

Der Holocaust. Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung. Edited by Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw. Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 2015. 342 pp.

Der Holocaust. Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung is the result of an international workshop held in April 2014 in Tutzing, Germany. One of the first publications of the recently established *Zentrum für Holocaust-Studien am Institut für Zeitgeschichte München*, this ambitious volume offers an assessment of the state of Holocaust research after the boom of the last quarter of a century. Individual articles provide overviews of key approaches in Holocaust historiography, assess the new opportunities and challenges brought by the deepening internationalization and specialization of the field, repeatedly address the moot question of appropriate contextualization, and raise some potentially central questions of future research. Written mostly by leading German experts, the volume can also be seen—though this is not explicitly part of its agenda—as an attempt to situate several specifically German contributions to the field in their transnational contexts, and thereby reflect on the roles specific national research traditions continue to play in Holocaust scholarship.

Two of the four sections of the volume are devoted to the question of continuities and various attempts at contextualization, including war and occupation, whereas the other two analyze perpetrator research and newer studies on the perspectives and strategies of Jews under Nazi rule. The introduction “Tendenzen und Probleme der neueren Holocaust-Forschung: Eine Einführung,” by Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, key representatives of the new research center in Munich, highlights the massive transformation Holocaust scholarship has undergone in recent decades. Bajohr and Löw discuss the increased attention researchers currently pay to the multiple roles played by individuals during World War II and the consequently more nuanced social historical contextualization of genocide. Their introduction also addresses the altered image of both the perpetrators, who can no longer be viewed as a marginal criminal gang pathologically different from the rest of society, and their crime, the Holocaust, which is now repeatedly depicted as the sum of a multiplicity of massacres and murderous acts rather than the result of the operation of a few major extermination camps. Last but not least, while emphasizing the intimate connections between the Holocaust and other national socialist crimes, the editors emphasize the pan-European scope of the Holocaust and the ways

in which anti-Jewish radicalization was often produced by interactions between the Nazi center and peripheries.

Ulrich Herbert's elaborate overview of the history and perspectives of Holocaust research in Germany ("Holocaust-Forschung in Deutschland: Geschichte und Perspektiven einer schwierigen Disziplin") comes after the introductory text by Bajohr and Löw. In addition to providing a narrative of the history of what he calls a problematic field of study, Herbert's contribution, like that of Bajohr and Löw, addresses the inadequacies of the image of a cold, industrial, almost clinically executed mass murder. Rejecting easily comprehensible concepts and theories as insufficient, in their stead Herbert suggests a stronger focus on the concrete, everyday facets of the Holocaust—which in their sheer mass may admittedly be unbearably horrific and utterly unmanageable. The author's chronological overview, first and foremost, reminds his readers how "hesitantly and very late" historical Holocaust research started in Germany (41). Herbert notes that German historians lagged decades behind German jurists in amassing detailed information and offering nuanced interpretations. As he observes, only in the 1990s did historical research start to outweigh interpretative polemics. Moreover, he maintains that the massive increase in German historical research was partly a reaction to an almost ceaseless public debate in the country, which took place approximately between 1985 and 2000 and by the end of which "everything was thought possible, even probable, and the *onus probandi* was now squarely on the shoulder of the doubters" (p.60).¹

As Herbert's "Holocaust-Forschung in Deutschland" highlights, in the last half of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s researchers focused on political, institutional, scholarly, and situational dynamics. They addressed the behavior, motives, worldview, and biographies of perpetrators, as well as the degrees and extent of participation, knowledge, support, or indifference of ordinary Germans. At the same time, there was a marked shift in the focus of research towards Eastern Europe, which placed the Holocaust in the middle of an "inferno of violence" and thus also made it appear somewhat less like a radical rupture in civilization. Another momentous change Herbert sketches is how, in addition to devoting significant attention to material aspects, German researchers finally began to study the perspectives of victims too. Moreover, he argues that the public polemic had visibly declined by the turn of the millennium and the Holocaust would thereby emerge as a preoccupation primarily of historians.

1 All translations from German are my own – FL.

As the article observes, this happened at a time when the emergence of new transnational perspectives on the subject and the increasingly international composition of the researchers themselves meant that German research trends were losing many of their distinguishing features.

In his overview of perpetrator research, entitled “Täterforschung: Ertrag, Probleme und Perspektiven eines Forschungsansatzes,” Frank Bajohr asserts that the microanalytical focus on perpetrators and their networks fundamentally changed our understanding of how the Holocaust was implemented (p.170). At the same time, Bajohr reflects on the unclear perspectives of *Täterforschung* now that the task of separating perpetrators from Nazi German society at large no longer appears easy and providing a satisfactory definition of who qualifies as a perpetrator has therefore emerged as a serious problem in its own right. After all, as Bajohr notes, violence was an element in community building in Nazi society, which implies a substantial amount of overlap between a history of perpetrators and a social history of violence. Bajohr also emphasizes, in his valuation of *Täterforschung*, that explorations of the personal motivations of perpetrators have not yielded many valuable insights. Biographical specificities, such as previous experiences of violence, do not seem to provide a sound basis on which to draw conclusions concerning these exceptional radicalization either, even if the political meanings perpetrators assigned to their former experiences of violence—whether endured, witnessed or committed—seem indeed to have played crucial roles. Whereas in recent years situational and social psychological explanations of perpetrators have admittedly grown in importance, in the assessment of Bajohr, they by and large fail to provide adequate historical contextualizations. Bajohr’s critical overview of current approaches finishes with a plea not to pursue *Täterforschung* in isolation, but to develop new approaches that combine insights into perpetrators with structural and institutional analyses (p.181).

