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Essays in the History of Ideas

Dan Stone



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The Holocaust, Fascism and Memory

Essays in the History of Ideas

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For Libby, Greta and Clem

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Introduction: History and Its Discontents

This book deals with some of the key problems of modern and contemporary history: intellectuals' responses to fascism; how to write the history of the Holocaust; and the relationship between history and memory, especially with respect to major, traumatic events such as genocide, revolution and other forms of large-scale social change. It offers a synthesis of discrete but related themes which together chart the rise of certain key ways of negotiating the recent past. The historiographical chapters in Part I offer ways into thinking about the origins and nature of the Holocaust; the essays on fascism and anti-fascism in Part II are mostly focused on individual thinkers, but in ways which raise questions about the ideas, fantasies and social trends which provided the settings and frameworks for Europe's great mid-twentieth century catastrophe; and the final section on memory probes the reasons why so much contemporary history has been addressed through the concept of 'memory' and why this notion remains so hotly contested in today's debates over the meanings of the past.

In this Introduction, I will not systematically describe each chapter in sequence but will address them thematically. For despite their different focuses, the chapters overlap considerably and provide different points of access to the big issues of twentieth-century history mentioned in the previous paragraph. The question of history and memory, for example, is tackled in several chapters. My argument is that whilst they belong inseparably together, history and memory are not the same, and they serve different purposes: analysis and elucidation in the case of the former, identity-construction and commemoration in the case of the latter. Their tasks overlap when historical narratives offer a variety of understandings that are as empathetic as they are dispassionate. Where the Weberian tradition of *Verstehen* meets the future-oriented commemorative goals of memory, history and memory intertwine.¹ In Chapter 3, I show that one reason for the success of Saul Friedländer's two-volume *Nazi Germany and the Jews* is that it combines historical analysis as it is traditionally conceived – especially with respect to source critique – with a commemorative impulse that lends

the text a melancholy air, allowing it to be perceived as a major work of scholarly history and a gift of memorialisation. Friedländer historicises the Holocaust without obliterating it from the present.

Taken together, these chapters provide resources for thinking about several of the key events of twentieth-century European history. 'History' is itself a contested concept, and much of this book's concern is with the ways in which history as a form of scholarly writing (*historia rerum gestorum*) and history as a sequence of events (*res gestae*) collide in different understandings of the world. In the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, history can be understood as a philosophy of struggle illuminating the belief that human affairs are driven by the conflict between 'Aryan' and 'non-Aryan' or, in a more social Darwinist register, between the strong and the weak.² This is a version of the speculative philosophy of history, where the events of the past – and therefore of the present and future – are believed to be inherently directional, that is, history is seen not as a random sequence of events but as a path along which a necessary and predictable process unfolds. In this understanding of the past, the job of the historian, philosopher or theologian is to discover and bring to light the meaning that is already present in the sequence of past events.

History can also be perceived as a challenge for those who grapple now with the Holocaust, which is widely felt – in many of the scholarly works on the problem of representing the Holocaust – to call into question many basic tenets of history writing, such as narrative, causal explanation or even the use of sources. This is a problem of historical theory, which asks how we give meaning to the events of the past, rather than a question of unveiling the supposedly inherent meaning or direction of historical change. In other words, it is a question of how we go about historicising events such as the Holocaust which continue to have an impact on everyday life.³

As a result of these challenges in representing the past, history is also often said to be in need of the complement of memory, given the 'age of testimony' in which we now live. This is a metahistorical problem because the problem of understanding the past is a quasi-philosophical question of the role played by history in the present and of whether (and how) meaning should be generated by history or memory. Memory speaks ostensibly about the past but looks towards the future.⁴

In each case, history in its different guises – as the past itself, the passage of time or the way in which we write about the past – has its discontents, whether that means those who want to overcome historicity, freezing time in an eternal present (or in a golden age, which amounts to the same thing) or those who seek new ways to represent the past in the light of events which question the validity of established methodologies. This book brings together a wide range of themes and topics, which add up to a searching reinterpretation of modern history, both the past itself and the ways in which it is written. In this Introduction, I will bring out explicitly what those themes and topics are and will develop the argument that in order

to find meaningful ways into twentieth-century history through the history of ideas, one has to do more than situate ideas in context. This is the starting point, and here I agree with Tony Judt that although textual, intellectual, cultural or economic contexts are all important, the political context in which texts are written is the most compelling way to situate them.⁵ But beyond that process of historicising ideas in their political and other contexts, one also has to reflect simultaneously on the process of writing history. So the chapters in this book attempt to problematise the writing of history at the same time as they seek to explain or to extract meaning from the past.

