



Simone Gigliotti, Berel Lang, eds. *The Holocaust: A Reader*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2005. 462 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4051-1400-4.



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Is the Holocaust Beyond Comprehension?

“The vocabulary has become impoverished. Concepts lose their clarity. Everything that was dreadful and terrible is pale and put to shame. Words stop affecting and influencing” (pp. 6, 362). These thoughts, penned by Herman Kruk in the Vilna Ghetto on December 29, 1942, do more than convey the feeling of helplessness featured prominently in many Holocaust memoirs. They speak volumes about the nature of Holocaust literature in general. For students approaching the subject for the first time, the mountain of books, articles, lectures, films, television programs, and internet sites, coupled with the seemingly infinite debates contained within these works, can make the Shoah a confusing and overwhelming topic. Simone Gigliotti and Berel Lang recognize that fledgling scholars cannot hope to enter this field without first comprehending how the idea of “The Final Solution of the Jewish Question” originated and then evolved into the attempted annihilation of European Jewry. Compiling a mix of primary documents and excerpts from recent secondary works authored by some of the leading scholars in the field, they claim to provide audiences with a “partial outline and summary” of “what the Holocaust was” (p. 2). In doing so, they demonstrate their belief that

“there are compelling historical and ethical reasons” for studying the Shoah (p. 2). Yet the information they provide is far more limited in scope than the title of the book suggests.

The reader consists of six sections. Part 1 tries to pinpoint the origins of antisemitism in Europe, and then traces its evolution into the “bio-political project of racial purification” in the Third Reich (p. 3). Part 2 focuses on Nazi population and resettlement policy, demonstrating that the Jews were not the only victims of Nazism. Anti-Jewish policy became more radical, as part 3 illustrates, after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. Viewing the war in the East as a racial struggle, the Nazi leadership ordered the SS *Einsatzgruppen*, four special task forces accompanying the Wehrmacht, to “liquidate” Jewish men, women, and children, political commissars, and enemy combatants. This section also explains how the long-held myth of Wehrmacht innocence in regard to war crimes in the East has come under informed attack recently and been dispelled. It was during the early stages of Operation Barbarossa, between June and December 1941, when, many scholars now believe,

“the decision initiating the ‘Final Solution’ was made ‘intentionally’” (p. 237). Part 4 outlines the “intentionalist/functionalist” debate which began in Germany in the 1980s and has since become known as the *Historikerstreit*.

Gigliotti and Lang devote two-thirds of the entire book to primary and secondary evidence regarding the origin and evolution of anti-Jewish policy, making this work a far more “partial,” and thus misleading, “summary and outline” of the Holocaust than the editors initially claim. By focusing exclusively in the next section on the writings of Jewish victims, Gigliotti and Lang use part 5 to preempt such criticism and provide some semblance of balance to the work overall. But they only include testimonies from three occupants of three different ghettos (Warsaw, Lodz, and Vilna) and one from the transit camp of Westerbork. Not only do Gigliotti and Lang ignore the concentration camp system entirely, but they also fail to include the voices of any victims from mid-1943 to mid-1945, the time period when the death factories ran non-stop in an attempt to “liquidate” as many prisoners as possible before the end of the war. Voices en route to the camps, inside the camps, and during evacuation and/or “liberation” from the camps are absent. In addition, the editors overlook several other vital aspects of the Holocaust, such as the roles and voices of non-Jews, “liberators,” and resisters, as well as such key topics as forced labor, Allied knowledge of and inaction toward the mass killings, and gender differences among both victims and perpetrators. The fact that Gigliotti and Lang recognize the importance of some of these omissions in their introduction does not excuse the editors from shedding at least some light on them, for which a work of over 400 pages certainly provided ample space. Finally, part 6 attempts to place the Holocaust in the context of genocide in general. Specifically, the articles try to construct an accurate and reasonable definition of what constitutes a genocide and whether the Holocaust was the prototypical example or something else entirely, deserving its own category.

In sum, the editors trace the progression of the Holocaust from the origins of antisemitism in Europe to the beginnings of the implementation of the “Final Solution.” But they fail to incorporate information regarding the main weapon used by the Nazis to carry out that genocide—the concentration and death camps. And what little voice they do allow the victims becomes silent after mid-1943. Therefore, the reader falls short of presenting the summary and outline of the Holocaust that its title and introduction imply. But Gigliotti and Lang could

have easily corrected this problem by explicitly explaining their intentions early on or condensing the first four sections to leave room for discussion of a wider variety of issues.

The editors also neglect to include some information vital to the understanding of the issues they do present. For instance, in part 2, Gigliotti and Lang completely disregard the pivotal role played by German women in Nazi population and resettlement policy.[1] Recent research has shown how women also acted as agents of “Germanization,” helping to exploit and even deport the indigenous populations to make room for ethnic Germans. While space constraints no doubt contributed to this oversight, the editors certainly could have included a list of some of the secondary literature focusing on women in Nazi Germany in the suggested reading section included at the beginning of the chapter.

