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## Complicity and the Holocaust in Eastern Europe<sup>\*</sup>

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MARY FULBROOK

Historians of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe are facing significant challenges in many areas today. Following the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe, previously inaccessible archives were opened up and progress was made in understanding how Nazi persecution of the Jews turned, from the “fateful months” of summer 1941, into a European-wide programme of extermination. In particular, growing numbers of regional and local studies illuminated the involvement of locals right across the broad swathe of territory stretching hundreds of kilometres from the Baltic to the Black Sea, in what has been termed the “Holocaust by bullets”. The historiography of perpetration, collaboration, and complicity on the part of different actors in this region has grown massively. But at the same time, research has continued to be entangled with political interests and issues in ways that might not have been predicted before the fall of communism. Ethno-nationalist and populist movements, political parties, and indeed some governments have sought to distort Holocaust history in the service of collective identity projects.

The issues frequently revolve around the extent of popular complicity in the Holocaust – particularly in occupied, annexed, or incorporated territories, but also in states allied with Germany, and even within the Reich itself. Attributing guilt and complicity in the mass extermination of the European Jews inevitably also raises moral and evaluative questions. Yet the debates have not remained at the level of scholarly research into the past; they have been affected by assumed connections with later and present identities. Underlying some of the current debates about complicity in Eastern Europe are implicit assumptions about a

<sup>\*</sup> This article is based on my research during two collaborative projects sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, to whom I am most grateful for their support. A slightly different version of this lecture was delivered at the Joint Annual Conference of the Fritz Bauer Institute, Frankfurt am Main, and the Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena, “The Holocaust and the Cold War: Culture and Justice”, 26–8 May 2021.

national identity persisting across decades – a collective identity that can supposedly still be defiled or offended, even decades after the events in question. National myths of innocence, heroism, and victimhood are at stake, assuming that “nations” have a persisting collective identity that can still be defamed even long after most perpetrators are dead.

By setting the question of complicity within a wider historical perspective, this article challenges the notion that persisting national identities are stake. Everywhere, local configurations and changing circumstances under Nazi rule shaped the extent and character of complicity in the persecution and extermination of Jews and other victim groups; and everywhere, later conditions shaped the kinds of narratives that were constructed both at an individual level and in wider public discourses. By adopting a more differentiated analytical approach, historians can seek to puncture not only the specific myths that constitute Holocaust distortion, but also the more general myths of mono-ethnic “nations” that persist over time and feel threatened by historical truth-telling.

#### *Complicity, guilt and “knowledge” in the Reich and beyond*

It is clear that the Holocaust was initiated and organized by Nazi Germany: without Hitler’s driving vision, and without German leadership, personnel, and organizations, the mass murder of European Jews and other victim groups would never have taken place.<sup>1</sup> Rightly, much historical attention has focused on understanding German policy and practices in pursuing what Nazis called the Final Solution of their self-imposed “Jewish Question”. Increasingly, historians and members of the public have come to recognize what participants already knew at the time: that not only the tens of thousands of members of the Einsatzgruppen, the SS, and the police battalions, who are easily identified as perpetrators, but also many more hundreds of thousands of ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers, bureaucrats, and civilian administrators were deeply implicated in the persecution and mass murder of millions of Jews and others across Europe. But what of the further millions of people who would never have considered themselves committed Nazis? And what of the innumerable collaborators, auxiliaries, facilitators, and occasional helpers of the Nazi project in occupied territories?

1 In what follows, I use the term “Holocaust” in the broad sense to encompass the full range of victims of Nazi persecution, including Roma and Sinti, the mentally and physically disabled, and others.

First, it is important to explore how far so-called ordinary Germans can be deemed to have been complicit, even if only by virtue of inaction and passivity in the face of violent inhumanity. The shape of German society was itself altered by everyday actions and changing social relations, ultimately facilitating the mass murder of the Jews.<sup>2</sup>

Under Nazi rule in the peacetime years of the 1930s, a societal transformation took place that not only ripped German society apart from within, “re-segregating” Germans of Jewish descent, but also paved the way for the genocide that followed. Initially most people fell into line, a conformity rooted either in fear or in desire for new opportunities and privileges. Over a couple of years, and certainly following the enactment of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, this conformity necessarily shifted into more active compliance. For many, though far from all, behavioural compliance was increasingly rooted in ideological conviction, particularly among members of younger generations. Others furthered the Nazi regime in their outward behaviours, whatever inner doubts and reservations they may have had. The picture was never uniform, and one cannot speak of “the Germans” or “the people” as a supposedly homogeneous mass: society continued to be deeply divided. But the direction of travel was one of increasing passivity or support, with widespread tendencies either to retreat and stand on the sidelines, or to join in the “national project”. During the events of November 1938, known as Kristallnacht, there was significant popular involvement on the side of the Nazis – humiliating Jews as well as looting Jewish property – and, while there was public disapproval of the destruction of property, despite widespread mutterings of shame and individual help offered in private, there was little or no outright protest against this intensely violent action and its consequences.<sup>3</sup> In the following months, Jews who were able to emigrate often experienced a degree of sympathy from individual compatriots, who nevertheless went on playing their roles in the nazification of society.