This double approach – writing history and thinking about the process of writing history simultaneously – can itself be historicised: it is a late twentieth/early twenty-first century phenomenon, with its emphasis on the need for historians to be ‘self-reflexive’, on the significance of ‘memory’ for grappling with the past, on the newfound interest in the historian’s text as a historicisable object and on openness to methodological experimentation. Methodological pluralism here goes hand in hand with historical theory, or, less grandly, one can simply say that there are many ways to write about the past; in order to choose between them, the historian has also to think about the ways in which he mediates the past and the present, and readers (whether other scholars or laypeople) have to find the historian’s arguments not only empirically sound but also capable of providing meaning in the present.⁶ Historicism and presentism are bound unavoidably together.

*

How then are the events with which this book deals and their narration connected? First of all, the events and the narration thereof are only theoretically separable; we can conceive of ‘the events’ of the past just as we can discuss how they should be written about, but in practice the two go hand in hand. The realm of popular history might be at one end of a spectrum where history is written as if the text were a window on the past, and where the narrator is as unobtrusive as possible, giving the impression that the past is accessible in the present and that no human agency or creative act is necessary to retrieve it. Ironically (although often quite rightly), this sort of history is admired precisely for the power of the narrative, and its historians are lauded for being expert craftsmen exactly because they write themselves out of the text. At the other end of the spectrum lie metahistorical works which narrate (or analyse) the past by theorising about how it is or was possible to write about it, or which may take the shape of philosophical discussions of historical representation which do not attempt to narrate the past at all.

Most of the chapters in this book fall somewhere in between these two positions and share a concern with historiographical or metahistorical issues: that is, they show that the narration of the past is shaped by how historians

write about it, and thus argue that it is important for students of the past to be able to analyse historians' strategies, for otherwise they fall prey to a realist fallacy. The latter can be a source of compelling narrative but does not necessarily indicate to readers that there are alternative ways of understanding how and why things happened in the past or, importantly, that things could have turned out differently. The more strictly 'historical' chapters, mostly those in Part II, are studies in the history of ideas which are focused more on reconstructing past ideas than on considering the metahistorical question of how to do so. But the two concerns are nevertheless still inseparable. Indeed, if this book as a whole is subtitled *Essays in the History of Ideas*, it is because historiography and methodological questions can – and should – themselves be historicised, and the surest way of doing so is to consider them as competing ideas, transmitted and debated in the manner of, say, the history of political thought or of one of the other disciplines which form the mainstay of the history of ideas.

Beyond this connection of the past and its narration, this book also brings together themes which share a natural affinity but which tend not to be studied in conjunction with one another. Most obviously, and highly surprisingly, fascism and the Holocaust are rarely considered together by historians. On the one hand, this separation is a result of the fact that Nazism is considered too different from fascism (especially the paradigmatic Italian Fascism) for the murder of the Jews to seem a defining feature of fascism. Likewise, and connected to the issue of genocide, many historians argue that the Nazi state's obsession with race constitutes a major difference from Italy. On the other hand, perhaps this divorce is a result of the fall into desuetude of the concept of 'fascism' as it was used in the 1960s, that is, as an explanatory framework which regarded fascism as a cynical tool of big business. Or it could be one aspect of the fallout of the 'uniqueness' argument of the 1980s and 1990s, which carefully policed any attempt to connect the Holocaust with either other cases of genocide or European traditions of violence in Europe or in Europe's overseas colonies. This is a subject that still raises hackles, albeit with the sentiments of the West German *Historikerstreit* of the mid-1980s reversed: now the liberal position advocates contextualising the Holocaust whereas defending Holocaust uniqueness or unprecedentedness has become an increasingly conservative position.⁷ Whatever the case, two discrete bodies of scholarly literature now exist: that on fascism tending more towards social scientific typologising and the search for a generic definition, which thereby tends also to overlook the particularities of the Holocaust, and that on the Holocaust which tends to be driven more by carefully delimited empirical historical analyses of Nazi decision-making or of Jewish responses.

