

# Encyclopédie critique du témoignage et de la mémoire

## Grey Zone

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The “grey zone” is a term coined by the Italian Holocaust survivor Primo Levi in his seminal essay collection *The Drowned and the Saved* (1989; originally published in Italian in 1986), the last book he completed before his death. In “The Grey Zone,” the second chapter and the longest essay in the book, Levi acknowledges the human need to divide the social field into “us” and “them,” two clearly distinct and identifiable groups, but points out that such binary thinking is inadequate in the face of the complexity of life in the camps. “[T]he network of human relationships inside the Lagers was not simple,” he writes: “it could not be reduced to the two blocs of victims and persecutors” (23). A key facet of Nazi practice, after all, was to attempt to turn victims into accomplices, to degrade and corrupt them by making them complicit in the oppression of their fellow victims. Setting out to explore “the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors” (25), insight into which he considers to be of fundamental importance for an understanding of humanity, Levi emphasizes that he by no means intends to obliterate the distinction between these two categories: “to confuse [the murderers] with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is a precious service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth” (33). The grey zone is inhabited by victims who compromise and collaborate with their oppressors in various ways and under varying levels of coercion in exchange for material or other benefits not available to their fellow prisoners. Levi sets out to probe and chart this in-between group without lapsing into a relativist position where everyone is guilty, and hence no one is guilty, though his characterization of the grey zone has in fact often been misinterpreted as involving just such a merging or blurring of the categories of victim and perpetrator.

Levi insists that one should refrain from passing hasty judgement on these morally ambiguous “privileged” prisoners, who found themselves flung into an infernal environment and who, moreover, did not constitute a monolithic group but came in many different shades of grey, with complicated levels of culpability. The examples he considers include low-ranking functionaries carrying out routine duties such as bed smoothing and lice checking, the *Kapos* or heads of the work squads, the barracks chiefs, the clerks, and those prisoners who performed diverse duties in the camps’ administrative offices, the Political Section, the Labour Service, and the punishment cells. He devotes particular attention to the *Sonderkommandos* or “special squads,” the groups of prisoners—the vast majority of them Jews—entrusted with the running of the gas chambers and crematoria, whom one would hesitate to call “privileged,” even between inverted commas. While we are entitled to exonerate or condemn some of the inhabitants of the grey zone, no one, according to Levi, is authorized to judge these individuals, who represent “[a]n extreme case of collaboration” (34). Judgement must also be suspended, he argues, in the perplexing case of Chaim Rumkowski, the controversial head of the Jewish council in the Lodz ghetto, another exemplary occupant of the grey zone whose story Levi discusses at some length. Levi’s reluctance to judge Rumkowski contrasts with Hannah Arendt’s notoriously harsh criticism of the Jewish councils for actively assisting the Nazis in peaceably rounding up the Jews in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963).

“Privileged” Jewish prisoners in the camps and ghettos have long been something of a taboo aspect of the Holocaust, with public taste favouring the reassuringly clear-cut categories of heroes or saints versus traitors or villains. In fact, it is not until fairly recently, with the release of films such as Tim Blake Nelson’s *The Grey Zone* (2001) and Claude Lanzmann’s *The Last of the Unjust* (2013), that a more nuanced debate appears to have become possible. Taking its title from Levi’s essay and directly engaging with its ideas, the former film, starring Hollywood A-listers such as David Arquette, Steve Buscemi, and Harvey Keitel, tells the story of the twelfth *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz-Birkenau, which launched a revolt in October 1944 that led to the partial destruction of one of the camp’s crematoria but was quickly suppressed by the SS guards. In a marked

departure from the ethical Manicheism characteristic of mainstream Holocaust films such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* (1997), which tend to view the history of the camps in straightforward black-and-white terms (good versus evil), *The Grey Zone* highlights the moral ambiguousness of survival in the camps, which in the case of the *Sonderkommandos* involved direct complicity with the killing process. The film depicts the gruesome work of the special squads in graphic detail and—also unlike many other films about the Holocaust—eschews redemption.

*The Last of the Unjust* features another iconic denizen of the grey zone: Rabbi Benjamin Murmelstein, the last Jewish elder of Theresienstadt, the “model ghetto” created by the Nazis to fool the world about the reality of the “Final Solution.” Lanzmann's documentary film lets Murmelstein—who died in 1989—make his case that he was not a traitor and a war criminal, as he had been branded in Israel, but actually saved the lives of many Jews under his authority by helping the Nazis keep up the illusion that the Jews were being treated decently in Theresienstadt (and, by extension, throughout the Third Reich) to the outside world. *The Last of the Unjust* consists for the most part of unused footage from a series of interviews Lanzmann conducted with Murmelstein in 1975 for what would eventually become the landmark Holocaust documentary *Shoah* (1985). A possible reason why Lanzmann waited almost forty years to make this film is that the world was not ready for such a controversial and ambivalent figure. (He did include interviews with several members of the *Sonderkommandos* in *Shoah*, though, and he also discusses the role of Adam Czerniakow as leader of the Jewish council in the Warsaw ghetto in his interview with Raul Hilberg in the same film.) Lanzmann gives a voice to Murmelstein, even becoming a surrogate witness for him by reading excerpts from his memoir in the present-day sections, but refuses to resolve the contradictions this man presents. The viewer is forced to understand the rabbi's collaboration from within the ambiguous and oppressive structures of Nazi domination.

While in his essay Levi primarily focuses on “privileged” Jewish inmates in the camps and ghettos, as do Nelson and Lanzmann in their respective films, his conceptualization of the grey zone stretches to include collaborationist regimes such as those of Vichy France and Quisling in Norway, and even a sadistic SS man who briefly contemplated sparing a young girl taken alive from the gas chamber. In fact, he views the camp as “an excellent ‘laboratory’” (27) that could help reveal wider truths about the relationship between power and privilege. His essay, which ends with a description of how “we are all in the ghetto” and “close by the train is waiting” (51), is a reflection, ultimately, on the ambiguity of human nature in general. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Levi's notion of the grey zone, which has proved singularly influential, has been taken up in many different fields and disciplines, ranging from Holocaust studies (Brown; Petropoulos and Roth; Todorov) to philosophy (Agamben), theology (Roth), law (Luban), and feminism (Card).

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