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Elective course: "After the traces of our neighbors: Jews in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Holocaust"¹

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„Holocaust historiography and state policies in Europe after the Cold War“

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Holocaust historiography and politics after the Cold War

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War has seen an explosion in Holocaust history, and some significant changes in the political dealing with the Holocaust in European states. The main historiographical explanations. The 'return of ideology' that began displacing the 'functionalist' or 'structuralist' dominance of the 1980s remains strong. But it is being supplemented In the last two decades very detailed regional and

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local studies were published, different experiences of ghettoization in different places were analyzed, and a focus was brought on the widespread plunder and corruption that accompanied the killing process. This enormous attention to detail reveals that the Holocaust unfolded differently in different places; but it also demonstrates the existence of an overall framework in which all the operations took place, what we might call an 'anti-Semitic consensus'. Simultaneously, historians have broadened the discussion of the Holocaust, situating it into a transnational or world-historical context of imperialism and colonialism.

I outline in broad brush some of these themes, and asks what effects they have had and will continue to have on Europeans' self-understanding in an age in which the post-war anti-fascist consensus has been dismantled while Holocaust-consciousness is officially enshrined into European identity.

Holocaust historiography and politics after the Cold War

Lev Rozhetsky was a schoolboy when the Romanian army, the Wehrmacht's largest ally, occupied southwestern Ukraine. His memoir is full of terrible stories: girls being tossed into latrines, Jews being tormented, tortured and shot, dogs growing 'fat as rams' on the bodies.

The perpetrators in this region, usually led by a thin layer of German commanders, included Romanian gendarmerie and local Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans). What Rozhetsky also observed was the involvement of locals, not always in the murder process itself, but in the looting that accompanied it: 'Having caught the scent of booty, all sorts of dirty scoundrels came running from every direction', as he put it.

Another survivor, the student Sara Gleykh from Mariupol in Ukraine, wrote: 'The neighbors waited like vultures for us to leave the apartment.' The same neighbors then quarreled over things before my eyes, snatching things out of each others' hands and dragging off pillows, pots and pans, quilts'. As historian Joshua Rubenstein notes, in the Baltic region and western Ukraine especially, but generally throughout Eastern Europe It was as if the population understood, without much prodding by the Germans, that there were no limits on what they could do to their Jewish neighbors.

From Horyngrad-Krypa in Volhynia, where Ukrainians armed with axes, knives and boards spiked with nails murdered thirty local Jews, to Kaunas, where the famous 'death dealer' of the city was photographed clubbing Jews to death with an iron bar, there is no shortage of evidence to back up Rubenstein's claim.

Apart from adding to the store of horror, what these memoirs reveal, from a political scientist point of view, is that the dominant explanations of the Holocaust need to be rethought. Scholarship on the Holocaust has been, until fairly recently, under the sway of an analysis that sees the murder of the Jews as an 'industrial genocide' implemented on the basis of a eugenic world-view that regarded Jews as an inferior 'race' that came into being in an ad hoc, or reactive, fashion, as changing circumstances in the war narrowed the Nazi regime's horizons, necessitating the urgent execution of a programme that might have looked very different had Germany won the war.

More recent, micro studies are beginning to reshape this picture. For some time, scholars have put an emphasis on Nazi 'ideology', especially anti-Semitism, as opposed to 'structure', with the aim of proving the importance of agency, and showing that the Third Reich's leaders believed what they said. But newer studies add nuance to this picture, which appears too neat. Replacing 'structure' with 'intention', even if one talks of a 'modified intentionalism', offers perhaps too coherent an image of the Third Reich and how it functioned. If the historiographical consensus now seems to suggest that centre - periphery relations were key to the decision-making process, and that Jewish policy was made on the hoof but always in the context of the perpetrators' broadly shared anti-Semitic consensus, it has also become clear that, below the highest leadership stratum, participation in the killing process itself and its bureaucracy cannot be put down simply to anti-Semitism. The pursuit of plunder and economic gain has resurfaced as a factor after decades, although, as we will see, in a different way from the interpretations of the 1960s. And the murder of the Jews, while still retaining its significance as the most urgent and most complete of the Nazis' genocidal projects, is increasingly seen as but one of several interlocking and inseparable projects of genocide.