On the question of the connections between fascism and Nazism, Tony Judt's work is worth considering, as his ideas on this subject illustrate the two different directions that historians have favoured. On the one hand,

Judt argues that Nazism was different from other varieties of fascism in that it spoke uniquely to Germans, whereas other fascisms – for example, Italian or Romanian – ‘operated in a recognisable framework of nationalist *ressentiment* or geographical injustice that was not only intelligible, but which had and still has some broader applicability if we wish to make sense of the world around us’.⁸ In contrast to this notion of the singularity of Nazism, Judt later goes on to say, quite rightly, that Nazism had ‘a certain European appeal’. The Nazi idea of Europe, Judt suggests, was one which meant a ‘post-democratic, strong Europe, dominated by Germany, but in which other countries, Western countries, would benefit as well’.⁹ As he says, this vision appealed to many intellectuals in the West. This is a claim which is borne out by my studies in Part II, which also speak against Judt’s first assertion, suggesting instead that Nazism was, as Federico Finchelstein puts it, not the ‘ideal type of fascism’ but fascism’s ‘most radical possibility’.¹⁰ If this is correct, then the links between fascism and the Holocaust are perhaps not as tenuous as many scholars of both subjects think.

Finchelstein, in fact, is one of the very few scholars who have attempted to bring together the literature on fascism with that on the Holocaust and to show that the two need not be mutually exclusive. He has pioneered the study of fascism as a transnational phenomenon, showing how despite seeming to be an oxymoron – an ultra-nationalist, exclusivist ideology does not seem the most promising place to look for cross-border cooperation – the concept of ‘transnational fascism’ actually reveals a good deal about the aspirations and connections of fascists in the interwar period.¹¹ With respect to the Holocaust, Finchelstein shows that scholars’ tendency to treat it in isolation from fascism means that they ‘often overlooked the actual ideological connections between the global intellectual history of fascism and the historical conditions for the Holocaust’.¹² These links include the following: the fact that fascists defined themselves and their community through a radical exclusion of ‘the enemy’ – as recent literature on the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* shows, one cannot have the cosy, safe Aryan community without the eradication of those, that is, the Jews and other so-called pollutants, who would sully it¹³; the structural violence that was fundamental to fascist ideology and action, and which reached its most radical conclusions in the death camps; and, importantly, the fact that actors at the time understood Nazism to be ‘German fascism’ and, thus, that its crimes were, by extension, prefigured in the very essence of fascism *per se*.

This ‘radical possibility’ of Nazism is also traceable in reverse, that is to say, in the history of anti-fascism. Quite large sections of the European population were amenable to fascism for various reasons. The threat, or supposed threat, posed by communism, the strength of irredentist feeling after the post-World War I settlements and, most of all, the inability of the existing regimes, especially in the newly created ‘successor states’ of central and eastern Europe, to respond imaginatively to the economic crisis of 1929

onwards were all grist for the fascist mill. Above all, the feeling – which is hard to imagine now – that the liberal democracies (in any case a minority of states in Europe by the mid-1930s) were exhausted and would soon be overtaken and replaced by more youthful and dynamic fascist regimes was very widespread, even (or especially) among democracy's defenders. The latter feared that they were unable to mobilise the same sort of passionate defence of their favoured system that the fascists were able to do for theirs.

Yet only the most radical of fellow travellers threw in their lot with the Nazis. In Britain this is especially clear: where Italian Fascism and Spanish Francoism both attracted considerable sympathy in the pages of the right-wing press (and sometimes in certain sections of the left), fewer were prepared to follow Hitler in a consistent fashion. As Hitlerism itself grew more radical, so did the number of British apologists for it grow smaller. Between 1933 and 1938, one could find numerous more or less positive assessments of the 'achievements' of the Third Reich, for example, its cleanliness, order and apparent unanimity. But after Munich, and certainly after Prague, only the most hard-line sympathisers remained unbending, and as soon as war was declared, only a handful of traitors actually stuck out their necks to the extent that they continued to support Hitler in opposition to British war aims – and thus left their necks susceptible to the hangman's noose.¹⁴

