistic representations—were clear evidence of the agency of their creators, upturning the traditional view that has positioned these actors as mere implementers of the rigid, top-down, ideological narrative of World War II in state-socialist countries. Despite constraints on what could be said about it or done to commemorate the Holocaust, it was possible for Eastern Europeans to try and make sense of the catastrophe, to mourn and seek to explain the massive destruction of their fellow Jewish citizens. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, this volume helps demarginalize the history of
violence and genocide in Eastern Europe. While recognizing salient specificities in the prelude, unfolding, and long-term effects of genocidal violence among East European societies, such differences do not preclude the possibility for useful comparisons to similar courses of events in other regions. There is certainly much to be gained from understanding the memory of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe since it provides useful concepts and heuristic tools to better seize traumatic memories and representation in other former “extremely violent societies,” like Rwanda after the Tutsi genocide or Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, places that share a similar past of “paroxysmal violence.”

Discursive Frameworks for Addressing the Holocaust

Rather than suppression, the authors of this volume put forward other ways in which memory was controlled in state-socialist Eastern Europe, such as marginalization, distortion, and the creation of alternative memories within the legitimate framework of antifascism and universalization of the Jewish experience. These concepts better explain how narratives of the fate of Eastern European Jewish victims during World War II emerged and changed. The discourses were furthermore extremely affected by the deep and long-lasting impacts of the brutalization of entire societies. Therefore, boldly articulating war experience with any mediation tool would have been too harmful and traumatic. The authors argue that narratives of the Holocaust were not absent at all from the public space but were framed mostly within the antifascist discourse that universalized Jewish victims, rendering them not as Jews but as simply citizens. While other scholars have often mistaken—sometimes deliberately—that antifascist framework of state socialism for censorship, this book proves that this framework cannot be reduced solely to censorship, as shown by the alternative memory forged by the writers of Sovetish Heymland or the self-censorship of the editors.

2 The concept of “paroxysmal violence” (violence paroxystique) was first used by Christian Ingrao in his book The SS Dirlewanger Brigade: The History of the Black Hunters, trans. Phoebe Green (New York: Skyhorse, 2011 [2006]), 245. His study of a unit of poachers sent to the Eastern front analyzes the conditions that made it possible for them to act with hitherto inconceivable cruelty, which Ingrao describes as “paroxysmal violence.”