This insight in turn leads political scientists to see the Holocaust in the context of Nazi empire-building, and to ask whether this history might be connected to earlier histories of European overseas colonialism. On the one hand, then, the picture is messier with a wider range of perpetrators participating for a variety of reasons and broader with the Holocaust

situated in the context of more extensive Nazi demographic schemes as well as the context of world history but without, one hopes, losing a sense of the ideological basis of the whole project that the Third Reich's leaders insisted upon and that gave it coherence. In what follows, I will pick up these themes and show how, since the end of the Cold War, the 'discovery' of Eastern Europe at the heart of the genocidal process is reshaping our understanding of the Holocaust and is also influencing governmental policies in Europe.

Contextualizing Auschwitz

In Western Europe, our image of the Holocaust centers on Auschwitz- Birkenau, the infamous death camp that has become an icon of evil. The notoriety is justified: after all, Auschwitz was, the 'capital of the Holocaust', where Jews and Roma from all over Europe were sent to be killed.

With its numerous auxiliary camps spread around the area of Upper Silesia, Auschwitz was also a major centre for slave labor-based industry (which, economically speaking achieved little but caused unfathomable misery and pain to many tens of thousands of inmates).

Yet Auschwitz is not synonymous with the Holocaust per se, which was a Europe-wide phenomenon, much of which appears more akin to colonial massacres than to the iconic image of the death camp. Rather, an aptly named 'Auschwitz syndrome', which has kept us fascinated by the apparent paradox of modern technology being employed in the service of mass murder, has stopped us from seeing other aspects of the Holocaust. If one really wants to look into the heart of darkness, then the relatively unknown Aktion Reinhard camps come quickly to mind.

Along with Chelmno in the Warthegau (part of western Poland incorporated into the Reich), where Jews were first murdered using gas vans, the small Aktion Reinhard camps (named after Reinhard Heydrich, the head of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt (RSHA) murdered by Czech partisans in 1942) of Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka were responsible, in the short period of their operation all were dismantled by the end of 1943 for the deaths of more than 1.5 million Jews. Established by Odilo Globocnik, the Austrian born SS und Polizeiführer (SS and Police Leader) in Lublin, these were 'pure' death camps, serving no purpose other than murder. And the process was unpleasant beyond belief. For too long we have talked about

the 'modernity' of the killing process, shielding the reality from ourselves with talk of 'industrial genocide', as if it were a clean, smooth, technical matter. In fact, the motor engines that produced the carbon monoxide (Zyklon B was used only at Auschwitz and Majdanek) often broke down, causing an excruciatingly slow death. Besides, these sites were brutal and violent; situated in the 'wild east', the guards again, a thin layer of German officers and then mostly Ukrainians (former Soviet POWs) were often drunk, and an undisciplined atmosphere prevailed, as the wealth that accumulated from the transports attracted prostitutes and bounty hunters.

But fewer than half of the victims of the Holocaust were killed in camps and, of those that were, some 1.2 million died in concentration camps proper, that is, those camps run by the SS's Inspektion der Konzentrationslager (Concentration Camps Inspectorate) and the Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt (Main Economic and Administrative Office), and not the 'pure' death camps. Before the Nazis set up death camps in occupied Poland in 1942, about 1.5 million Jews were shot in face-to-face massacres. Some historians have observed that a 'festive' or 'carnavalesque' atmosphere dominated at the mass shootings that took place in the first sweep through eastern Poland and the Soviet Union in 1941/42. Photographs depicting laughing perpetrators at forest clearings and cheering locals in German and eastern European towns are not hard to find. Auschwitz remains central to our understanding, but the history of the Holocaust has become much more complex, as historians discover more about the other death camps, about perpetrators other than the SS for example, the German Ordnungspolizei (Order Police), the Wehrmacht, local gendarmerie and auxiliary police (more than 100,000 men served in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine's police force) about the role played by concentration and forced labor camps (as opposed to death camps), about the almost inexplicable death marches, and about motivations for local participation beyond the catch-all of