During the war, many more Germans were brought into the growing machinery of persecution. Mobilization of a nation at war effectively turned

2 These developments are explored in Mary Fulbrook, *Bystander Society in Nazi Germany: Conformity, Complicity and the Holocaust* (forthcoming).

3 Alan Steinweis, *Kristallnacht 1938* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); see also Wolfgang Benz, *Gewalt im November 1938: Die “Reichskristallnacht”*. Initial zum Holocaust (Berlin: Metropol, 2018); Wolf Gruner and Steven Ross, eds., *New Perspectives on Kristallnacht: After 80 Years, the Nazi Pogrom in Global Comparison* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2019); Dieter Obst, *“Reichskristallnacht”: Ursachen und Verlauf des antisemitischen Pogroms vom November 1938* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1991).

the vast majority of “national comrades” (*Volksgenossen*) into accomplices in an inherently racist national mission, whether willingly or otherwise. Yet it is striking what little evidence there is in later self-representations of having been involved in a criminal enterprise on a grander scale, including among Germans who had worked in the annexed and occupied territories, assisting policies of “germanization”, resettlement and ghettoization, or exploitation of forced and slave labour. After the war, the legal definition of criminal culpability concentrated minds primarily on direct physical violence. The less immediate consequences of Nazi occupation policies – causing death at a distance, as it were – by reduction of rations, movement into overcrowded and unhygienic housing, brutal exploitation of labour, seem not to have unduly troubled the consciences of those who participated. Professionals who had held senior civilian administrative posts betrayed little sense of personal responsibility for the harm caused to those they saw as “sub-humans” (*Untermenschen*). By contrast, their accounts often shift the blame onto locals – Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukrainians, and others, depending on context – and onto other Germans, particularly the SS and Gestapo, as well as those considered to be fanatical Nazis. These groups conveniently serve as scapegoats, while such narratives also often betray continuing racist sentiments, persisting decades later. Meanwhile, the testimonies of victims and survivors provide agonizing evidence of the damage caused by German occupation policies and practices.<sup>4</sup>

Once mobilized for war, of course, hundreds of thousands were actively involved in facilitating the killing of civilians. While the SS, *Einsatzgruppen*, and police battalions were the primary perpetrators, the army was also deeply implicated, as were local collaborators across Eastern Europe. The precise figures are contested, but the net of guilt was spread far more broadly than any postwar system of justice could possibly hope to capture.

Mass involvement in collective violence on this scale raises the question of motivation versus mobilization. The extent to which antisemitism was a driving and motivating force – which it certainly was for the Nazi leadership and ideologues – or to which it was, rather, a diverse set of attitudes and discourses that could be drawn on under extreme circumstances to try

4 See Mary Fulbrook, *Reckonings: Legacies of Nazi Persecution and the Quest for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Fulbrook, *A Small Town near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

to justify the mass killings and assuage uncomfortable feelings among some, requires further exploration.

The war transformed attitudes, exacerbating antisemitism in new ways. Following the invasion of Poland in September 1939, and even more so after the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Germans encountered the distinctively different Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. Soldiers passing through occupied Poland, seeing Jews reduced to wearing rags and prone to starvation and disease by Nazi policies, wrote home saying they now thought the stereotypes portrayed in the rabidly antisemitic weekly tabloid *Der Stürmer* were confirmed. As they moved east, with the war framed as a “self-defensive” fight against “Judeo-Bolshevism”, pre-existing indifference towards Jews could readily be whipped up into more active antisemitism; and the linkage between Jews and partisans could make summary executions seem an appropriate response. Any potential sympathy for the plight of Jews was countered by highlighting Germany’s supposed need for living space and foodstuffs, or the dangers of contamination by disease-ridden Jewish “vermin”. All this had an impact on popular responses. Travellers through eastern territories sometimes recorded news of massacres laconically: worthy of note, but not something to cause distress. Diary entries by people within the Reich, hearing news from the front, frequently also registered rumours of atrocities; some with a degree of shock and disbelief, others with passing interest but little more. There was, it seems, a remarkably widespread capacity to record reports of atrocities not quite with indifference, but with little by way of outrage; at best, those who were clearly shocked also registered their own sense of impotence to do anything about it anyway. In any event, such “knowledge” was generally registered only briefly, amid other more urgently pressing matters of personal life.

Attitudes changed over the course of the war, from the early and speedy German victories to the later military setbacks and growing awareness of impending defeat.<sup>5</sup> Most Germans were far more preoccupied with their own interests, the wellbeing of relatives and friends, and fighting for the homeland, than about the fates of former Jewish neighbours with whom they had been losing touch – let alone those unknown Jews in eastern territories with whom they had never had any personal contact. But, given mass mobilization in service of the fatherland, it was virtually

5 See Nicholas Stargardt, *The German War: A Nation under Arms* (London: Bodley Head, 2015).

impossible to remain neutral. Out of bystanders grew, on the one hand, innumerable accomplices and perpetrators; and, on the other, a few who engaged in acts of resistance or rescue, generally only when there were strong personal and emotional bonds with victims, or wider moral and political commitments overriding the risks involved. After the war, the majority who had been compliant with the demands of Nazi rule, and who had become ever more complicit, tried to profess innocence by ignorance: millions claimed they had “known nothing about it”, even when they had been actively involved in actually making “it” possible.

