



Istvan Deak. *Essays on Hitler's Europe*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2001. xviii + 222 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-6630-8.

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## Reviewing the History of Nazi Europe: The Essays of Istvan Deak

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According to Jean Bethke Elshtain, for professional academics to enter into the larger realm of public discourse as “public intellectuals,” they must do so as “generalists rather than as spokesmen for a discipline,” which requires them to recognize that there is “no way to separate intellectual and political issues from larger moral concerns”.[1] Those who have written on the subject of Nazi-occupied Europe and the Holocaust have often found a receptive public for their work on the basis of such a connection. Given the incredible production of books on these related subjects, quite often the format in which historians and others have entered into the public discussion concerning Nazism and the Holocaust has been through reviews of recent literature. Thus review essays in periodicals like the *New Republic* and the *New York Review of Books* have introduced various historians to the broader public, and they have also brought debates amongst Holocaust scholars to the attention of many beyond the academy. One of the most gifted historians to become a “public intellectual” on issues related to the Holocaust and war is Istvan Deak of Columbia University. The recent publication by the University of Nebraska Press of his review essays from these and other publications in the collection *Essays on Hitler's Europe* is thus an opportunity to reassess his contributions, over time, to our broader understanding of the Nazi Holocaust and occupation in Europe.

Deak argues that writing review essays is less an

author's choice than an obligation, by both editor and writer, to often haphazardly react to what is available in the the public realm (p. ix). Inevitably, some reviews are written about books that do not endure in terms of their historical importance, while other reviews remain fresh because of the quality and significance of the works they assess. Yet review essays, as they are written in periodicals such as the *New York Review of Books*, are also a form of interpretation and argument, in which Deak is quite skilled, providing us with a variety of insights on the issues dealt with in his own research and writing, namely Nazism, fascism and collaboration. This collection of eighteen pieces is organized into five parts, entitled “Germans,” “Jews Among Aryans,” “Victims,” “The Holocaust in Other Lands” and “Onlookers.” Given the variety of topics considered here and Deak's talent for this form of writing, one of the criticisms that must be made of this collection concerns the decision to break up or severely edit several review articles from their original format. For example, reading parts of Deak's piece “Memories of Hell” (first published in June, 1997) in two segments here (“Memories of Hell,” pp. 94-99 and “Poles and Jews,” pp. 163-165) left this reviewer disappointed. That dissatisfaction was reinforced by contrasting the smaller, broken-up essays with those presented here in full that are simply of a better quality. These contributions represent the best of the review essay as solid historical writing grounded in superior analysis and insight.

Two of the most impressive pieces presented examine the recent contributions of diarists to our understanding of the Holocaust. Victor Klemperer's *I Will Bear Witness*:

*A Diary of the Nazi Years, 1942-1945* and Avraham Tory's *Surviving the Holocaust: The Kovno Ghetto Diary* are respectively called an analysis of "immense value" (p. 52) and "a historical document of major importance" (p. 114). While diaries and memoirs have long been the source of material for Holocaust researchers, Deak underlines the necessity of reading such work not only for its description of daily life under Nazism, but also in light of the character of the authors and their ability to portray the details of daily life and routine in the midst of a violent historical setting.

Deak is forthright in his opinion that Klemperer was a most unlikable person, intending from the start to publish his diaries, yet unable, because of his personality, to refrain from being harsh to all around him: Jews (he compared Theodor Herzl to Hitler), Nazis, and even non-Jews who assisted him (pp. 53-54). Yet precisely because Klemperer was so temperamental and "indifferent to the outcome of his outpourings," his diary serves as a remarkable source (p. 54). Klemperer's contention that he was never the victim of anti-Semitic outbursts from Germans, but rather experienced an expansion of sympathy from them after 1942, is an historical assessment of great value, made more significant for the reader who understands Klemperer himself as "cynical, selfish and an opportunist" (p. 63). The importance of Tory's contribution, Deak argues, comes in its depiction of daily life in the midst of the Shoah in Lithuania and the Kovno ghetto. Outlining in great detail the lengthy history of Lithuanian Jews, Deak describes the devastation caused by the Einsatzgruppen campaigns and deportation on the population, which had a survival rate of 17 percent, among the lowest of all Jewish communities across Europe (p. 124). Given this background, Tory's diary is all the more remarkable for its ability to present a historical setting in a very different light, as a picture of daily life and work. Between the initial killings and the ghetto's liquidation, a sense of peace and order emerged within the community, constructed in large part by the Jewish Council of the ghetto and by many of the civilian German authorities based there (p. 124). There did exist, in the daily life of the landscape of genocide, the possibility of "ordinary days," improved conditions, even culture and cooperation. Yet Tory's book also demonstrates the cost that resulted from what was an exaggerated sense of normality, for any peace that emerged was never meant to be lasting. Even a well-managed ghetto could not survive the violence of the SS and Lithuanian collaborators, and Deak concludes that in this case the vibrant color of the multicultural communities like Kovno was turned gray

(p. 128).