anti-Semitism, such as greed. As Timothy Snyder points out, although Auschwitz is located in Poland, actually very few Polish or Soviet Jews were killed there; thus the largest victim groups religiously orthodox Jews from eastern Europe are excluded from the most famous symbol of the Holocaust. Historians such as Timothy Snyder and Omer Bartov have also begun to investigate local ethnic relations before the war in the complex societies of the eastern European borderlands, whose ethnic homogeneity today (a result of the Communists finishing off in the immediate post-war years what the Nazis had begun) is a far cry from the

mélange of populations that existed before 1939. They show that, before the war, many regions that had been places of relative ethnic harmony had, like western Volhynia in 1943, become 'the battlefield of a multi-sided civil war', 'with Soviet Ukrainian partisans, Ukrainian nationalist partisans, Polish self-defense outposts, and the German police all engaged'.

Anti-Semitism and the return of the economic

The renewed emphasis on plunder and looting as motivating factors is applicable not only to individuals but at the macro level too. In the 1960s, there was a fashion for the Marxist-inspired idea that Nazism was a creature of big business, that is, that Hitler was bankrolled by capitalists who unleashed fascism to protect their interests and to prevent the increasingly militant masses from recognizing theirs. In the wake of the emphasis on 'race' and ideology of the last twenty years or so, that paradigm virtually disappeared. It became clear that the Nazi regime controlled big business, not the other way round, and that its leaders believed in their ideology, especially in what Saul Friedländer calls 'redemptive antisemitism'. In recent years, however, researchers have once again started talking of the Third Reich as a 'gangster regime' or as a 'kleptocracy', albeit this time round without giving top priority to economic motives. Jonathan Petropoulos, for example, remarks that 'the Nazis were not only the most notorious murderers in history but also the greatest thieves'. At all levels, individual, institutional, state-led and Europe-wide, the killing process was accompanied by plunder on a fantastic scale.

The Holocaust was not driven by economics, but it is clear that the possibility of financial gain was a motivating factor. The Nazis carefully calculated the value of the goods taken from Jews at death camps, and they fleeced occupied countries such as the Netherlands in a remarkably thorough way. Agencies such as the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg were set up to co-ordinate the theft of artworks across Europe, and the German population was rendered complicit in the murders by the distribution of clothes from dead Jews through the 'Winter Help' charity or at 'Jew markets', like the one that took place in Hamburg. Studies of perpetrators have revealed that they were not all dyed-in-the-wool anti-Semites, but took part in killing operations for many reasons, including peer pressure, the influence of alcohol, and the expectations of their comrades and superiors.

And neither were locals across eastern Europe simply anti-Semites who killed their neighbors at the first opportunity, but people who, in a desperately poor region, saw the 'elimination' of the Jews as a chance to acquire some material goods. Extermination and enrichment went hand in hand as, all across Europe, at individual, agency and state levels, greed, corruption and plunder proved inseparable from the process of murder.

Anti-Semitism remains key because it was the regime's driving force, that is, the framework that permitted various actors with different motives to come together. But the complexities of real life mean that we should not be satisfied with anti-Semitism as an explanation. Anti-Semitism had long existed, and one needs an explanation as to what generated genocide at this particular point in time, in a region where Jews and Gentiles had co-existed for centuries. One reason, of course, is that the regime and thus the state believed in the paranoid conspiracy theory that the Jews were colonizing Germany and were a threat to world stability; previously, anti-Semitism had remained at the social level. But that explanation concerns only the core of the Nazi regime, and does not account for the continent wide participation in the killing process.