If Nazi Germany spearheaded the Holocaust, it is also clear that it found accomplices across Europe. Without the collaboration, cooperation, or acquiescence of millions of Europeans – in states variously allied with, occupied, or annexed by the Reich – the deportation and mass murder of Europe’s Jews could not have taken place on the scale and in the manner that it did. The responses and actions of other Europeans not only affected the timing and character of persecution, deportations, and killings, but also significantly shaped the relative survival chances of Jews in different regions, ranging from more than 98 per cent in Denmark and 75 per cent in France, through 25 per cent in the Netherlands, to a mere 5 per cent at best in Lithuania, with other countries along the range between.

There was a fatal combination of German initiatives and various local interests, from organized nationalist movements (such as the Lithuanian Activist Front), through simmering forms of popular antisemitism that could be whipped up under particular conditions, to individual profiteering; there was also constrained cooperation under conditions of duress, as locals were “requisitioned” by Germans to carry out different tasks in the wider project of murder.<sup>6</sup> All this was, on the eastern front, widely witnessed by innumerable onlookers. Germans often filmed mass killings where it was Lithuanians, Latvians, or Ukrainians doing the shooting, already constructing later alibis of German non-involvement; and the notion of never having actually shot anyone later served in many quarters as a profession of innocence.

Certain incidents stand out, in part because we have unique eyewitness reports or visual images, as in the case of the infamous Lietukis garage massacre in Kovno (Kaunas, Lithuania) on 27 June 1941, or the killings on the Šķēde beach near Liepāja (Latvia) on 15–17 December of that year. But

6 See examples in Father Patrick Desbois, *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets*, trans. Hilary Reyl and Calvert Barksdale (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2018).

everywhere across Europe, local collaborators, facilitators, and auxiliaries enabled the Nazis to put their murderous project into practice.<sup>7</sup> In each case, longer-term relationships between Jewish and non-Jewish communities were significant, including questions of citizenship, social stratification, and the extent and character of personal and cultural as well as economic connections. There were also crucial shorter-term factors such as, in the Baltic states, the impact of the brief Soviet occupation in 1940–41 that gave fuel to the myth of “Judeo-Bolshevism” as well as providing brief hope to nationalist movements that collaboration with Germans might further the fight for independence.<sup>8</sup> In other areas, notably borderlands with longer experiences of Soviet rule, the distinctions between citizens of Jewish descent and other citizens were less evident or present in the perceptions of younger generations, potentially mitigating antisemitic hostility once under German occupation.<sup>9</sup> And, in the occupied present, the extent and character of the repressive forces and occupation regimes proved absolutely crucial to choices between actions and inaction.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever the configuration of forces in particular regions, it seems likely that most locals remained essentially passive onlookers to specific

7 See David Gaunt, Paul Levine, and Laura Palosuo, eds., *Collaboration and Resistance during the Holocaust: Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004); Waitman Wade Beorn, *The Holocaust in Eastern Europe: At the Epicentre of the Final Solution* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine 1941–44* (New York: St. Martin’s Press and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

8 Christoph Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941–1944*, 2nd edn (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2016); Katrin Reichelt, *Lettland unter deutscher Besatzung 1941–1944: Der lettische Anteil am Holocaust* (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2011).

9 The literature is vast but see e.g. Gaëlle Fisher and Caroline Mezger, eds., *The Holocaust in the Borderlands: Interethnic Relations and the Dynamics of Violence in Occupied Eastern Europe* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019); Leonid Rein, *The King and the Pawns: Collaboration in Byelorussia during World War II* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2011); Barbara Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto, 1941–43: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press and U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016); Raz Segal, *Genocide in the Carpathians: War, Social Breakdown, and Mass Violence, 1914–1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

10 For Western European comparisons, see Pim Griffioen and Ron Zeller, *Persecution and Deportation of the Jews in the Netherlands, France and Belgium, 1940–1945*, in a *Comparative Perspective* (Amsterdam: Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris, July 2013, European Holocaust Research Infrastructure; updated 2018); Christina Morina, “The ‘Bystander’ in Recent Dutch Historiography”, *German History* 32, no. 1 (March 2014): 101–11; Jacques Semelin, *The Survival of the Jews in France, 1940–44* (2013), trans. Cynthia Schoch and Natasha Lehrer (London: Hurst, 2018).



incidents of violence. Yet many nevertheless also benefited from the removal of the Jews from their midst; and in multiple, often only tiny ways, a few individuals had the courage to put obstacles in the path of deportations and killings, helping some of the persecuted to survive. The variations in local dynamics, structures of power and repression, social relations between different communities, notions of civic activism, morality, and solidarity, and the risks and potential benefits of action and inaction under changing circumstances over the course of the war are questions that can be addressed both within specific regions and comparatively, across Europe. The differences frequently have more to do with degrees of impotence – incapacity to act effectively given the constraints of repressive regimes – than with the “ignorance” often later claimed.