What this potted history means is that the history of anti-fascism confirms Finchelstein's argument about fascism: if Nazism was fascism's most radical possibility, then anti-fascism reached its apogee in the face of the growing challenge from Nazism. Where during the period of Italian Fascist dominance, anti-fascism had been confined (for the most part – there are of course important exceptions) to sections of the left, as the threat to European peace grew more acute under Hitler's influence, so did anti-fascism become a more likely possibility for many strata within European society, including the 'apolitical'. At the same time as many individuals and groups across Europe fell prey to the Hitlerite ideology of a 'united Europe', so an equal number realised that they had to try to resist it. Anti-fascism also confirms the links between fascism and the Holocaust. Especially in the popular literature that was produced in the United Kingdom and the United States before and during World War II, the link between fascism and the persecution of Jews was often made, in ways which might seem surprising today, when the weight of Holocaust historiography means that it is easy to overlook the first scholarly analyses which were produced simultaneously with the events they described. Nazism radicalised both fascism and anti-fascism.

*

The title of this Introduction, 'History and Its Discontents', is meant to work in several different registers. The first we have just seen – that is, discontent with certain trends in historiography, in particular the isolation of the

scholarship on fascism and the Holocaust from each other, which is a concern throughout this book but especially in Part I, which deals with the frameworks of the particular body of historiography concerned with the Holocaust. Examples of the sorts of concerns currently being expressed by Holocaust scholars include the following: a dissatisfaction with the focus on the Holocaust, not necessarily at the expense of other genocides – although some scholars do think this is an issue – but at the expense of understanding what genocide really is, and why it is not synonymous with mass killing or the attempt to kill every member of a group (Chapter 2); a worry that remaining at the level of empirical work might come at the expense of getting to grips with the anthropological revolution of Nazism (Chapter 4); and discontent with the reifying gaze of positivist historiography and the need to find a way of historicising the past without objectifying it (Chapter 3). In each case, I argue for the usefulness of taking such concerns seriously, whilst always carefully trying to circumscribe their reach.

For these are discontents of a limited sort. They do not suggest that there are fundamental problems with the historiography of the Holocaust, but only that such a massive body of sophisticated – often brilliant – historical scholarship has room for further innovation and theoretical debate.¹⁵ Indeed, one could argue that it is precisely where one finds large, complex bodies of scholarship that the best opportunities for future innovation will arise rather than, as one might intuitively expect, in fields that are under-researched.¹⁶ There is no question of a fundamental rejection of the status quo, in the manner of some of the individuals who form the subjects of Part II of this book. There is no comparison, for example, between current forms of discontent at historiographical practice on the one hand and the urgent rejection of the Whiggish view of history, which prevented otherwise thinking people from recognising the threat posed by fascism in the interwar years, on the other hand (see Chapter 5). With one proviso: the comparison works in that it reveals how risky but necessary it is, today just as in the 1930s and 1940s, to try to go beyond empirical reconstruction and ask questions of the unconscious or of the ‘deep essence’ of phenomena such as Nazism. As Chapter 3 shows, the necessity of thinking theoretically about issues such as the meaning of historicisation is borne out when such apparently arcane issues unexpectedly acquire importance in refuting logically and morally dubious ideas. In this instance, Martin Broszat’s insistence that the traumatic (and, as he hinted, vengeful) memory of the Jewish victims was incompatible with rigorous historical analysis has been explored by Friedländer’s practical reconciliation of historicisation and memory.

That said, it remains worth asking whether we have really overcome what Dan Diner calls the ‘crisis of historiography’ engendered by the Holocaust or just chosen not to think about it any more.¹⁷ The explosion of archival research on the Holocaust has been immensely valuable, but this focus has meant that many of the issues concerning what it all means and how history

constructs and narrates the Holocaust which seemed so pressing in the 1990s have not been resolved but simply left unaddressed.¹⁸ If there is a sense of urgency in Holocaust historiography, it concerns the extent to which the gulf between popular commemorations and perceptions of the Holocaust and the detailed historical knowledge appears to widen even in the face of efforts to bridge them (for example, through Holocaust education). The ‘crisis’ diagnosed by Diner concerned the internal methods of history itself in the face of Nazi genocide. That question of historical representation is perhaps less pressing today as a matter internal to the discipline; as opposed to thinking innovatively about methodology, few historians reject the historical attempt to grapple with the Holocaust *per se*. Instead, there is growing concern at the contrast between the bowdlerisation of the Holocaust in the public sphere and its scholarly representation. The former – that is, the Holocaust in the public sphere – is where concerns over the ‘limits of representation’ now primarily reside. And, as Chapter 12 shows, this is especially true in current political debates concerning the idea of ‘double genocide’ in Eastern Europe or the attempt to make Holocaust commemoration and education a central pillar of the European Union’s (EU) ‘memory project’.

