H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Inga Clendinnen. *Reading the Holocaust.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. ix + 227 pp. $15.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-64597-3; $69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-64174-6.

Reviewed by Milton Goldin (National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS))

Published on H-Holocaust (July, 1999)

What You Should Know about the Holocaust

Before taking up this study, the first she has written about the Holocaust, Inga Clendinnen wrote about Aztecs, Mayans, and their encounters with conquistadors and Spanish clerics. A forthright sort, she writes that Elie Wiesel mistakenly "assumes the natural dominance of the metaphysical over the historical" when he writes that "The universality of the Holocaust must be realised in its uniqueness. Remove the Jews from the Holocaust, and the Event loses its mystery" (p. 11). She wants to describe what happened from the perspective of *both* perpetrators and victims, in fewer than 185 pages. Anyone remaining who may still think that the lady doesn't hold strong opinions will be jolted by her insistence that the Holocaust is not beyond human comprehension, which is the exact opposite of what most writers on the subject insist. Clendinnen's common sense understanding is, If these crimes involved human beings, the Holocaust is surely within human comprehension.

Nor do the above *desiderata* represent her total ambitions. *Reading the Holocaust*, the back cover of the paper edition tells us, will "dispel" what she calls the Gorgon effect: "the sickening of the imagination and the draining of the will that afflict so many of us when we try to confront the horrors of this history."

These aspirations make for one very tall order, and Clendinnen begins the work with a welcome explanation of why she would give herself so daunting an assignment. "Moral outrage," it develops, played a lesser role than "moral duty" to study the Holocaust, which she first undertook while in college. What resulted from her initial investigation was the discovery that "I could learn who ordered what, how many died in what region, by what method. Forceful interpretations of motives were offered. But I still could not comprehend it" (p. 3).

It occurred to her the problem was "[that] my reading of the Holocaust had been no more than dutiful; that I had refused full imaginative engagement" (p. 3). When illness compelled her to end university employment, she used the recovery period "to do some concentrated reading and thinking in an area not my own" (p. 3). She finally insisted on three principal self-imposed conditions before she set pen to paper. First, albeit manifestly impossible for her to read everything written about the Holocaust, she would read as widely as possible. Second, she would seek to deal mainly with "human connections," meaning how perpetrators and victims affected each other, how victims affected each other, and how perpetrators affected each other. And third, she would "write as a general reader who also happens to be a historian" (p. 5).

At this point I was tempted to put her book aside. Few of us lack for acquaintances who have quirky opinions about the Holocaust, and fewer still have friends with something original to say. And, truth be told, a half-century after the events, once you get past now-standard arguments in now-standard works, how much originality in interpretation can be expected? A great deal, it seems, if you happen to have as penetrating an intelligence as

Clendinnen's.

She suggests, for example, that despite detailed day-by-day accounts of perpetrators' activities and suffering of victims, it is impossible "to follow the historian's standard procedure of piecing together a context and sequences of action from surviving fragments" (p. 26). Why? Because out of some seven million Jews Nazis intended to gas or to murder some other way, fewer than one million survived, and out of the group that survived, relatively few (as in any group) had the intellectual capabilities, the emotional resources, *and* the opportunities to closely observe what was happening.

Clendinnen devotes much of this book to descriptions of writings by survivors who not only observed but eloquently described. For her (and, I readily admit, for me), Primo Levi exemplifies the highest levels of moral and intellectual standards. Captured while a partisan, he was deported to Auschwitz, where his training as a chemist and his habits of watching, analyzing, and identifying led to his determination to live and bear witness.

Did his sense of mission help keep Levi alive? Clendinnen believes that it surely provided him with great psychological benefit (having close friends in the camp also helped), but she has no illusion that having a mission was what kept him alive. Luck made the difference. Every Jew had a will to live, but tragically, very, very few Jews had luck.

As always, the overriding question for individuals seeking enlightenment on the Holocaust is, Why? Why did human beings behave that way toward other human beings whom they had never before seen and who had no intention of doing them harm? Shortly after he arrived in Auschwitz, desperate for water, Levi reached for an icicle from a window pane. A guard snatched it away from him. Levi asked why he could not have it. The response was, "Hier ist kein Warum" ("There is no Why here.").[1]

But to the contrary there was a "Why here," and Clendinnen addresses herself to it. Previously, conquerors had wanted to systematically annihilate whole peoples or enslave them. They failed because the means to do either simply did not exist. The rulers of Nazi Germany, however, grasped that industrialization had now arrived at a point from which they could achieve such awful ambitions. They further believed that their propaganda would enable them to justify what they did. Russians and Poles would be killed casually, because they were sub-humans, but Jews–in Nazi minds, enemies of humankind–could be murdered the same way automobiles or radios are manufactured, via rationalized procedures. In this instance, the "product" had to be prepared for death.

This brings me to admire even more the extraordinary nature of Levi's achievement. It never fails to depress me that, as Clendinnen writes, "the discipline which destroyed [inmates] as sentient beings was largely in the hands of prisoners" (p. 36). After the war, Jewish and non-Jewish survivors alike testified it was gratuitous assaults by fellow-prisoners that *most* destroyed hope. The SS had contacts only with kapos, who aped the SS whenever possible and insured that despair would finish off the weak, the confused, and the helpless.

What the SS and kapos impressed on the overwhelming majority of victims–but not on Levi–was that they were unworthy of life. Arbitrary murder, indescribable torture, and senseless brutality were not happenstance occurrences. They were aspects of an overall plan intended to destroy any sense of order, decency, or loyalty among inmates, so that individualism and self-respect would be crushed, and the weak, the confused, and the helpless would be abandoned. That was the Why that preceded the last step, to the gas chamber.

Could any people have withstood such an onslaught? Clendinnen notes that Soviet prisoners-of-war–men trained as soldiers–did not behave differently from Jews. As for Germans, during the post-war period now known as Year Zero, they fought each other for scraps of food and cigarette butts. In Berlin, orphaned children ran after trains, screaming for food. During the years of the Third Reich, Germans had denounced each other to the Gestapo as Jew-lovers. After V-E Day, they denounced each other to American Military Government offices as Jew-haters.

Note

[1]. Primo Levi, *If this is a Man*, trans. Stuart Wolf (London: Abacus, 1987) p. 35.

https://networks.h-net.org/h-holocaust

Citation: Milton Goldin. Review of Clendinnen, Inga, *Reading the Holocaust.* H-Holocaust, H-Net Reviews. July, 1999.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3234