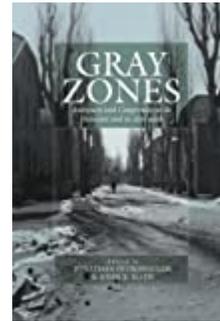




Jonathan Petropoulos, John K. Roth, eds. *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath (War & Genocide)*. Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006. xxii + 417 pp. \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84545-302-2.



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De profundis clamavi: Out of the depths I cry (Psalm 129)

Every now and then a student asks me, "What else could possibly be written about the Holocaust?" My standard response points to an issue more familiar in Australia: "Every square centimeter of Anzac Cove at Gallipoli has been sifted, analyzed, memorialized, annotated, commemorated and studied by Australian and Turkish historians since the guns ceased firing in December 1915. And there is every sign that such processes will continue for many more years to come. And the Holocaust happened only sixty years ago." My point, and one the essayists in this volume make so poignantly, is that the work of the historian is never complete. There will always be more to learn, analyze, discover and understand, more to make students and teachers alike wonder at the incredible brutality visited upon the Jews of Europe.

The editors' choice of title is compelling. Taken from the chapter of the same name in Primo Levi's *The Drowned and The Saved* (1986), the phrase "gray zones" is defined in the book's subtitle. It is divided into four sections, each dealing with one broad "zone": historical, personal, geographical and religious/ethical. The volume presents a compendium of current multi-

disciplinary Holocaust scholarship that examines lesser-known aspects of the Shoah that are nonetheless central to our growing understanding of the murder of European Jewry. Readers are given a brief sample of the work of twenty-five academics and scholars in Holocaust study and research. At the beginning of each section, editors provide a "connecting note" linking the essays together and tying them to the framework of Levi's notion of the "gray zone." Notes at the end of each essay and a select bibliography give readers the opportunity to read further. The structure of the book is "user friendly"—each essay is self-contained and the reader can move from different areas and subjects according to interest. For this reason alone, *Gray Zones* will be a valuable work for those involved in classroom teaching and supervising graduate students.

Levi spent many years moving in between different states of "gray zones," never fully emerging from the Holocaust, and his experience was not unique. It is into these areas of ambiguity and compromise that the reader is led. Of all the gray zones created in the Holocaust, none was more terrible than the existence of

the Sonderkommando of Birkenau. Gideon Greif's "Between Sanity and Insanity: Spheres of Everyday Life in the Auschwitz-Birkenau Sonderkommando" describes in harrowing detail the horror faced by Jews selected to empty the gas chambers and incinerate the bodies of the dead. The Sonderkommando lived in gray spaces—they were a necessary part of the machinery of death. These men, who were relatively better fed, housed and clothed, were at the same time themselves destined to be destroyed. Avoiding any trace of sentimentalism, Greif allows the reader to gaze into a world far removed from our own, documenting "the paradoxical mixture of normality and abnormality that the prisoners experienced in the crematoria" (p. 52).

At the heart of the gray zone was the constant, unrelenting demand placed upon the victim to choose how to survive any one particular moment. The choice was present until the person was dead or liberated. Choice consisted in the ability to exercise some power, however remote and intangible it may have been, as to the moment and method of one's death. Whether it be the choices faced by the Jewish leadership in the Wierzbnik ghetto and Starachowice labor camps, which saw a high survival rate (recounted here by Christopher Browning) or those that forced the looting of the property of French Jews (traced by Jean-Marc Dreyfus), the greatest dilemma lay in the realization that one's own life and survival was often contingent upon the death of another. For Richard Rubenstein this problem is most terribly illustrated in figure of the leader of the Lodz ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski (the topic of his essay in this volume).

Throughout the volume a number of essays look at non-Jewish areas. Geoffrey Giles's "A Gray Zone Among the Field Gray Men: Confusion in the Discrimination Against Homosexuals in the Wehrmacht" demonstrates the collision between National Socialist ethics and military pragmatics: bio-politics was one thing, winning the war quite another. Giles comments that German homosexual men faced a precarious existence that, ironically, was less threatened as long as Jews remained alive. But by 1942, most of Europe's Jews were dead, and police forces could theoretically be mobilized to hunt out and destroy "a potentially dangerous and subversive enemy group of enormous proportions" (p. 143). The murderous implementation of the New Order had never been designed to be limited only to Jews.

Volksdeutsche colonies in Ukrainian-free districts of Ukraine were, according to Wendy Lower, another aspect of the racial restructuring planned and (in part) executed

by Germany's utopian visionaries. Some of the effects of government-sponsored killing in a war built on theories of racial superiority in a fundamentally intolerant state are explored in essays on humor (by Lynn Rapaport), sexuality (Sara Horowitz) and cinema (Lawrence Baron). Their authors do not limit themselves to the years of the Third Reich, but extend their research into the postwar years and come to several surprising conclusions. Dagmar Herzog explores and explodes the myth of Nazism as "anti-sex" and places it within the broader context of the bio-political core of National Socialism, its antipathy towards Christian sexual morality and the anti-Church backlash during the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s.

The last "zone" explored is "Justice, Religion, and Ethics During and After the Holocaust". If most essays examine particular case studies or themes emerging from one or other historical narratives, the last section focuses on the vexing ethical questions raised by the Holocaust. How can anyone speak of living ethically in Auschwitz? Even if one concedes, as does John Roth, that Nazism operated within its own rigid and murderous ethical system (p. 374), ethics and ethical living are an integral part of being human, and understanding ethics—"why we do the things we do"—means we must know the historical record thoroughly. Victoria Barnett, in "The Creation of Ethical 'Gray Zones' in the German Protestant Church: Reflections on the Historical Quest for Ethical Clarity," makes the timely point that "[h]istory, done well, helps to keep us ethically honest by keeping the truth of the record out there. It confronts us with the facts, the documents, with human behavior as it was, not as we wish it had been—even when it often raises more questions than it answers" (p. 369).

Questions about ethics (and their opposite) have often fueled the desire (or lack thereof) to assess honestly the role of the professions (particularly academic science), postwar justice and the responsibility of the Christian Church. One hopes, with Barnett, that accurate and honest history will aid in the production of accurate and honest ethics.

Gray Zones is a useful addition to Holocaust historiography and literature. It is accessible for students and teachers as well as the general reader. It provides a taste of what the world of Holocaust scholarship is actively engaged in—the constant exploration and understanding of the history of the murder of the Jews of Europe and the ongoing effect of these events on the world today. Hopefully, this book will stimulate others to read further and deeper.

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