This mention of popular history is a reminder that this book’s remit goes well beyond Holocaust historiography to take in some other major themes of recent historical research, in particular ‘memory studies’. The topic of ‘memory’, as already noted above, has been one of the most productive of research fields for the last 20 years. The field has developed, in history at any rate, from a focus on representations of memory at *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) such as memorials to stress instead the *social* dimension of memory. By this is meant the fact that competition over memory – that is, over whose image of the past prevails in public discourse – is irreducibly about power. Criticisms of memory studies to the effect that it has stripped social history of its political charge and has remained interested only in aesthetics or representation have not always been wrong, but memory studies need not neglect the social and the realities of struggles for power. As the chapters in Part III indicate, the political context in which contests over control of memory take place is indeed the key one.

There are, of course, other sources of discontent with the ‘memory discourse’ of recent years. Perhaps the most compelling, from a historian’s point of view, is the claim that the fascination with memory has gone too far, sometimes going beyond the methodologically unproblematic fact that memory can be the subject of historical study (how actors in the past created, contested and eliminated ‘collective memory’) and instead making ‘memory’ synonymous with ‘history’ or even making ‘memory’ the master concept over and above ‘history’. History remains necessary, even when we are confronted with events which are ‘archive breakers’, that is to say, events which fundamentally challenge our ability to order them, cognise their occurrence or turn them into objects of research.¹⁹

By the same token, it is easy to find discontent with the 'optimistic' version of memory studies, according to which memory studies deals with reconciliation, overcoming the past and psychic closure. Rather than promoting such desirable outcomes, could it not be that memory is more likely to fuel the same hatred, division and violence, which brought about the disasters that are now being 'remembered' in the first place? Perhaps collective memory – especially the sort that satisfies a public need for easily digested, uncritical narratives about the in-group – risks perpetuating those same emotions, as well as others, such as resentment, humiliation and shame?²⁰ Even well-meaning attempts to regulate memory in the public sphere can end by inadvertently revivifying the trends that such regulation is designed to dissipate.²¹ Sometimes forgetting might be the more fruitful act.²² By contrast, history might – just might – find a way of negotiating between different, even competing communities and providing dispassionate, non-partisan accounts of the past. This is an idealised version of what history can achieve, indeed it is one which has largely been dismantled, thanks to memory studies itself, but still, it is one to which we ought to pay more than lip service. Even if memorialisation can in fact, as has been shown empirically, play a valuable role in stabilising societies in transition, it will not always do so, and such memorialisation in any case needs to be underpinned by historical research and an agreed version of the past.²³

These are examples of discontentedness with history understood as the writing of the past, *historia rerum gestarum*. On a different register are those discontents, examined in Part II, who objected to the status quo and, in particular, who did so through advocating what are today considered 'rejected' ideologies. This form of discontent could be seen in the late 1930s and the war years (Chapters 7 and 8) or in the postwar context (Chapter 9). We might call this a sort of 'historical discontent' as opposed to a 'historiographical discontent'. The argument in Part II is not just that these individuals and movements are fascinating footnotes in the history of the twentieth century but that the key events of the twentieth century did not emerge out of nowhere and that, even if one takes a materialistic approach – one for which I have sympathy, for ideas do not exist in a free-floating sphere and the reasons why they either become operational or harmlessly dissipate are not solely related to their intellectual power – events are underpinned by the intentions and actions of thinking people. The point is not only that people make history but that they do so in circumstances which are not of their own making; it is also that 'thinking people' think and do things that are not rational or instrumental, or which, from an 'objective' point of view, run against their own interests. Here ideas, especially ideas of the proto-fascist, fascist or 'neo-fascist' variety, can be of great help in understanding the appeal of movements and ways of thinking that would prove catastrophic not just for their enemies but also for their advocates. Fascist

ideas might not always prove the surest guide to fascism in action, but they do help to explain why people became fascists and what their hopes and fears were about the world in which they lived.