One helpful approach is to think of an 'anti-Semitic consensus': whatever the actual motives of perpetrators, whether greed or envy or hatred, they knew that the regime was fighting a 'war against the Jews' and that they could get away with just about anything as long as they paid lip-service to that project.

Utilitarian motivation of institutional actors was, presumably, the main source of radicalization. Anti-Semitism and state coercion, nonetheless, remained the constitutive basis of persecution. Anti-Semitism represented a kind of convertible currency. Whatever the personal Weltanschauung, as soon as peripheral actors had something to offer the 'center' that fitted the anti-Semitic agenda they could expect advantages in exchange.

Investigations into motivation do not seek to exculpate, but to provide answers to the question of how anti-Semitism could be activated and radicalized at a certain moment. If we do not ask this and other questions, we end up with the 'lachrymose narrative' of Jewish history that is unable to distinguish the Holocaust from a nineteenth-century pogrom. For the Jews who were killed, of course, the result was the same: the motivating factors and the backgrounds of the perpetrators may have been heterogeneous, but the murderous effect was strikingly homogeneous.

'Discovering' Eastern Europe

But to ask after perpetrator motivation leads one ultimately to a dead end: the individual psychology of perpetrators cannot be isolated from more important social factors. That is why so much research has been done on the conditions under which the murder process took place. However, although the vast majority of Jews murdered in the Holocaust came from and were murdered in Eastern Europe, we know far more about the Holocaust in Western Europe. We know about survival rates, resistance, opportunities for hiding, rescue attempts, the role of local police forces and bureaucracies in listing, rounding up and deporting Jews, and we have very precise lists of deportations, especially for France, Belgium and the Netherlands. The

stories of rescue in Denmark and Italy have been told many times, even if the temptingly pleasing notion of Italians as *brava gente* has come in for something of a battering recently, with historians arguing that the Italians' refusal to deport Jews (until the chaotic and brutal final stages of the war under the Salò Republic) owed more to a desire to establish their sovereignty vis-à-vis Nazi Germany than to altruism pure and simple. Again, for the Jews concerned, whatever the case, the result was the same. Where Jews survived it tended, paradoxically, to be in Axis countries whose regimes sought to assert their independence from German authority, as in the case of Italy, Finland and Bulgaria (excluding Bulgarian-occupied Thrace and Macedonia), or places where the German occupation was thin on the ground and the power of the SS to urge on the local police was therefore relatively weak, as in France, where 75 per cent of the Jews survived the war.

But, for Eastern Europe, it is only since the 1990s that historians have been able to produce detailed studies of places such as Serbia, Croatia, Belarus, Galicia, Lithuania, Estonia or Transnistria, as previously inaccessible archives were opened, at least for long enough for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to acquire copies of most of the documents. Histories of the ghettos, for example, especially ghettos about which almost nothing was known, such as short-lived examples in the Soviet Union, are now being written.

They confirm, on the one hand, the apparently 'functionalist' argument that there was no single ghettoization policy or experience, and that local conditions led to varying outcomes. On the other hand, it is clear that for all their differences, all the ghettos had one thing in

common: they were all doomed to extinction. Ghettoization may not have been undertaken with a view to deporting Jews to death camps, but it marked a significant milestone on the road to genocide, and was itself genocidal. Once again, the existence of an anti-Semitic consensus among the perpetrators seems clear: debates between so-called 'attritionists' and 'productionists' (who wanted to keep Jews temporarily alive for labor) show that, ultimately, both were in accord about the eventual outcome.

