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Magdalena A. Zolkos
Copenhagen University

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Rethinking the Holocaust by Yehuda Bauer. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 335 pp.

Yehuda Bauer is a historian from the International Institute for Holocaust Research at Yad Vashem (Jerusalem), who has published extensively on the issues of anti-Semitism, Nazism and the Jewish resistance during World War II. His most recent book Rethinking the Holocaust is a collection of his deliberations on different aspects of the Jewish Holocaust—some of which have been previously published. The common theme that brings these contributions together is the authorial objective to tell “the [true] story” (ix) about the Holocaust. The acknowledged political motivation that underpins such exploration has been the author’s desire to contribute to the prevention of analogous events happening in the future, and hence turning the collective memory of the Holocaust into “a warning, not a precedent” (3).

However, it remains unclear what Bauer’s proposition about the Holocaust really is. This is partly due to the character of the book, which essentially is a compilation of essays that present different lines of argumentation and consequently remain somewhat detached. Bauer argues that the Holocaust experience is exceptional not only in Jewish history, but also in the history of humanity. His rationale is premised on the dominant ideological motivation, the universal character, and the totalizing inclinations of the Holocaust (ch. 3). To prove his point Bauer draws comparisons with the historical experience of other genocides. In this respect, he attempts a critical assessment of other interpretations of the Holocaust (chapters 4 and 5). The author also presents a narrative of the Jewish resistance, a gender perspective on the experience of genocide, and an overview of the reaction of European populations to the Holocaust (chs. 6, 7, 8 and 10). Due to the author’s extensive factual knowledge of the historical circumstances and his elaborate and lively narrative, this is probably the most engaging part of the book. Finally, Bauer includes more abstract theoretical discussions, which accommodate insights from philosophy, theology and the theory of knowledge, about the comprehensibility and explicability of the Holocaust experience, and its impact on the Jewish faith.

The great merit of this book is its insightful, comprehensive and informative account of the Holocaust events, some of which have so far remained unknown (or overlooked) in the dominant public memory. It is therefore relevant for both the students of the Holocaust and for those interested in the European history of the 20 th century. There is also no doubt that it has been written by a knowledgeable and authoritative researcher, who combines his historical scholarship with a passionate aversion to the atrocities perpetrated during the Holocaust.

This book has, nevertheless, a couple of problematic aspects. First, Bauer’s evaluation of the Holocaust literature seems too cursory, in particular as regards his treatment of the seminal works on the Holocaust by Zygmund Bauman and Daniel J. Goldhagen. Bauer dismisses their inferences, declaring them as “vague” in regard to definitions; “distorting” of historical reality; and “simplistic” in terms of interpretation (82, 96). His assessment, however, does not even attempt a critical engagement with these authors. Bauer’s criticism targets the alleged absence of historical sensitivity in both Bauman and Goldhagen as regards the identification of the categories of victims (Jews) and perpetrators (Germans). More specifically, Bauer’s critique centers on what he perceives as 1) Bauman’s inattentiveness to the issues of anti-Semitism and ideology (and his endorsement of the universalizing category of “modernity”) and 2) Goldhagen’s inaccurate idea about the social and political transformations in pre-war German society, and the varieties of its antisemitic attitudes.

Second, Bauer's claim to the exceptionality of the Holocaust experience seems problematic to the extent that his comparative exercise gives a somewhat limited and fragmented picture. Even though he is careful to explicitly acknowledge that the horrors of genocide and human suffering have no gradation, his text seems to impart a different story (if not agenda). For instance his questionable interpretation of the Rwandan genocide, which he treats as geographically-limited and "pragmatic" (i.e. economic), underwrites both the insensitivity of the narrative as well as its dominant Western (Euro-centric) perspective. It is not only the question of suitability and possibility of phrasing normative questions about genocide in comparative perspective that is causing doubt here, but also the very rationale and authorial intentionality in proposing such an endeavor.

The third issue is the authorial visibility in this book. On the one hand, this book includes a range of biographical remarks, which are sometimes difficult to connect to its overall theme. It is not clear, for instance, what is the relevance of Bauer's emphasis on his participation in the Arab-Israeli wars, or the fact that during the Holocaust he lived outside of the European continent. On the other hand, it would be desirable for the author to mark his presence more explicitly as regards the interpretative dimension of the "factual account" in this book. While interpretative freedom of history, especially in regard to such horrid and traumatic events as the Jewish Holocaust, has of course numerous and serious limitations, it is nevertheless important to ask questions about the feasibility (and desirability) of the formation of unitary historical interpretations and about the political aspects of the production of historical knowledge.

Magdalena A. Zolkos, Institute of Political Science, Copenhagen University
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