Given the scale of the Holocaust, millions of people (particularly across the eastern front, but also further afield) “knew” about aspects of what was taking place, whether or not they were themselves involved on the side of either perpetrators or victims. But people generally only perceived or registered fully what was in some way – geographically, socially, emotionally – close to them. There were wide variations in channels of knowledge, circulation of rumours, and frameworks of interpretation, and there was a deep asymmetry in the extent to which people were either desperate for knowledge or, by contrast, avoided being too aware of what was happening. Those affected by persecution took a keen interest in news of friends, relatives, and members of their community who had disappeared or been deported; but those who had supported or turned a blind eye to antisemitic measures during the prewar years generally found it easier to ignore rumours of atrocities or to remain indifferent to what should have been morally deeply disturbing news, essentially refusing to form a wider picture of what was happening. Even people at the forefront of violence often had limited perspectives, preferring to believe the propaganda about “partisan warfare” than to register the enormity of killing women, children, babies, the sick, and the elderly simply because they were Jewish. For virtually all non-victims, apart from the masterminds at the centre of the spider’s web, secure knowledge of the extermination of Europe’s Jews was partial, restricted to certain incidents, and viewed from limited perspectives.

Within the Reich, non-Jewish Germans had already been practising habits either of looking away, protecting themselves from uncomfortable reactions, or looking on relatively dispassionately. It is remarkable not only how many people did gather to stare but also how many people

criticized having to see acts of violence while not actually criticizing the violence itself. Either way, they were effectively condoning the perpetrators' actions by failing to intervene and allowing the violence to continue. It was no longer possible, in a situation of systemic violence persisting over time, to remain merely an innocent bystander – but the reasons for passivity ranged from antisemitism and indifference to the fate of the Jews, at one end of the spectrum, through the prioritization of both personal and patriotic interests in wartime, to conflicted feelings of powerlessness and despair at the other. The one thing that few could claim at this time was ignorance. Even if the overall shape of a coordinated policy of extermination was not discernible to contemporaries, local incidents should have demonstrated all too clearly that acts of total inhumanity were taking place before people's eyes.

Yet there was no wider picture of the Holocaust at the end of the war. Survivor accounts in the early postwar years, such as those captured in David Boder's remarkable collection of recorded interviews in Displaced Persons camps, or the many stories collected by researchers for the Jewish Historical Commission, are often fragmentary, piecemeal.<sup>11</sup> So too are the stories told by German soldiers in captivity, secretly recorded when talking among themselves. And at precisely the same time, Germans who had themselves been part of the system on the side of the perpetrators began to claim that they had known nothing about it – a claim that the photographer Margaret Bourke-White and journalists in 1945 Germany registered as becoming more or less a national anthem.<sup>12</sup>

The emergence of a wider understanding of the Holocaust came only over the following decades. It was shaped by the radical restructuring of European politics and societies in the decades of the Cold War that followed the defeat of Nazi Germany.

### *The presentation of new selves in postwar life*

Among those hundreds of thousands who had played a significant role in the persecution and murder of Europe's Jews, evasion of justice and deception about a compromised past were crucial. This had begun

11 See further [https://voices.library.iit.edu/david\\_boder](https://voices.library.iit.edu/david_boder); Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); see also Fulbrook, *Reckonings*.

12 Margaret Bourke-White, "April in Germany", *Life* (1945), repr. in *The Taste of War* (London: Century, 1985), 261.

straight after the end of the war, with varying attempts at “purification”, denazification, or radical restructuring. Evasion was greatly assisted by the implications of the Cold War, both directly and indirectly.

Internationally, the course was set by the Allies. The American prioritization of Cold War interests in the fight against communism meant that many Nazis were able to lead new lives quite openly in the west. Routes to escape justice such as the infamous “rat line” through Italy, assisted by the Vatican, allowed the more compromised individuals to disappear into relative obscurity, only rarely discovered and brought to account in the courtroom – most notoriously in the case of Adolf Eichmann. In the Federal Republic of Germany under its first Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, the continuing fight against communism facilitated the rehabilitation and quiet reintegration of former Nazis into high places. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Eastern Europe, those who were considered to be particularly useful to the communist project in some way – whether as scientists and engineers or as secret informers – were similarly either spirited away to the Soviet Union (often against their will) or assisted in quiet reintegration, easily subject to blackmail to assist in domestic surveillance and spying on compatriots, as seen in the East German Stasi. Over time, the imposition of communist rule in newly acquired satellite states in Eastern Europe frequently resulted in the renewed persecution of people who had recently also fought against Nazism but now from the “wrong” political perspective, having been committed to national independence rather than submission to communist dictatorship. Everywhere, people had to question their allegiances, old and new, and refashion themselves to fit new circumstances.

The 1960s and 1970s marked a more stable era of the Cold War, as international tensions shifted away from Central Europe to flashpoints elsewhere, from the Cuban Missile Crisis to the Vietnam War. Former perpetrators variously transformed themselves into good democrats in the West, communists or at least passive citizens remaining under the radar in the East. And even as the spotlight fell on the big Nazi war crimes trials, the majority of people accommodated themselves to changed circumstances, adapting their behaviours and amending the stories they told (or did not tell) about their past.