To give another example, where very little was known about the Holocaust in Romania, now there are numerous studies that show in great detail something that Nicolai Ceausescu's 'national Stalinist' regime wanted to hide: namely, that Romania undertook to solve the 'Jewish question' in 'the Romanian way'. That is to say, the Jews of Romania (not including Northern Transylvania, which was ceded to Hungary in 1940) and of Transnistria was mostly killed not by Germans but by Romanians. Ion Antonescu, Romania's ruler did not have to be bullied by Hitler into deporting the Jews. Nor was Hitler able to prevent Antonescu from ordering plans to deport the Jews of the Regat the 'old kingdom' of Moldavia and Wallachia to be halted as the fortunes of war began to turn against the Germans, which is why most of the Jews of Bucharest survived the war. In Antonescu's understanding of the world, as in that of Himmler who entertained negotiations with Jewish groups on the same basis in the war's late stages, the Jews were omnipotent; thus, protecting the Jews of the Regat would, he believed, win him some sympathy from the Jewish-controlled Allies.

Romania is exceptional since, although it was firmly within the Germans' orbit, it remained a sovereign state and was never occupied by the Wehrmacht. But other countries, such as the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH), often referred to inaccurately as a 'puppet state', and Slovakia, under the rule of clerico-fascist Jozef Tiso, also to some extent forced the pace of Jewish policy. With regard to German occupied eastern Europe, especially Poland, and the lands of the western Soviet Union, including the Baltic states, Ukraine and Belarus, historians can now show in great detail how the 'final solution' developed in different places at different times as a result of interaction between local commanders and central directives from Berlin. They can also show that, although the Holocaust was a German-led plan, there should be no surprise that throughout Europe it proved possible to mobilize large numbers in the project of killing Jews. The pace of killing was quickened, especially when 'centre' and 'periphery' met, as when Himmler visited his men in the field in Ukraine or Lithuania. Although it is now clear, that there was no single,

simple plan to murder the Jews of Europe, and that policy developed reactively and in an ad hoc manner, on the basis of considerable competition between different Nazi agencies, it is equally clear that the various perpetrator groups shared the objective of eliminating the Jews. As historians have analyzed in detail the complex reality on the ground in a series of 'regional studies', so they have begun to describe the occupation and population policies the Germans undertook there as akin to overseas colonialism.

The Holocaust as 'colonial genocide'

Indeed, few historical debates have been as controversial as that concerning the applicability of the term 'colonialism' to the occupation of Eastern Europe, or of 'colonial genocide' to the treatment of the Slavs and, especially, the Jews. With the rise of world and transnational history, historians have increasingly been tempted to understand the Holocaust as one case of genocide among many. Genocide studies as a discipline has itself undergone considerable change in the last decade.

Can the Holocaust be understood as a 'colonial genocide'?

First, such an understanding requires finessing the commonly held definition of 'genocide' as state-led mass murder. If genocide occurred in the European overseas colonies, such as in North America or Australia, it usually did so without explicit orders from the colonial authorities, even if the colonial project as such implicitly authorized the process. But the Holocaust was a state-led crime. Furthermore, attacks on indigenous people in overseas colonies were carried out in order to acquire their land. But the Jews in Europe were for the most part not landowners, and they were a minority population across the continent (albeit a substantial one in Poland, the western Soviet Union and a few major cities and regions). So, where the occupation of eastern Europe and the treatment of the local populations, especially in Ukraine and Poland, can be seen as akin to the colonial treatment of 'natives' forcing them to live in very poor conditions, eliminating leadership and educated strata, denying cultural expression and restricting food supply the way in which the Nazis dealt with the Jews was altogether different and much more radically straightforward. Jews simply had no place in the Nazi universe.



Although we now know that surprisingly large numbers of Jews survived in forced labor camps that were outside the SS-run camp system, there can be little doubt that their deaths were merely being deferred. These important differences between the treatment of Jews and Slavs notwithstanding, many historians have found the vocabulary of colonialism and imperialism fruitful for thinking about Nazi rule in Europe. From tracing lines of continuity (in personnel, military practices or ideas about cultural superiority) from the German colonies, especially Southwest Africa, where the Herero and Nama people were victims of genocide in the war of 1904 to 1908, to analyzing Hitler's admiration for British rule in India or westward expansion in the United States, the Holocaust is increasingly set within a world-historical framework. Although some fear that this process will lead to the Holocaust losing its supposed 'uniqueness', the cohort of historians that has done the most to advance comparative genocide studies in recent years is careful to stress that, even if one can establish broad frameworks for understanding, this need not come at the expense of the specificity of any particular event. The argument about colonialism is meant to supplement, not replace, other sources for understanding the forces that drove the Holocaust. The discussion of the Holocaust in the context of comparative genocide is not undertaken with the aim of 'downplaying' the Holocaust, whatever that might mean in the context of other terrible atrocities.

