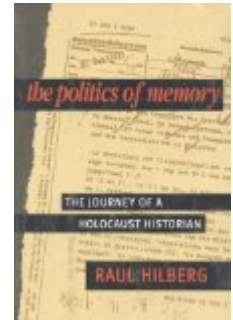


**Raul Hilberg.** *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian.* Chicago, Ill.: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1996. 208 pp. \$22.50, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56663-116-7.



**Reviewed by** David A. Meier

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*The Politics of Memory* is Raul Hilberg's autobiographical account of his life and his scholarship. First published in 1961, Hilberg's *The Destruction of European Jewry* has remained the standard from which to judge all subsequent histories of the Holocaust. Subsequently, Hilberg edited *Documents of Destruction: Germany and Jewry, 1933-1945* (1971), co-edited *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom* (1979), and published *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders* (1992). Hilberg's position as the world's preeminent Holocaust scholar did not, however, come without its costs. Hilberg was born in Vienna, where his family found its limited niche in Austrian society. Hilberg's recollection of life in the Austro-Hungarian capital included a rebellious resentment of his forced attendance at the local synagogue. Hilberg's vision of religion had been strongly influenced by his father's idol, Baruch Spinoza. As Hilberg wrote, "The fact is that I have had no God" (p. 36). Hilberg's own interests cast doubt over the reality of that assertion. For example, Hilberg was "enraptured" by the liturgy of the Russian Orthodox Church, "ensnared" by "Beniamino Gigli in the Verdi *Requiem* ... Rossini's

*Stabat Mater* ... and Mozart's 'Italianate' *Laudamus Dominum*." Hilberg's most prized personal possession, however, was his atlas (p. 37). The Nazi occupation of Austria in 1938 brought this phase of Hilberg's life to a close. Integration and military service in the First World War did not, however, protect Hilberg's immediate and extended family from Nazi persecution and humiliation. Hilberg himself fled Germany with his mother in 1939, and other family members escaped annihilation by emigrating (via Cuba) to the United States in 1940.

A student at New York's Abraham Lincoln High School, Hilberg displayed little respect for the field of history. When he became a student at Brooklyn College, Hilberg's first interest was chemistry. Upon reaching draftable age, Hilberg did his service in the United States Army. As the war drew to a conclusion, Hilberg's unit stopped in Munich. The first serious glimmer of Hilberg's future calling, Hilberg recalled finding "sixty wooden cases ... Hitler's private library." When Hilberg returned to Brooklyn College after the war, history and political science became his new

intellectual home. Under the guidance of Hans Rosenberg (an expert on the Prussian bureaucracy), Hilberg's interest in public administration and its role in the Nazi dictatorship grew (pp. 57-58).

A graduate student in the Department of Public Law and Government at Columbia University, Hilberg took a keen interest in a visiting professor, Franz Neumann, the author of *Behemoth*. Modeling his work after Neumann's, Hilberg divided Germany into four groups, namely, the civil service, the army, industry, and the party, "each operating under a leadership principle, and each with legislative, administrative, and judicial powers of its own." A review of various secondary sources moved Hilberg to two basic assumptions: First, "the destruction of the Jews was not centralized." Second, "Jews were destroyed in a progression of steps and that everywhere the sequence was the same." With the assistance of Eric Marder, a close friend of Hilberg, Hilberg defined a three-step process as beginning with defining the "concept of the 'Jew'" and physical isolation. Second, Jews were removed from the economy through dismissals and "special taxes." Third and finally, ghettoization and forced labor set the stage for their eventual annihilation. With a working thesis in hand, Hilberg consulted the documents and recent research (pp. 63-65).

Aware of the works of Leon Poliakov and Gerald Reitlinger, Hilberg drew upon the still largely untapped resources of the Nuremberg trial records and, later, on the massive collection of materials housed at Alexandria, Virginia. Working with the War Documentation Project, Hilberg assisted in the cataloguing of some 28,000 linear feet of Nazi documentation. Through exposure to these materials, Hilberg pieced together the Nazis' incremental process of excluding Jews from European life. Hilberg, by his own admission, initially overlooked one key piece of apparent Nazi incrementalism, namely, Hermann Goering's order of July 31, 1941, to Reinhardt Heydrich charging

"Heydrich with organizing the Final Solution of the Jewish Question in Europe" (p. 78). Further complementing these resources, Hilberg also surveyed the testimony given during the trial of Adolf Eichmann. The documentation thus fleshed out Hilberg's initial assumptions about the Nazi killing process.

Hilberg's academic career then hit a few bumps. His dissertation advisor, Franz Neumann, died in a car accident. After getting his program back on track, Hilberg searched for a teaching position. Hilberg faced three problems. First, war veterans had flooded the market. "A second problem was discrimination against Jews, particularly in private colleges." The topic of his dissertation became Hilberg's third problem. After his first job at Hunter College and a second in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, Hilberg found himself at the University of Vermont (pp. 93-104).