Depending on where survivors ended up, they still often felt uncomfortable. In Poland, returning Jews soon discovered not only that their own communities had been destroyed, but also that Jewish returnees were deeply unwelcome. Treated to a hostile reception by former neighbours

who had taken over their homes and possessions, and justifiably fearful of extreme violence, many survivors fled again, hoping to emigrate to North America, Palestine, or elsewhere. In France, there were other causes of unease: the official emphasis on resistance, and the significance of French citizenship rather than religion or ethnicity, led to a downplaying of the Jewish tragedy – evidenced, for example, in otherwise moving cultural representations such as Alain Renais’s 1956 film *Night and Fog*. Even in societies with significant Jewish communities – New York, north London, parts of Australia, Palestine/Israel – survivors often had a hard time trying to fit in, and felt they had to make strenuous efforts to appear “normal” despite the enormity and impact of what they had been through. Wherever they settled, survivors felt they had to fit in with communities where there was little understanding of their experiences or sympathy for their plight, or to protect themselves from traumatic memories, including of former partners and children they had lost, or to protect their postwar families from full knowledge of the ghastliness that had overshadowed their own lives. Some members of the second generation, for example, only found out after the death of a parent that there had been a previous marriage, and previous siblings, who had not made it through, and whose existence had been effectively silenced.

Among people on the perpetrator side, too, there were variations in self-presentation, and some of these have had an impact on wider understandings of the Holocaust. After the defeat of Nazi Germany, people reformulated their previous activities in ways that would be more acceptable in differing Cold War circumstances. There were some obvious and easily detectable deceptions – the omission, for example, of potentially incriminating former functions or memberships of certain organizations, whether on denazification papers after the war or on later immigration and citizenship applications. But there were also more subtle ways in which aspects of a compromised past could be variously silenced or reshaped to look better in a later present.

Ways of talking about the Nazi era frequently included strategies for self-distancing, to avoid acknowledgment of guilt or complicity. Frequently used strategies included: highlighting “ignorance” (“never knew anything about it”) with the implication that, had one known, one might have acted differently; highlighting distance, having supposedly been far away from wherever terrible things were happening; and highlighting powerlessness, lack of agency, having no alternatives, no leeway to resist or refuse, through fear of the consequences. Interestingly, this last

defence is closely related to the defence often used in (West German) law courts, of having been “only following orders” and having had to obey. Even though expert testimony for the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial (1963–65) demonstrated that supposed fear of severe penalties for refusing to carry out orders was unfounded, this defence was nevertheless still effective: having supposedly “acted under putative duress” (*Putativnotstand*) was still sufficient in many West German trials to prove that defendants who had sent tens of thousands of people into the gas chambers had not been acting of their own volition, out of “base motives”, but had merely been following orders and were therefore not guilty of the charge of murder.<sup>13</sup>

Systems of justice differed across states on either side of the Iron Curtain, and the statements of defendants and eyewitnesses varied accordingly. So too did the patterns of speech in everyday discourses about a compromised past. “Source criticism” belongs to the everyday toolbox of professional historians and these issues are of course taken into account by scholars. But public consciousness of the past was affected by the discourses and politics of the Cold War era. When we look at the significance of war crimes trials in this wider context, some curious twists emerge, effectively aiding the evasions of the complicit.

One might think, at least as far as West Germany is concerned, that the Allied trials in the later 1940s, and the big Nazi war crimes trials of the 1960s and 1970s, would raise questions of guilt and complicity in the Holocaust to the centre of both scholarly research and public attention. And of course, these trials did serve massively to stimulate investigations into particular crime scenes, producing extensive files of statements by witnesses and defendants, as well as to pique public interest and provoke controversies fought out in the media spotlight. Without the huge body of material collected during legal investigations, our knowledge of the crimes of the Holocaust would be greatly impoverished.

Yet there is a curious irony to be observed here. It could be summarized as follows: as people became more aware of significant crime scenes and major perpetrators through public trials, so at the same time the complicity of the hundreds of thousands, more likely millions, of

13 See further Fulbrook, *Reckonings*. On the Auschwitz trial, see e.g. Bernd Naumann, *Auschwitz: A Report on the Proceedings against Robert Karl Ludwig Mulka and Others. Before the Court at Frankfurt*, trans. Jean Steinberg (London: Pall Mall Press, 1966); Devin O. Pendas, *The Frankfurt Auschwitz Trial, 1963–1965: Genocide, History and the Limits of the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Rebecca Wittmann, *Beyond Justice: The “Auschwitz” Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

accomplices and beneficiaries progressively disappeared from view. Early knowledge could more easily be displaced by professions of ignorance. So, just as the big trials were drawing ever more attention to scenes of major crimes and perpetrators, at a personal level the complicity of the many was progressively fading from view. The picture of the Holocaust, even as it acquired the name and became a focus of growing public attention from the later 1970s onwards, was increasingly focused on the extremes of organized violence in the extermination camps, symbolized by the word “Auschwitz”. As members of the second generation in West Germany increasingly expressed their sense of shame through remembrance, an ever broader range of victim groups were also, belatedly, receiving public recognition – Roma and Sinti, homosexual men, victims of compulsory sterilization and “euthanasia” policies, forced labourers. Yet even as survivors of camps and forced labour, by then reaching retirement age, were increasingly giving testimony – both in private, for the benefit of grandchildren, and also in recorded interviews for archives and documentaries – the roles that ordinary people had played in making mass murder possible continued to fade from view.