As with the historiography of fascism, this claim is also true in reverse, that is, with respect to anti-fascism. As Chapters 5 and 6 show, the ideas that drove anti-fascism were just as important to its success, intellectually and institutionally, as its ability to organise and mobilise campaigners. The war of ideas over fascism was a key part of the broader war, both before 1939 and from 1939 to 1945. If individuals such as Kolnai or Emily Lorimer can be labelled as discontents, the label is less about the way in which they perceived society to be moving and more because of their frustration at what they felt to be the complacency of those around them. In the face of the fascist threat, such equanimity was, they believed, tantamount to unwitting collaboration. The anti-fascists' discontent grew out of a sense that all that the liberal democracies held dear was being betrayed by those who subscribed to their values, precisely because they were unable to appreciate the severity of the threat facing them.

Many of the key events of the twentieth century, then, have emerged out of contexts which were created by, and which in turn have further given rise to, discontents with history. This is true whether one thinks of history as being synonymous with past events or of history as the account of those events. For example, fascists objected to the ways in which societies and cultures had, according to them, become more effete and backward over time and wanted to 'recreate' martial, organically rooted, future-oriented, racially unified societies – this illustrates how some were discontented with history as events. And especially when it comes to narrating or explaining the terrible events of the twentieth century wrought by fascism, history as the narration of events has bred many discontents, who find not just that the discipline lacks the tools necessary to take account of such dreadful occurrences, but, in some cases, even that the aspirations of history – to totality, to objectivity, to historicisation – are themselves somehow fascist in tenor. My aim in this book is to show that on both grounds, the discontents are only partially justified.

Fascists in the first half of the twentieth century were often right to diagnose problems with their societies; communists and many others did so too. But where fascists claimed to be dealing in eternal verities – of nation or race – we can see now that their ideologies emerged out of specific historical conjunctures: the collapse of the European empires, World War I, colonial violence, the rise of mass society and, above all, the Great Depression. Whether French leftists radicalised by the Great War or Italian syndicalists joining together with nationalists to rebel against the liberal mainstream, the supporters of these traditions which were already emerging before 1914 received a tremendous shot in the arm by the war and subsequent events, all of which made attacks on bourgeois democracy not only fashionable but

apparently credible.²⁴ In certain circumstances, notably the Romania of the 1930s, the fascist intelligentsia typified by Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran represented mainstream opinion. Furthermore, as well as ritual and violence, one finds within the various strands of thought, which made up the complex mix of fascism, 'serious debate over the meaning of corporativism, serious rethinking of the Hegelian ethical state for a mass age, serious discussion of the scope for new forms of education, serious assessment of the legacy of Giuseppe Mazzini in light of the outcome of Marxism'.²⁵ It is insufficient to condemn these theorists for abandoning the liberal-democratic tradition, though we might do that too. Rather, a historian's job is to try and understand why at a certain moment in time the rejection of liberal democracy seemed so plausibly attractive and to show why that way of thinking quickly ran its course, destroying itself along with its putative enemies.

In contrast with those whose discontent with history is with the actually existing status quo, those 'historiographical discontents' who fear the consequences of historicisation do so on more sympathetic grounds: that their communal scars will be smoothed over and that their community's suffering will soon go unrecognised or forgotten. But they pick the wrong target. In fact, one could say that given the discontent with history that fascism displays (the impatience with facts is a key component of fascism), the discontent with history-writing and the turn to more emotionally gratifying but uncritical and even selective or partisan 'memory' may be rather closer to fascist ways of thinking than such discontents would like to think. It is ironic indeed that a way of thinking that clearly derives from disgust at the 'achievements' of fascism risks, in its more extreme versions, rejecting facts in a way that uncomfortably replicates fascist propagandising. Memory might provide comforting forms of community cohesion, but it runs the danger of doing so by mythologising the past.

All of which goes to show that history is always changing. That is obviously true of our day-to-day existence, when periods of apparent stability can be shattered in a moment, whether by isolated events – earthquakes, accidents, random killings – or by sudden, major structural collapses, such as financial crises. It still surprises people, however, to learn that the same is true of historiography. There is no last word on any subject because the aim of history is not to provide the fullest account possible, such that there are no more facts left to discover (the impossible dream of objectivity mocked by Borges and Foucault); rather, it is to provide meaningful accounts of the past in the present, that is, substitutes for the past which satisfy those in the present by speaking to their concerns. What those concerns are is, of course, constantly changing and so, therefore, is what counts as a satisfactory account. Thus, there is an intimate connection between discontent with history as a concatenation of events – those who dislike 'the way things are going' – and discontent with history as a narration of those events – those who worry at history's response to the past. This book investigates both and

tries to show that those who fall in the former category of those who dislike the current state of affairs are also likely to fall in the second category of those who dislike the dominant narrative of past events. The same is not true in reverse, however; critical historiography does not entail sociological churlishness. Rather, the aim of critical historiography is, or should be, to inculcate a sense of humility at one's own fleeting moment on this earth and an awareness that, since all things must pass, there is little to be gained from the vanity of certainty.