The Nazi New Order was diverse in form and content, and Deak reminds us of that in two essays concerning his native Hungary and the collaborationist regime of Admiral Miklos Horthy. In his review of Thomas Sakmyster's *Hungary's Admiral on Horseback*, Deak agrees with Sakmyster's argument that Horthy, like many collaborationists, combined elements of nineteenth-century conservatism with twentieth-century radicalism in his ever-changing regime (p. 149). The result was that while the regime put in place many anti-Semitic policies that drew upon local traditions, 95 percent of Hungarian Jews still remained alive inside Hungary as late as March 1944. Nazi and local fascist pressure on Horthy—combined with his regime's contradictory policy of imposing anti-Semitic legislation while refusing to turn over all Jews to the Germans—and tentative Hungarian approaches to the Western Allies, led to the Nazi invasion of Hungary and Horthy's removal from office in March, 1944. Deak underlines the importance of Sakmyster's conclusion in his own, arguing that the Horthy regime embodied, in many respects, the "best" of collaboration in the Nazi New Order. Independence was hopeless, but totalitarianism was not necessary; Hungary, therefore, remained for longer than most, "an island ... where a semblance of the rule of law and a pluralistic society had been preserved in a sea of barbarism" (p. 158). The result of Sakmyster's study, for Deak, is a nuanced conclusion that while the regime certainly did not actively save Jews, as some Hungarians later argued, it also was not in a position to really oppose Nazi Germany concerning anti-Jewish policy and deportation to the death camps.

In a second piece on David Cesarani's edited volume, *Genocide and Rescue: The Holocaust in Hungary 1944*, Deak is quick to argue that such an understanding of "model collaboration" does not mean that collaboration was a viable strategy in Hitler's Europe. Hungarian collaboration as a political and economic model was full of contradictions in terms of the relationship between Hungary and its Jews. Collaboration ultimately did not save Jews, for, as Deak asserts, the collaborationist impulse in Hungary revealed some truths about society, namely that Hungarians were generally without any sense of compassion toward Jews (p. 162). The Hungarian Army was generally pro-Nazi, so there was no chance of armed resistance to Germany when the invasion came in March, 1944. The work of countless civilians, the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg and other neutral diplomats along with numerous monks, nuns and Church officials saved thousands, but none of this was combined with public

statements of condemnation against the Nazis on the part of various official institutions or the Jewish community. Indeed, Deak concludes, the public expressed the absence of compassion after the deportations, by committing “no greater crime than to grab the flats and silver left behind by the departed Jews” (p. 162). At the same time, the model of collaboration described by Sakmyster and others did delay the deportation of Hungarian Jews to the death camps of Poland. Although collaboration demonstrated a latent and not-so-latent anti-Semitism within Hungary, its end resulted in the full-scale destruction of Hungarian Jews. Deak quotes Yehuda Bauer’s “courageous and honest words” from the Cesarani volume, that the attempt by the last Hungarian government in early 1944 to get out of the war, which ultimately resulted in the German occupation, symbolized a brutal irony. Collaboration had a limited effect in saving Jews, but when it was deemed no longer in the Hungarian interest, and peace feelers to the Allies were made, the Nazis invaded. Collaboration was replaced by an occupation that destroyed the country’s Jews (p. 160).

Amongst the complete review essays presented here, others also deserve praise. Deak’s essay on the controversy surrounding Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* appears to Deak, in retrospect, somewhat less significant than it once did (p. 100).[2] But for those of us who teach Holocaust courses and often face students eager to agree with the Goldhagen thesis, it offers a strong criticism, grounded in an understanding of what historians are supposed to do with the evidence they find—which should also be at the heart of any course on the Holocaust (p. 110). His final piece, a review of Richard Breitman’s *What the Nazis Planned, What the British*

*and Americans Knew*, concludes on a theme consistent throughout the collection, namely that for the Allies, collaborationist governments, groups and individuals, little could be done to stop the Nazi genocide, for “the killings would have gone on in any case.” Having said that, however, Deak also emphasizes that the reactions of the European public, churches, Allied and European governments and others represented a “moral eclipse” that “completed the tragedy” (p. 193). The moral imperative, although difficult to find in Hitler’s Europe, is never far from the analytical judgments Deak makes.

The best essays in this collection emphasize the value of the review essay to the art of historical writing. Moreover, since these pieces come primarily from the pages of the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Republic*, they also emphasize the importance, especially in Holocaust history, of bringing the debates, insights, and standards of the profession into the broader realm of public discourse. Finally, Deak’s writing always seeks to emphasize, understand and appreciate the complexity of judging sources, constructing definitions and making rigorous analytical conclusions without losing focus on the need for historians to find a moral center when contemplating the history of Nazi Europe. As such, these pieces represent a model for all of us, inside and outside of the academy, to use in our own assessment of the history of the Holocaust and the Second World War in Europe.

#### Notes

[1]. Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Why Public Intellectuals?” *The Wilson Quarterly* (Autumn 2001), p. 44.

[2]. Reprinted from *Central European History* 30:2 (1997).

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