Perhaps even more significantly as far as Eastern European confrontations with the past are concerned, as attention in the West shifted to the major extermination camps, so the mass shootings across the eastern front faded somewhat from view. Yet this was the arena of the Holocaust in which hundreds of thousands of people had participated. It was much easier to reduce the Holocaust to “Auschwitz”, and indeed to reduce it even further to just “the gas chambers”, in order to claim one had “known nothing about it”. It was not until after the end of the Cold War, and with the travelling exhibition of the Crimes of the Wehrmacht (*Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*), that the participation of ordinary soldiers in mass killings of civilians and the knowledge about this within the Reich began to reveal, particularly to members of younger generations, the extent of the silencing that had taken place through the preceding decades.<sup>14</sup>

In Germany in particular, widespread involvement in perpetration

<sup>14</sup> Following criticism of the original exhibition, first opened in 1995, the exhibition was revised and reopened in 2001; see Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, ed., *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944: Ausstellungskatalog* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1996); Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter, and Ulrike Jureit, eds., *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Bilanz einer Debatte* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005); Hannes Heer and Klaus Naumann, eds., *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941–1944* (New York: Berghahn, 2000).

had been hard to acknowledge while those who had been adults during the Third Reich were not merely still alive, but still holding positions of power and influence, great and small, whether in local communities or at higher levels. It was hard for the second generation too, closely tied by bonds of kinship and love, to have to reconsider their parents, readjust the images and stories with which they had grown up, and decide whether to challenge openly or refrain from “dirtying the nest” (as it was frequently described in Germany, using the derogatory term *Nestbeschmutzer*). But the ways in which members of the second generation addressed the issues raised by parental compromises with Nazism were also strongly affected by the markedly different Cold War contexts and historical portrayals with which they had grown up.

*A compromised past: Holocaust representations  
during and after the Cold War*

The Cold War massively affected the character of historical representations in both books and memorials, in ways that are partly obvious and partly more subtle. The obvious aspects have to do with selective emphases and omissions for political purposes, as well as the inaccessibility of many research materials, restrictions on sharing materials even for war crimes trials, and significant constraints on scholarly exchanges. The less obvious have to do with the kinds of historical picture constructed through choice of words, concepts, and theoretical frameworks of interpretation.

From a Western perspective, committed to the separation between scientific analysis and value positions, accounts written on the communist side of the Iron Curtain could readily be dismissed as deeply tarnished by political instrumentalization. The intended propaganda effects were obvious in narratives where the heroes were left-wing antifascist resistance fighters – led of course by communists – and the villains were fascist imperialist monopoly capitalists, still supposedly holding the reins of power in the West. It was an easy game for Western critics to point out blank spots in, for example, GDR history books where the bothersome Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939–41 was conveniently omitted, while the Soviet “liberators” were proudly celebrated, not only in books but also in monumental statues, as in East Berlin’s Treptower Park. And while in the GDR the Jewish victims of the Holocaust were more present in scholarly accounts than Westerners often acknowledged, they gained less space and attention than the heroic communist resistance narratives in

public memorial sites such as Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald. (It could nevertheless be argued that these were, indeed, camps for predominantly political prisoners before their expansion in 1938, when they received thousands of Jewish men after Kristallnacht, and that they were not as iconic for the Holocaust as the extermination camps built on the soil of defeated Poland.)

In the Soviet Union, the myth of the Great Patriotic War overrode any real confrontation with widespread popular complicity in the Nazi project of the extermination of the Jews. The USSR chose to treat all victims of the massacres in the “Holocaust by bullets” as “Soviet citizens”, rather than explicitly recognizing the specifically Jewish character of more than a million victims. This radically affected the memorial landscape of former killing sites and labour camps, while allowing the overwhelming majority of mass graves of murdered Jews to linger unmarked, abandoned, and increasingly overgrown.

In Poland, however, where the major mass extermination sites were located, such neglect was far less practicable and indeed impossible at internationally well-known sites with extensive visible remnants such as Auschwitz. Memorialization of politically acceptable heroes – Polish martyrs and resistance fighters in Auschwitz I, or Polish labourers in part of Treblinka – was combined with recognition of the fate of the Jews, even if less fully than the latter deserved. At less well-known sites that were more off the track and where the victims had been almost entirely Jewish – particularly Sobibór and Bełżec but also to some extent Chełmno – far less effort was put into public memorialization.

It is, then, easy enough for Western scholars to critique the distortions of representation under communist auspices. But, even while public controversies and differences of opinion were far more possible under democratic conditions, there were also significant distortions and lacunae in historical representations on the capitalist side of the Iron Curtain. Many sources, particularly relating to Eastern European trials of those involved in the first phases of mass murder in the summer of 1941, were of course largely unavailable to Western historians. But the question was less one of sources than of approach. Eagerness to denounce dictatorships, including the current communist version, lent a particular slant to many early West German representations of the Third Reich, where an author’s democratic credentials could be displayed while continuing in the anti-communist vein that had been prevalent under Nazism. Moreover, until the 1970s the Holocaust itself was frequently marginalized, sometimes



even explicitly left to “Jewish historians”, as though German history had relatively little to do with the mass extermination of the Jews. To some extent mirroring the emphases in trials, the focus was primarily on significant individuals, Nazi organizations, and the industrialized mass murder in the extermination camps, rather than on wider complicity.