Part I

Interpreting the Holocaust

1

Beyond the 'Auschwitz Syndrome': Holocaust Historiography after the Cold War

Lev Rozhetsky was a schoolboy when the Romanian army, the Wehrmacht's largest ally, occupied south-western Ukraine. His memoir, recently published in English translation in the important collection *The Unknown Black Book*, 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.¹ Another survivor, the student Sara Gleykh from Mariupol in Ukraine, wrote that 'The neighbours waited like vultures for us to leave the apartment.' The same neighbours then 'quarrelled over things before my eyes, snatching things out of each others' hands and dragging off pillows, pots and pans, quilts'.² 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 neighbours'.³ From Horyngrad-Krypa in Volhynia, where Ukrainians armed with axes, knives and boards spiked with nails murdered 30 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.

Such narratives, apart from adding to the store of horror, from a historian's point of view, also reveal that the dominant historiographical explanations of the Holocaust need to be rethought. Historical 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 worldview that regarded Jews as an inferior 'race', and which came into being in an *ad hoc* or reactive fashion, as changing circumstances

in the war narrowed the Nazi regime's future horizons, necessitating the urgent execution of a programme that might have looked very different had Germany won the war.

More recent, micro-historical studies are beginning to reshape this picture. For some time, historians have put an emphasis on Nazi 'ideology', especially antisemitism, 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.⁴ But newer studies add nuance to this picture, which appears too neat. Replacing 'structure' with 'intention', even if one talks of a 'modified intentionalism',⁵ offers perhaps too coherent an image of the Third Reich and how it functioned.⁶ 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 antisemitic 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 antisemitism. Plunder and economic gain have again come to the fore, although, as we will see, in a different way from the interpretations of the 1960s. And the murder of the Jews, whilst 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.⁷ This insight in turn leads historians 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 various reasons – and broader – the Holocaust is situated in the context of broader Nazi demographic schemes and the context of world history – but without, hopefully, losing a sense of the ideological basis of the whole project that the Third Reich's leaders insisted upon and which gave coherence to the whole process. In what follows, I will pick up these themes and show how since the end of the Cold War, the 'discovery' of Eastern Europe as the heart of the genocidal process is reshaping our understanding of the Holocaust.

In Western Europe, our image of the Holocaust centres on Auschwitz-Birkenau, the infamous death camp that has become an icon of evil. This fame is quite justified: after all, Auschwitz was, as one historian puts it, the 'capital of the Holocaust', where Jews and Romanies from all over Europe were sent to be killed.⁸ With its numerous auxiliary camps spread around the area of Upper Silesia, Auschwitz was also a major centre for slave labour-based industry (which, economically speaking, achieved little, but caused unfathomable misery and pain to many tens of thousands of inmates).⁹ 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 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.¹⁰ If one really wants to look into the heart of darkness, then the relatively unknown Operation Reinhard camps come quickly into view. Along with Chełmno 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 RSHA murdered by Czech partisans in 1942) of Bełżec, Sobibór 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.¹¹ Established by Odilo Globocnik, the SS and Police Leader (SSPF) in Lublin, these were 'pure' death camps, serving no other purpose 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 which 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 a wild atmosphere prevailed, as the wealth that accumulated from the transports attracted prostitutes and bounty-hunters.¹²

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 IKL (*Inspektion der Konzentrationslager*) and WVHA (*Wirtschafts-Verwaltungshauptamt*, or Economic Administrative Main Office), not the 'pure' death camps.¹³ 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 1941–42.¹⁴ 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 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 labour camps (as opposed to death camps), about the almost inexplicable death marches¹⁵ and about motivations for local participation other than the catch-all of antisemitism, such as greed. As Timothy Snyder points out, although Auschwitz is located in Poland, actually very few Polish or Soviet