Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

Stach, Stephan, Hallama, Peter, Bohus, Kata

Published by Central European University Press

Stach, Stephan, et al.

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/94691.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/94691

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3197463
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.”

who published the Ringelblum Archive. However, censorship did exist and did prevent the publication of certain works or the expression of Jewish suffering in certain ways—for instance, in the case of state-funded art projects about the memory of the Holocaust in Hungary, or in the case of GDR historian Helmut Eschwege who encountered difficulties when he tried to describe explicitly the fate of Jews in his broader narrative of the war.

Yet, this censorship was not as total or as top-down as it has often been imagined to be. Rather than only taking the form of the censor’s black marker, censorship more ambiguously took place in the form of self-censorship, self-constraint, and adaptation to official discourse. Such was the case for many of the painters, sculptors, writers, filmmakers, journalists, and historians discussed in this volume, who thrived to tell their story in their own way. The creative virtue of (self-)censorship, that boundaries enhance creativity and artists pass on messages despite constraints,⁴ appears to be quite important in other fields too, such as with journalists like Heinz Knobloch. As Alexander Walther underscores, Knobloch challenged the conventionally impersonal history of the destruction of European Jewry in his books by presenting a very personal narrative and addressing the controversial issue of responsibility, although in veiled language. Similarly, Anatolii Rybakov used voids in the construction of his novels to help the reader understand the unspeakable. If literature can be defined by an attempt to embody and individualize the expression of universal emotions and situations, then its mission could still be fulfilled among talented artists who acutely used that essence of literature—and art in general—to tackle the potential distorting effects of an imposed and dominating universalistic war narrative.

Thus, censorship of Holocaust discourse was not total. Many chapters in this book analyze the existence of discursive places for the memory of the Holocaust, be it through the critical reception of a work of art or a book. Historical research and publication projects, often looked down upon by Western scholars, did occur behind the Iron Curtain, though historians were linguistically cautious in presenting the results and complied to an extent with the official or sometimes unofficial demands of the state in exchange for access to archives. Peter Hallama, for instance, highlights the leading role played by historian Miroslav Kárný in publishing sources on the Nazi persecution in the Czech lands and publicizing the history of Jews in the region and particularly

---

⁴ See for instance on Soviet literature Luba Jurgenson, Création et tyrannie (Cabris: Éditions Sulliver, 2009).
in the Theresienstadt ghetto. Similarly, the authorities in Hungary and Poland permitted important publications on the Holocaust, some of which even gained international importance, like many diaries of Jewish survivors and collections of documents from the Ringelblum Archive published by the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland.

The universalistic and antifascist narrative also did not prevent the commemoration of Jewish victims specifically, even if they were not openly presented as such. Even in the Soviet Union, commemoration sites appeared throughout the period, like the Ninth Fort Museum in Kaunas analyzed by Gintarė Malinauskaitė, testifying to a particular Soviet narrative of the Holocaust. Indeed, there was a great diversity and inconsistency in official state-socialist policies towards Jewish memorial sites: sometimes allowing for important landmarks like the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Monument or the Babyn Yar memorial, while other times desecrating important sites, like for instance building a market over a Jewish cemetery and World War II murder site in Parczew, Poland. This volume invites further, much-needed historical research on local initiatives to make sense of these spaces in times when Holocaust memory was still embedded in other local memories of violence and wars.5

To be sure, the prevailing narrative in state-socialist countries often resulted in a twofold discourse: one aimed at a domestic audience and the other an international one with the intent of giving the regime the best image possible abroad. For Western audiences, or for major official events, the state would strongly emphasize the antifascist narrative, whereas it could allow for a less heroic, more pluralistic, and empathic narrative for local audiences and smaller events. A similar pattern held for memory discourse on other traumatic events. More broadly, double standards were common use to present abroad the domestic social issues communist governments were facing, especially during political upheavals. This duality led to discrepancies and inconsistencies in policy and attitude. Daniel Véri demonstrates the differences between the Holocaust monuments mainly for international audiences at former concentration camps (Auschwitz and Mauthausen), and the plans for monuments that were not built, and were less centered on antifascism and focused more on specifically Jewish victims, and which eventually found their way into domestic art collections and were discussed in Hungary. Conversely, there were times when specifically discussing

Jewish victims of the war was implicitly authorized for selected audiences, such as with publications that were clearly for an international Jewish/Yiddish audience, like *Sovetish Heymland* in the USSR, or publications from Jewish communities in Czechoslovakia and Poland that were only issued abroad in English and German.

