Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism

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Making Sense of the Holocaust in Socialist Eastern Europe

membering), it might be more useful to see Holocaust memory as a complex network of expression and translation that circulated around all of Eastern Europe and beyond, and was not simply imposed.14

Making Sense of the Holocaust with Agency

Acknowledging the circulations of patterns of memory also enables us to envision them as creative or even liberating forces rather than merely as repressive frameworks for the silencing of expressions of Jewish suffering during the war. Writing about the journal *Sovetish Heymland*, Miriam Schulz compares the “ethnic autonomy” allowed in the USSR when it came to certain memories of the war, though always within the limits of the assimilatory goals of the Soviet Union, to “the old Bundist principle of ‘doikayt’ (hereness).” Doing so, she points out that at least parts of the Jewish world could take ownership of antifascist interpretative frameworks after the Holocaust and turn them into useful tools to cope with the trauma and loss of mass destruction. Embracing the heroic narrative of the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union, the national resistance movement in Poland, or the antifascist struggle in Hungary or the GDR may have been a positive attempt by Jewish individuals and groups to make sense of the immense destruction endured by their community and an expression of their agency.

This volume points to many examples of how Jewish survivors took on active roles in commemorating their communities and families. The fact that they did not simply endorse the instrumentalization of the Holocaust by communist regimes but rather participated in the process complicates our current understanding of the period. It would be naïve to believe that the antifascist narrative of the war was inclusive: it did not consider the specific suffering of each category of the victims it claimed to defend. Such a universalizing narrative could not offer a proper expression of the Eastern European Jewish experience of the war, even though there were important intersections where a shared history of Nazi oppression could be articulated. But it would be equally erroneous to be-

lieve that the state manipulation of Holocaust memory was constant and that it deprived Jewish survivors of all agency. The common dual image of Eastern European Jews as either victims or accomplices of state socialism is somewhat misleading. As these essays illustrate, antifascism was a genuine and sincere part of postwar Jewish identity.15

The case raised by Katarzyna Person and Agnieszka Żółkiewska in their chapter about the publication of texts from the Ringelblum Archive reveals that sometimes self-censorship was due more to reasons internal to the Jewish community than to external political pressure. A closer look at Jews’ own agency in making sense of the Holocaust can enable us to understand certain statements they made and positions they took. Jewish survivors and their descendants were positioned in a specific social narrative not of their own making, but often managed to mold it in a way that made sense of their “national” catastrophe through the lens of their own experiences, while embracing the appropriate vocabulary for Eastern European Jews. Focusing on agency may help us grasp the blending of seemingly divided memories: a quiet, if not almost secret, Jewish memory restricted to local and small circles of survivors versus an official, universalistic, and antifascist public memory of the Holocaust. Violating the master narrative of collective suffering and redemptive sacrifice of societies oppressed by Nazism was only admissible within an internal Jewish discourse. The presence of many Jewish actors in both public and private commemorations and memorialization efforts is evidence of a new postwar Jewish identity. For these Jews, the commemoration of the particularly Jewish suffering during World War II was not in opposition to their simultaneous expressions of patriotism and love for their Soviet, Polish, Hungarian, or Czech homelands.

Indeed, for many Jewish survivors living in this part of Europe, the universalist antifascist narrative could be liberating, a more satisfying way of making sense of their catastrophe than a religious understanding might have been. And such contrasting interpretations of the Holocaust were by no means unique to that side of the Iron Curtain.16 For Jewish survivors and their descendants everywhere, the issue of how to properly articulate memory was central. Despite

very different political contexts, survivors on both sides of Europe, in Israel, and in the US all initially suffered a lack of consideration, if not distortion of their voices by the societies they lived in.

Demarginalizing Eastern Europe

This last point leads us to the need to rethink the issue of Holocaust memory within the Cold War context but also to demarginalize Eastern Europe, as many of its supposedly distinctive features are evident in other parts of the world.

First, some of the commemorative efforts in state-socialist countries served a communicative purpose mainly oriented toward a Western audience. Their function was to display that the commemoration of the Holocaust was not suppressed and that the Jewish communities of these areas had not been deprived of their religious and cultural autonomy. Such international-facing forms of memory, though certainly propagandistic, circulated from one side of the Iron Curtain to the other, a process that has still not been properly acknowledged and studied. For instance, one can think about trials of perpetrators that were conducted after Nuremberg, like the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem or the Frankfurt-Auschwitz trial in West Germany, which had their own respective ideological agendas, both domestic and international. Witnesses and archival documents were brought as evidence from Eastern Europe for these trials. Trials conducted in Eastern Europe also had political purposes and with equally important circulations of actors, evidence, and patterns of representation of the Holocaust and Jewish victimhood that have not yet fully been explored and understood.17

Second, many chapters in this collection demonstrate not only that there was a clear understanding and analysis of the Shoah in Eastern Europe, but also that many concepts that were deemed to have emerged first or only in the West were very much present there as well. For example, one could think about the

17 For a closer examination of these East-West circulations during trials of perpetrators, see the research project headed by Vanessa Voisin, “Nazi War Crimes on Trial: Central and Eastern Europe,” Agence Nationale de la Recherche, April 27, 2020, https://anr.fr/en/funded-projects-and-impact/funded-projects/project/funded/project/b2d9d3668f92a3b0fbbf7866c7250f1ef3282d5476/tx_anrprojects_funded%5Bcontroller%5D=Funded&cHash=e7abdd01edf26ce01216d8eda3f196. See also the special issue of Revue d’histoire de la Shoah, no. 214 (2021) on the trials of war criminals in Eastern Europe, with a focus on transnational dimension, especially articles by Jasmin Söhner, “Un ‘châtiment inéluctable’? Le concours soviétique apporté aux enquêtes ouest-allemandes sur les criminels de guerre et les criminels nazis, 1955-1969,” 185–207; and Mate Zombory, “Documentation historique pendant la guerre froide: L’histoire du livre de Jeno Levai, Eichmann en Hongrie (1961),” 231–35.