Mark Roseman’s subsequent reflections (“Lebensfälle: Biographische Annäherungen an NS-Täter”) relate to several of the concerns raised by Bajohr. Roseman asks whether individual biographies are relevant in a society of perpetrators, and he critically examines the notion that the radicalization of Nazi policy could be explained with reference to personal attitudes. He ultimately appears rather skeptical towards biographical studies, claiming that such projects promise to discover merely “some of the mechanisms within the Nazi party and regime that enabled and motivated action” (p.202). Roseman reminds his readers that moral constraints necessarily hinder an empathic

approach to Nazi perpetrators and thus their biographers ultimately, and perhaps entirely unavoidably, tend to fail in their attempts to grasp their motives and their psychological strategies of self-justification. Moreover, Roseman argues that a marked focus on the options perpetrators had point, admittedly rather paradoxically, to the need to search for structural preconditions. Noting that perpetrators were often characterized by a bewildering mixture of radicalism and flexibility, the study maintains, quite simply, that ambitious young men at the beginnings of their careers in 1933 were prone to becoming perpetrators, largely irrespective of their individual intellectual profiles.

In “Der Holocaust und die anderen NS-Verbrechen: Wechselwirkungen und Zusammenhänge,” which represents a thorough attempt at contextualization, Dieter Pohl agrees that anti-Semitism may well have constituted the central element of the Nazi worldview, but it escalated in the context of a new form of continental imperialism. Sharing the perception that “the other half” of National Socialist violence has remained relatively understudied in comparison with the Holocaust, Pohl complains that connections and interplays between various major Nazi crimes (above all those committed against Jews, prisoners of war, and political enemies) have often been neglected. Emphasizing furthermore that the Nazi policy of extermination was closely connected to economic and labor policies, Pohl ultimately pleads for an integrative study of Nazi violence.

In her article “Besatzung als europäische Erfahrungs- und Gesellschaftsgeschichte: Der Holocaust im Kontext des Zweiten Weltkrieges,” Tatjana Tönsmeier advocates a social historical study of occupational experiences during World War II, which would help researchers develop an integrated history of the Holocaust in a pan-European perspective. Tönsmeier suggests that occupations ought to be understood as forms of social interaction between occupiers and occupied with special dynamics of their own. She pleads for thick descriptions of the complex, often ambivalent, and highly situation-dependent ways in which some 200 million people living in occupied territories dealt with the norms, rules, and institutions of the Nazi occupiers. She maintains that an encompassing project of this kind would conceptualize Jewish populations as part of local societies without recourse to morally loaded terms like collaboration and bystander.

“Holocaust und Besatzungsgeschichte,” Doris L. Bergen’s reflections on Tönsmeier’s intriguing proposal, recognizes opportunities inherent in treating the Holocaust as part of a history of occupation, but it also points to several potential pitfalls and unsolved dilemmas of this kind of an approach (p.300).

Bergen raises several crucial concerns, such as the fact that the Holocaust was also implemented in non-occupied and non-German occupied territories, the potential neglect of military history in a research project focused narrowly on civilians, or the simple fact that relevant participants may have experienced the social processes of what Tönsmeier calls occupation as annexation or even as liberation. She highlights the benefits of focusing on the role that interests and identities (whether ethnic, religious, political, or clan-based) played amidst all the corruption and violence in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe in particular, while also pleading for methodological pluralism.

Ingo Loose's "Massenraubmord? Materielle Aspekte des Holocaust" covers a much debated topic by focusing on four issues in particular: the annihilation of the economic foundations for the existence of German Jewry and its consequences in the 1930s, the subsequent economic annihilation of European Jews during the war and the Holocaust, material components of collaboration, and, last but not least, the relationship between economy and rationality in Nazi policies. Loose argues that while there was a strong though certainly not necessary empirical connection between the economic annihilation of Jews and their subsequent murder, the actual value of stolen Jewish property across Europe should not be overestimated. The author points out that by 1938 the largest segment of property, that of German Jews had largely been confiscated, and the value of Jewish forced labor to the German war economy was probably greater than what was expropriated from Jews across Europe during the war (p.151). At the same time, Loose explains that even if the perception among anti-Semites of the wealth of Jews was a notable factor in the radicalization of the persecution, the Holocaust was not a consequence of economic motivations. His article thus maintains that the contested German concept of *Massenraubmord* (literally: mass robbery murder) has limited value. After all, as Loose notes, Polish Jews were still alive when their properties and belongings were confiscated, but by the time these things had been sold and the profits from their sale were being put to use, the vast majority of these people had already been murdered (p.155).