The remainder of Hilberg's work dwells on the publishing of his seminal work, *The Destruction of European Jewry*, and the resonance it created in the academic community. Although well received by Columbia University, Hilberg's manuscript was incomplete when first reviewed. Its increased length drove up publication costs. The manuscript moved from one publisher to another. Hilberg was forced to seek financial assistance in a variety of forms. In the end, Hilberg's manuscript moved into the hands of the University of Chicago Press.

If publication meant the end of one battle, it also signaled the beginning of another. Hilberg referred to this war as his "Thirty-Year War." Hilberg anticipated that his basic thesis would cause a stir. Hilberg maintained that "the process of destruction was bureaucratic ... that a bureaucrat became a perpetrator by virtue of his position and skills at the precise time when the process had reached a stage that required his involvement, that he was a thinking individual, and that above all, he was available, neither evading his duty nor obstructing the administrative opera-

tion." In short, Hilberg described this process as a consequence of German history rather than as an aberration (p. 124). As for postwar Germans, Hilberg asserted that "the German of the Nazi era is different from the German that emerged after the war" (p. 86).

Although challenging accepted notions about Hitler's Germany within German history, Hilberg released a much more emotional and vociferous response to his integration of "Jewish institutions as an extension of the German bureaucratic machine." Consistent with traditional Jewish trust of higher government authorities, "Jewish cooperation" included "accommodation and precluded resistance" (pp. 128-29). Criticized by survivors and scholars for his bureaucratic approach, Hilberg had violated prevailing efforts to describe Jewish victims as "heroic" and actively engaged in resistance—irrespective of how small (p. 133). Hilberg acknowledged the psychological importance to the Nazi killing process of defining Jews as adversaries. Inflating the concept of Jewish resistance, however, would undermine the "accomplishment of the few who took action." Additionally, ghetto and camp life could not be understood from the perspective of resistance (pp. 134-37). A few pages later, Hilberg's commentary becomes more cutting: "The manipulation of history is a kind of spoilage, and kitsch is debasement" (p. 141).

Hilberg saved his more scathing critiques for Nora Levin, Lucy Dawidowicz, and Hannah Arendt. Nora Levin's *The Holocaust* (1968) borrowed heavily from both Gerald Reitlinger's work and Hilberg's (pp. 142-43). Lucy Dawidowicz's *The War Against the Jews* (1975) builds "largely on secondary sources and conveying nothing whatever that could be called new." The second half of her work addressed the basic issue of Jewish resistance. Dawidowicz, according to Hilberg, included into her ranks of Jewish resisters "soup ladlers and all others in the ghettos who staved off starvation and despair." Hilberg strongly suggested that "nostalgic Jewish readers" would find

here "vaguely consoling words, [which] could be easily clutched by all those who did not wish to look deeper." Recounting Henry Friedlander's contribution to the *American Historical Review* in 1982, Hilberg listed twenty-three key authors whose works Dawidowicz did not use in her own work. Hilberg finished Dawidowicz with the statement: "To be sure, Dawidowicz has not been taken all that seriously by historians" (pp. 145-47).

Hannah Arendt's works on totalitarianism and her accounts of the Eichmann trial were important inspirations for Hilberg. Upon reviewing her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1964), Hilberg was startled to find no footnotes and only a minor acknowledgement of her use of his work and that of Reitlinger's. Hilberg pointed out, furthermore, that Arendt's "reliance upon my book had already been noticed by several reviewers." As for Arendt's concept of the *banality of evil*, Hilberg stressed that Arendt never understood "the pathways that Eichmann found in the thicket of the German administrative machine for his unprecedented actions. ... There was no 'banality' in this 'evil.'" Furthermore, Arendt separated "Jewish leaders from the Jewish populace" to account for Jewish cooperation in the destruction. However, Arendt's response to Hilberg's *The Destruction of European Jewry* was negative. Writing to Karl Jaspers in 1964, Arendt wrote: "His book is really excellent, but only because it is a simple report. A more general, introductory chapter is beneath a singed pig" (p. 155). Hilberg does not let Arendt off the hook. Hilberg stated that Arendt reestablished ties with a lover from her days as a student, namely Martin Heidegger, and sought to rehabilitate him. Hilberg's point is obvious.

The latter chapters of this work are devoted to the publication of *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom* (1979), and *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders* (1992). Not quite as colorful as his responses to his critics, Hilberg praised the contributions of Christopher Browning on more than one occasion and other contri-

butions to the growing list of Holocaust-oriented works. Finally, Hilberg takes the reader back one last time to Vienna for his closing reflections--which I would encourage others to read and enjoy.

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