There were marked shifts in emphasis in the 1980s on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The question of popular complicity had never been entirely absent. It was explicitly explored, for example, in French historiography and films from the 1970s, including Louis Malle’s *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), while the responses of bystanders were explicitly brought to the fore in Claude Lanzmann’s path-breaking but controversial 1985 film, *Shoah*. Despite the critical reception this received in Poland, even there the debate was opening up, as evidenced in Jan Błoński’s 1987 work, *The Poor Poles look at the Ghetto*. But developments were faltering and partial. In the 1980s, West German historians of “everyday life” tended to focus rather sympathetically on the “little people” and their small acts of resistance or refusal in daily encounters. Even such a pioneering historian as Martin Broszat, who led the “Bavaria project” that opened up many new avenues of inquiry, still failed to recognize in his well-known exchange with Saul Friedländer in the late 1980s that the very emphasis on the supposed normality of everyday life in Nazi Germany was yet again excluding German Jews and ignoring how this was precisely the flip side of discrimination.<sup>15</sup>

For all the differences between Eastern and Western European portrayals, what is striking is that everywhere the question of complicity among members of the surrounding societies was to a considerable degree marginalized or ignored. Insofar as this issue was recognized, the easiest way to explain it was by reference to repression and fear: to highlight the role of terror, lack of agency. This changed significantly with the collapse of communist rule and the opening up of new controversies from the 1990s onwards. Historical research has been greatly facilitated by the opening up of archives, research opportunities, and scholarly contacts across the previously relatively impervious Iron Curtain. Both new empirical material and productive theoretical debates have opened up entirely new perspectives on the Holocaust.

15 Repr. in Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust and the Historians’ Dispute* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990); further discussion of this point in Mary Fulbrook, “Subjectivity and History: Approaches to Twentieth-Century German Society”, Annual Lecture, German Historical Institute London, 4 November 2016.

Research into the perpetrators and facilitators of the mass murder of the Jews on the eastern front has, in particular, made great progress since the 1990s. Whether the “ordinary men” in German police battalions, or the brutalized soldiers of the Wehrmacht, or the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Ukrainian auxiliaries, or the ordinary Eastern Europeans who were “requisitioned” to assist the Germans in their murderous task – we know and understand a great deal more about their actions, particularly during the “fateful months” in the summer of 1941 as mass killings turned into what the Nazis termed the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”. The complicity of local people has become the subject of major controversies, not least precipitated by Jan Tomasz Gross’s work on Jedwabne.<sup>16</sup> Projects have included not only delving into previously inaccessible archives, but also oral history research and collection of testimonies, such as that carried out by Father Patrick Desbois and his team in his organization *Yahad-In Unum* while there are still eyewitnesses and even former accomplices alive to tell about what they saw and participated in at the time. Yet the opening up for research is still far from complete. Research on perpetrators in wartime Belarus, for example, has been hampered by continuing lack of access to resources.

All this has served greatly to shift the character of historical debates on the Holocaust. We understand far more about the ways in which centre and periphery interacted, as central directives took shape locally, and local initiatives were in turn negotiated and authorized from above; we know more about the curious combinations of social psychological factors, the impact of experiences in brutal warfare, and the ways in which ideological justifications were brought to bear by people who had been variously constrained to participate in unprecedented collective violence, and changed in the process.

Debates on Germany and on Western European states have moved forward too. Questions around resistance and rescue, or complicity and the passivity of bystanders, have opened up in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, and elsewhere across Europe. As far as the Nazi dictatorship itself is concerned, the old controversies between intentionalists and functionalists about Hitler’s role have been superseded. Meanwhile,

<sup>16</sup> Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland, 1941* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Antony Polonsky and Joanna Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence: A Quest for the Truth of a Wartime Massacre* (2004), trans. Alissa Valles (London: Penguin, 2015).

new perspectives have illuminated questions about the balance between coercion and consent, repression or enthusiasm in the Nazi Volksgemeinschaft. But it has at the same time become increasingly clear that the Third Reich can only be adequately understood in a transnational perspective, taking into account the wider European movements of peoples in colonization and resettlement programmes, as well as forced labour transfers that are also integral to the history of the Holocaust.

The historiography of the Holocaust has itself become increasingly internationalized, with debates and exchanges across the academic world; even though language barriers and area specialisms remain, it is difficult any more to describe historiographies in the “national” terms that were possible in the 1960s or 1970s. With the expansion of the internet, and even as a by-product of the coronavirus pandemic that began in 2020, web-based seminars are allowing ever more international participation in contemporary debates. The project of understanding the persecution and extermination of European Jews has itself become internationalized.