Turning to the victims, Beate Meyer's study on Jews in the Third Reich and Western Europe ("Nicht nur Objekte staatlichen Handelns: Juden im Deutsche Reich und Westeuropa") reminds her readers that while Jewish reactions, options, and choices were all strongly influenced by Nazi policy, societal attitudes and behavior, they were nonetheless highly diverse. Meyer focuses, more particularly, on how, by the late 1930s and early 1940s, the strategy of cooperation pursued by Jewish representatives with the aim of moderating the impact of persecution

and enabling further emigration came into obvious conflict with the strategies of ordinary members of their communities, who tried to escape the impact of Nazi policies as best they could. In her “Handlungsspielräume und Reaktionen der jüdischen Bevölkerung in Ostmitteleuropa,” Andrea Löw uses the example of ghettos in Eastern Europe, primarily in Poland, to discuss newer themes and research perspectives on Jewish behavior. Pleading for social historical analyses and a focus on everyday life in particular, Löw underlines, much as Meyer does, the broad diversity of Jewish behavior within Nazi ghettos, which included impressive cultural activities alongside various forms of resistance, but which also generated notable conflicts within these forcefully created communities. In his essay “Handeln und Erfahren: Bewältigungsstrategien im Kontext der jüdischen Geschichte,” Dan Michman explains that Jewish strategies in the face of Nazi persecution cannot be sufficiently understood when conceived of as immediate reactions. Arguing that the broad diversity of Jewish behavior under Nazi rule observable across the continent may be better grasped with reference to previous Jewish experiences and organizational forms, he suggests taking a longer-term view of them.

In “Neue Quellen, neue Fragen? Eine Zwischenbilanz des Editionsprojekts ‘Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden,’” in which she offers an overview of the largest ongoing German project on the Holocaust, Susanne Heim specifies what the *Editionsprojekt “Judenverfolgung 1933–1945”* has already yielded. Heim begins by emphasizing that, repeated claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the Holocaust has not been thoroughly researched in its pan-European dimensions yet and the *Editionsprojekt* aims to bring historians back from their avid focus on questions of memory and remembrance to more ‘directly historical’ explorations. More concretely, Heim explains that the project has made advances in three specific ways: it has amassed new materials on Jewish perspectives, it has gathered source materials on the rather under-researched cases of Southeastern Europe and Hungary, and, more generally, it has nurtured broad international comparisons (p.337).

In his essay entitled “Holocaust als angewandter Antisemitismus? Potenzial und Grenzen eines Erklärungsfaktors,” Jürgen Matthäus probes the seemingly self-evident but actually rather questionable explanatory value of anti-Semitism. Matthäus offers the intriguing assessment that “the newest research shows that anti-Semitism as an abstract explanatory concept is of limited use. At the same time, we are only at the beginning in terms of probing the actual relevance of anti-Semitism to the Holocaust.” (p.118) Explaining that structures of prejudice

have to be contextualized in a nuanced manner in order to grasp how they actually functioned in the context of unleashed violence, Matthäus ultimately pleads for empirical analyses of the relationship between images of an alleged enemy and practices of persecution. Last but not least, in her “Sonderweg, Kolonialismus, Genozide: Der Holocaust in Spannungsfeld von Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten der deutschen Geschichte,” Sybille Steinbacher examines the strengths and weaknesses of placing emphasis on the continuities of German history. She pleads for an approach that would incorporate longer-term historical connections, such as the one to colonialism, while placing the novel racist radicalism of the National Socialist regime at the center of attention and focusing on the utopian dimension of its rule (p.95).

In sum, *Der Holocaust. Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung* not only offers numerous fascinating insights into current trends of Holocaust historiography but also provides overall assessments of several of its major areas. However, as a whole, the volume proves more convincing as an analysis of such trends and a critique of some of their shortcomings than as a set of proposals for new avenues of research. Instead of pointing to still uncharted territories, numerous contributors plead instead for more integrated perspectives, whether in the study of Nazi violence in the case of Pohl, the study of occupations in the case of Tönsmeier, or the plea for structurally and institutionally grounded research on perpetrators in the case of Bajohr. This in turn suggests that, as a consequence of recent decades of intense research, specialized knowledge on individual aspects of the Holocaust has reached a certain depth that now calls for new synthetic visions. Works by the likes of David Cesarani, Christian Gerlach, and Timothy Snyder, which promise to articulate precisely such visions, are in fact already near completion. *Der Holocaust. Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung* also makes clear that the internationalization of scholarship on the Holocaust may have proceeded at an impressive rate, but it has not yet brought a reasonable balance to our knowledge of various European regions. Ultimately, in this agenda-setting volume of the *Zentrum für Holocaust-Studien am Institut für Zeitgeschichte München*, Nazi Germany and the occupied Eastern European theaters of war appear as the central objects of Holocaust historiography. Thus detailed explorations of the varied interactions between Germany and other, non-occupied states, which represent another subject of great relevance to histories of the Holocaust, also remain to be conducted as part of future studies.