A surprising but crucial finding of this collection is that the prevailing antifascist narrative was neither a prison for memory nor an eraser of it. On the contrary, this framework unexpectedly paved the way for voicing some of the earliest expressions of Holocaust memory, at least among intellectuals, who were both deeply embedded in this antifascism and the most in dialogue with it. As Stephan Stach and Peter Hallama have previously pointed out, the antifascist narrative has fostered practices of “counter-history” (*Gegengeschichte*). The dissidents exposed falsifications in order to delegitimize official history. Even some left-wing political opposition groups could challenge the socialist master narrative. Similarly, many reference works (books, films, essays, monuments) that have contributed to the elaboration of a specific Eastern European Holocaust historiography and memory can be viewed as alternative interpretations of World War II by shedding light on so-called “blank spots,” namely the Jewish experience, even if their authors were not labelled as dissidents as such. These productions and practices surely gain in meaning and complexity when considered as a form of non-agonistic “counter-history”. In this respect, the concept of “multidirectional memory,” referenced repeatedly in this volume, proves useful for explaining the multiplicity of memory narratives, which can be seen as interdependent rather than exclusive and in competition. In this approach, the “Jewish experience” is not muffled by a “national” one but a part of it, with the same amount of agency and similar patterns of transmission.

One question remains, raised by Richard S. Esbenshade about Hungary but easily applicable to the rest of Eastern Europe. Did the still skewed narratives and representations of the Holocaust he identified in Hungarian literature actually manage to provide a greater “shared space” between Jews and non-Jews? In other words, did they really keep “division and antisemitism at bay,” or did they

---


7 For the Polish case, see Andrzej Friszke, *Anatomia Buntu* [The anatomy of rebellion] (Kraków: Znak, 2010).

fail to bring about a consensus in the memory landscape, as the heated, post-
1989 debates over World War II memory still prevailing in this part of Europe
would perhaps indicate? Could these narratives, framed within antifascist
lines, provide a forum to discuss local responsibilities for the Holocaust or
rather, did they stifle debate, provoking its resurfacing since the 1990s?

Eastern Europe in its Diversity

This volume, by bringing together case studies on various countries in Eastern
Europe—the German Democratic Republic, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland,
and the Soviet Union, including Soviet Lithuania—allows us to see some simi-
larities in the region as a whole and thus a kind of specificity regarding the East-
ern European understanding of the Holocaust, while also highlighting some
striking differences hitherto overlooked in historiography.

The first striking difference is that, though the antifascist framework and
the issue of censorship would at first glance appear to be a shared and distinctive
feature binding the expressions of memories of the Holocaust in Eastern Eu-
rope, a closer look at each country shows the crucial importance of national con-
texts. Whether the country had been allied with the Third Reich during World
War II, the presence of prewar communist activists and wartime antifascist re-
sistance, the overall civilian casualties in the war and the fate of the Jewish pop-
ulation in particular, the level of antisemitism historically—all these factors
played a role in determining the degree to which the antifascist narrative was
implemented, and the manner in which it was used to legitimize the socialist re-
gimes in the name of patriotism and heroism. The contributions in this volume
demonstrate how crucial it is to approach Holocaust memory and historiogra-
phy of Eastern Europe within their political and social context rather than
treating the area as a monolith. The heroic antifascist narrative was neither
equally powerful nor equally discriminatory towards the Jewish experience in
every country. The difference between Poland and the GDR is quite illuminat-
ing here, especially when it comes to the translation of documents related to the
Holocaust, as shown by Stephan Stach. Important Polish books on the Holo-

---

9 On this issue, see John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, eds., Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The
Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013); Georges
Mink and Laure Neumayer, eds., History, Memory, and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory
Games (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Malgorzata Pakier and Joanna Wawrzyniak, eds., Memory