The organization of the volume also presents some problems. Because the first four sections deal with the same general subject—the early stages of policy on the “Jewish Question”—much of the information contained in the secondary excerpts becomes repetitive, lending further support for the need to scale down this topic to make room for a broader array of questions. In addition, while the editors pen an introduction to the book as a whole as well as one to each of the six parts, they fail to include a conclusion. Such remarks could have summarized and tied together the various arguments, helping to combat the confusion—which the editors claim to be concerned with eradicating—caused by the overabundance of Holocaust literature. Finally, for whatever reason, the book lacks an index, which interferes with the editors’ determination to remedy the difficulty and confusion of entering the field of Holocaust studies.[2]

But such minor neglects and oversights do not take away from the overall value of the reader as a detailed introduction to the transformation of anti-Jewish policy in Germany from antisemitism to resettlement to mass extermination. One of the major strengths of this work is that it familiarizes undergraduates with some key primary documents in Holocaust and genocide studies, such as sections of *Mein Kampf*, Himmler’s thoughts on how to deal with so-called “racially-valuable” and “racially-worthless” peoples in the East, Otto Ohlendorf’s testimony that the *Einsatzgruppen* murdered hundreds of thousands of innocents during Barbarossa, the infamous “Commissar Decree,” the minutes of the Wannsee Conference, and several others. Such documents provide novice students with a chilling first-hand look into

the violent, fanatical, and business-like manner in which the Nazis sought to “solve” the “Jewish Question.” Such sources can also demonstrate to undergraduates the difficulty in working with primary materials from the Nazi era, particularly in regard to the “intentionalist/ functionalist” debate. Without a written order from Hitler initiating the “Final Solution,” “intentionalists” are forced to comb through his speeches and writings to “prove” the destruction of European Jewry was Hitler’s intention as early as the 1920s. “Functionalists,” on the other hand, reject these pieces of evidence as empty words, arguing only a written document ordering the “Final Solution” and signed by Hitler will prove them wrong. By including the above evidence, Gigliotti and Lang demonstrate to students that the only way for them to begin to understand the Holocaust is to examine both primary and secondary sources.

For those teaching courses on Nazi Germany, the Holocaust, or even genocide in general, these documents could also prove highly useful in igniting classroom discussion or providing topics for reaction papers. For instance, in the selection “Nation and Race” taken from *Mein Kampf*, students will follow the supposed process by which Hitler became an antisemite. But throughout the document, Hitler consistently flip-flops between hatred for the Jews and an uncertainty about his true feelings for them. By posing questions regarding what caused this apparent uncertainty, whether he viewed the Jewish people as a race or followers of a religion, or if there are any passages foreshadowing the attempted annihilation of European Jewry would not only produce interesting discussions and papers, but would also teach students how to sift through primary evidence to extract information supporting their arguments.

The secondary articles also introduce readers to a number of historical and ethical questions in addition to the “intentionalist / functionalist” debate, which seems to drive most of the book. In Part 2, for example, Gigliotti and Lang include an essay demonstrating that Jewish councils, under Nazi tutelage, “assumed responsibility for the internal management and regulation of ghetto communities” (p. 89). In other words, as Raul Hilberg points out in his article “Ghetto Formation,” these Jewish leaders served dual functions. While transmitting German directives to the ghetto inhabitants, using Jewish police to enforce Nazi law, and taking Jewish property, labor, and lives, the councils also “continued until the end to make desperate attempts to alleviate the suffering and to stop the mass dying in the ghettos” (p. 125). In short, “The Jewish leadership both saved and de-

stroyed its people” (p. 125). Posing the question to students of how some Jewish authorities could contribute to the gross exploitation of their own people could produce lively, productive debates. Helen Fein’s piece “Defining Genocide as a Sociological Concept” and Mark Levene’s “Is the Holocaust Simply Another Example of Genocide?” will assist readers in placing the Holocaust in historical context. These pieces raise some of the most loaded question in the field to help students discover for themselves whether the Holocaust was an unprecedented tragedy in world history or merely another example of a dominant group intentionally trying to annihilate a weaker, dissimilar one.

But the greatest attribute of *The Holocaust* is quite simply the work itself as a whole. Rather than a comprehensive history of the Holocaust told from the point of view of one scholar, Gigliotti and Lang present primary and secondary works that approach the subject from historical, ethical, philosophical, sociological, and legal viewpoints. As a result, the editors not only appeal to a wide audience, but they also encourage cooperation between many fields of study. Thus Gigliotti and Lang imply that although many have claimed the Holocaust to be “incomprehensible,” approaching the subject from many different vantage points is the first step to reaching some sense of understanding.

Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel once wrote, “The Universe of concentration camps, by its dimensions and its design, lies outside, if not beyond, history. Its vocabulary belongs to it alone” (quoted, p. 452). Wiesel may have been right. The sheer number of texts that dissect, analyze, and reinterpret every conceivable aspect of the National Socialist persecution of the Jews testifies to the difficulty those with no direct experience of the Holocaust have in trying to comprehend. These works also testify to the importance millions around the world place on that terrible tragedy. We cannot let go. We cannot forget. We must understand. Simone Gigliotti and Berel Lang’s contribution should become a staple in undergraduate and graduate seminars on the Holocaust and genocide for years to come, so the next generation of scholars will not forget and will begin their own efforts to understand.

Notes

[1]. Studies of women’s importance to Nazism and involvement in the Holocaust include Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Elizabeth Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make: Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999)–see H-German review by Silke Neunsinger at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=135641098688662>>; Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987); Claudia Koonz, "More Masculine Men, More Feminine Women: The Iconography of Nazi Racial Hatreds," in *Landscaping the Human Garden: Twentieth-Century Population Management in a Comparative Framework*, ed. Amir Weiner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Lisa Pine, *Nazi Family Policy, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Berg, 1997); Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Germany* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2001); Elizabeth Harvey, *Women and the Nazi East: Agents and Witnesses of Germanization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)–see H-German review by James Ko-

necke at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=305031094368641>>.

[2]. For comprehensive histories of the Holocaust, see Rita S. Botwinick, *A History of the Holocaust: From Ideology to Annihilation* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, 2004); Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002)–see H-German review by L.M. Stallbaumer-Beishline at <<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=236351058984838>>; Deborah Dwork and Robert Jan Van Pelt, *Holocaust: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003); Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe during the Second World War* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1987).

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