The Holocaust has become a European project in symbolic ways too. The adoption of 27 January as an International Holocaust Remembrance Day in some ways binds European nations together in a common framework of symbolic commitment to honouring the victims and remembering for the future. With the expansion of European Union membership in the early twenty-first century, commitment to Holocaust remembrance became even more bound up with officially propagated national identities. Yet, as recent controversies have shown, things are never simple or straightforward. The Holocaust remains deeply entangled with national political interests and issues. Governments and groups continue to inflect or distort Holocaust history in service of collective identity projects, picking up on and twisting previous issues in new ways. This relates in part to the evaluation of the actions of particular individuals. In “double genocide” approaches that have been current, for example, in the Baltic states, the effective equation of Nazism and communism led to the resurrection of individual murderers as national heroes. Individuals who in the early 1940s had assisted the Nazis in antisemitic violence, and were during the Cold War decried as fascists, could now be celebrated as heroes in the fight against communism.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Rūta Vanagaitė and Efraim Zuroff, *Our People: Discovering Lithuania's Hidden Holocaust* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020); Silvia Foti, *The Nazi's Granddaughter: How I discovered that my Grandfather was a War Criminal* (Washington, DC: Regnery History, 2021).

In part this relates to collective identity constructions, notably under the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) government in Poland. The official approach to historical research on Polish complicity with Nazism and involvement in “Jew-hunting” threatened not only to distort the historical picture, but also to constrain the conditions for scholarly research, as the case against Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking demonstrated all too clearly.<sup>18</sup> This development could also be seen elsewhere, notably in Hungary, and in a different variant in Turkey, with President Erdoğan’s resistance to acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide carried out by Ottoman troops more than a century ago. Ethno-nationalist movements postulate some persisting essence or “national identity” with which individuals should identify, and which it is possible to defile or offend as a collective, even decades after the events under scrutiny. Official myths of innocence, heroism, and victimhood are at stake, and the “nation” defined in this way can still be defamed well after individual perpetrators are long gone. These developments are not quite as contradictory as they might at first seem. The rise of ethno-nationalism relates closely to changes in the wider international system, and fears of the consequences of new transnational currents are often bundled together under the ogre of globalization.

Separately, there are often also strong personal reasons why these questions still matter. Across generations there remain family connections and emotional sensitivities to aspects of Europe’s murderous past. Even when Nazi-hunters like Efraim Zuroff do finally decide there is no one left alive to hunt, there will remain feelings of anger, pain, injustice, and potentially also continuing legal issues around lost properties, compensation, or restitution claims. The tangles of European transformation effected by the Holocaust have not yet gone away. It is possible that eventually, with the passage of time, and as new challenges urgently demand attention, the Holocaust may yet be consigned to history and future generations will only occasionally pause to wonder why there are so many memorials to the victims of mass murder across the landscape. But for now, and particularly in relation to questions of guilt and complicity, it remains very much alive.

18 See e.g. articles in *The Guardian*, 12 Feb., 16 Aug. 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/12/a-gift-for-holocaust-deniers-how-polish-libel-ruling-will-hit-historians>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/16/polish-appeals-court-overturns-ruling-against-holocaust-historians>.

### Conclusions

In exploring complicity in the Holocaust, we need to engage in a more extensive comparative analysis. Factors to be considered would include not only ideological antisemitism but also questions relating to empathy or sense of moral obligation; the balance of power and repression; command of material, social, cultural, and other resources; moral frameworks of interpretation; and aspirations for possible futures. This sort of analysis might help us to understand better how Europeans living under Nazi hegemony contributed to the shape and development of the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question”. It might also, at the same time, help to take some of the heat out of current debates over patterns of remembrance and contested constructions of national identity in different political contexts.

The term “memory” is often used somewhat unproblematically as though all later representations (whether dominant, official, subversive, “counter”) can in some sense be called “memory” or “collective memory”, whether or not the person or groups involved personally experienced a particular past. This widespread usage is in fact potentially obfuscatory; it would be more helpful to consider later collective representations as frameworks of interpretation with selected contents and tropes, (co-)produced in relation to others, and relevant to identity construction in later contexts – often in the face of continuing conflicts in new circumstances, with varying issues at stake. Therefore “memory accounts” depend not only on who is doing the remembering, but also on who are the intended audiences, and what the memory agents are hoping to achieve in “remembering”.

Patterns of involvement under Nazi rule had crucial consequences for the ways in which people later reflected on this period in different historical and political contexts. In Germany, widely renowned for supposedly having faced up to its past, failure to bring most perpetrators to account in court and the general rehabilitation and reintegration of Nazi perpetrators, followers, and accomplices were combined with ever-growing remembrance of victims.<sup>19</sup> Yet, however critically one may evaluate the failures of German justice to deal with the truly guilty over the last seventy-five years, attempts to understand the roles of Germans in making the Holocaust possible have indeed led in many quarters to a

19 See Fulbrook, *Reckonings*.

sense of particular historical responsibility and commitment to moral and political vigilance. Far from seeing research on guilt and complicity as a potential threat to current identity, most Germans have incorporated awareness of the compromised past as an integral part of the current national landscape.

In Eastern Europe, by contrast, theories of “double genocide” have tended to equate Stalinism and Nazism, allowing Lithuanian, Latvian, or Ukrainian nationalists to be portrayed as anti-communist national heroes rather than antisemitic collaborators with the Nazis. Similar currents, inflected by national variations, have been evident in Poland. In these cases, historical interpretations are put in service of a would-be ethno-nationalism that in some respects echoes right-wing tropes of former days.

It is all the more important, then, that historians develop conceptual and empirical work that will allow ideologically charged national narratives to be challenged and critically evaluated – and that citizens ensure that the conditions for freedom of speech and of academic research are sustained.