After the brutal stability of the Cold War

The end of the Cold War and the opening of archives in the former Communist countries has helped to reignite interest in the explosive issues of slave labor reparations, Nazi gold, victims' bank accounts and looted art, now combined with a sophisticated methodological approach to Nazi perpetrators drawn from management theory, with its vocabulary of 'networks', 'competencies' and 'inter-agency competition'. German firms have also opened their archives, and detailed studies of business during the Third Reich now exist, ranging from company histories (such as those of Volkswagen or Deutsche Bank) to analyses of the insurance and banking systems. All make clear the extent to which the 'ordinary' institutions of a modern capitalist society functioned, in the Third Reich, as agents of theft, impoverishment and, ultimately, murder. One other consequence of the end of the Cold War has been an increasing awareness that the Holocaust was a transnational phenomenon involving almost every state in Europe. Hence, countries from Portugal to Latvia have

established national commissions to enquire into their role in the Holocaust and, hence, the decision at the Stockholm Forum in 2000 to make 27 January Holocaust Memorial Day.

This is by no means an uncontested decision: as historians expose the continent-wide dimension of the genocide, so the caricature of Nazism as the product of 'evil' that has nothing to do with 'us' dissipates and so the resentment at what many regard as the tarnishing of national honor increases. Nowhere is this process clearer than in post-Communist eastern Europe, where struggles over memory have resurfaced after the suppression of the Cold War, and where the meaning of the Second World War is inseparable from the 'second dictatorship' of post-1945 Communist rule.

Remarkably, the further we get from the Second World War, the more fierce the battle over its meaning grows. The end of the Cold War's brutal stability means that views that were previously marginal or even lunatic have resurfaced, and the anti-fascist consensus on which post-war Europe was built has been radically challenged. In many countries, that consensus has been more or less totally dismantled. In Silvio Berlusconi's Italy, for example, the so-called 'post-fascist' narrative that all Italians were victims has become the norm. It is no coincidence that anti-immigrant violence and the politics of celebrity are notable features of the current Italian scene. In Russia, by contrast, the anti-fascist narrative that provided moral legitimacy to the Communist regimes, sustaining them for longer than might otherwise have been possible, has been reinforced, albeit in caricatured form. The Great Patriotic War (the Russian term for the Second World War of 1941-1945) was a source of great pride in the Soviet Union, and it is thus hardly surprising that Putin and his successors have tried to maintain its presence, at the forefront of Russian minds, as a source of national pride.

In that context, the Holocaust is certainly abused, but it is also brought to the fore in ways and in places where it was previously unknown or massively bowdlerized. For example, in museums from Budapest to Tallinn, the murder of the Jews is often presented as little more than a sideshow compared with the 'second Holocaust' of the Hungarian or Estonian people. Here, memory of the Holocaust is placed at the service of an anti-Communist narrative, and national heroes are drawn from the pantheon of interwar nationalists, anti-Semites and fascists. On the other hand, the countries of Eastern Europe also place new emphasis on the Holocaust because the European Union has enshrined Holocaust memory in its mission. At the same time as eastern European history books and museums challenge what they perceive as 'smug' western narratives about the defeat of Nazism in countries where there

was no subsequent experience of Communism they also promote Holocaust memory as a way of proving that they are 'on board' with the mainstream European understanding of the past. By bringing out the massive complexity of the event, new narratives of the Holocaust also contribute to new contests in Europe's ongoing memory wars. The way in which they are resolved will be an important barometer of the state of the European civilization.

