Extreme History

In *The Train Journey*, Simone Gigliotti asserts that “extreme experiences call for an extreme interpretive approach” (p. 161). She answers that call in her new discussion of the experiences of Jewish Holocaust victims during their journeys to Nazi death camps during World War II. Railroad historians who might be attracted to her book by its title will be in for a rude, salutary awakening, not so much because of the gruesome aspects of her topic, but because of her approach. Those who have participated in or followed the debate on the meaning of the Holocaust will find her remarks stimulating and illuminating.

Gigliotti relies on a wide range of sources, such as published testimonies by Holocaust survivors in English. In particular, she makes extensive use of David Boder’s published interviews with survivors conducted in the U.S. occupation zone in Germany in the summer of 1946.[1] The author also employs the 1961 Adolf Eichmann trial testimony as well as unpublished sources available at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archive in Washington, DC, including video testimony of Holocaust survivors recorded in the 1980s and 1990s.

The author takes an interdisciplinary methodological approach based on many recent developments in the field of cultural studies. For example, she makes particular use of ideas such as sensory witnessing, and explores the relationship between seeing and understanding. This theoretical framework gives her analysis broad significance.

In this vein, Gigliotti raises the important issue of how the Enlightenment stressed the importance of “seeing” as a means for lending credence to truth claims. She reinforces her argument by employing concepts from anthropology, sociology, and critical theory concerning the utility of non-visual evidence. Last, but by no means least, she employs concepts from psychology and philosophy.

Even a brief mention of the many thinkers that Gigliotti looks to underscores the density and analytical depth of her analysis. She adopted Robert Eaglestone’s concept of the binary definition of truth claims, i.e., positivist and/or existential (p. 3).[2] Clifford Geertz’s 1973 work on “thick description” and Michael A. Bernstein’s concept of “backshadowing” also informed the theoretical underpinnings of her research.[3] She makes good use of Edith Wyschogrod’s model of the “death-world” of Holocaust victims and Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of “forms of togetherness.”[4] Also present are Norbert Elias’s idea of “journey fatigue” as described in his 1993 book, *Time: An Essay*, and Todd Presner’s arguments concerning the deportations (*Mobile Modernity: Germans, Jews, Transit*, 2007). From anthropology, she borrows Michael Jackson’s ideas on the coexistence of seeing testimony and suffering (p. 128). Additionally, she includes impulses from Barry Curtis and Claire Pajaczkowska’s 1994 work on travel; Sander Gilman’s discussion of Jewish bodies and movement (1991); and, importantly, Michel Foucault’s ideas about the intersection of biology, power, and history.[5]
Gigliotti organizes her analysis according to the three categories of transit, captivity, and witness. She further breaks down her presentation of the recollections of the victims into narrative categories that correspond to the chronological phases of their deportation experiences, including collection, departure and boarding, the trip in the cars, and arrival and disembarkation. Within this thematic categorization, Gigliotti argues against traditional historiographical treatments of the Holocaust. She rejects, for instance, the conventional depiction of Holocaust victims as invariably submitting to their annihilation without resisting. In discussing this point, she notes the disputes that continue among historians and survivors about which groups suffered the most, and which individuals and groups can claim the right, as it were, to have suffered. She also contends that survivors’ testimony is very reliable, in contrast to many scholars’ hesitancy to rely on these sources. Moreover, Gigliotti insists that no aspect of the Holocaust should be ignored, including socially taboo topics, such as feces, urine, and stench. She concludes with the controversial assertion that the train trips were more degrading to the victims than their concentration camp experiences.

A major problem with Gigliotti’s arguments regarding those conventional historians with whom she disagrees is that she does not identify those scholars by name. Her criticism seems to be aimed at traditional mil- itary, diplomatic, and political historians, whom she believes accept only written documentary evidence as legitimate historical sources. Had she made explicit the people behind the school of thought with whom she takes issue, her contention that mainstream scholarship does not make the Holocaust accessible to nonparticipants would have been strengthened. This argument is not without merit, but she has set herself up for unnecessary criticism by referring only in generalizations to a certain kind of historiographical methodology. It is a fair claim that conventional reconstructionist history tends to reject victims’ accounts as unreliable due to their subjectivity, but few historians fit neatly into one category. A more careful criticism of those unnamed historians would have allowed Gigliotti to demonstrate how some strands of traditional historical approaches miss the opportunity to read and hear survivors’ recollections in ways that enrich our understanding of their experiences. Even so, her observations about the field of Holocaust scholarship serve as a powerful reminder of the incompleteness of a conventional approach that allows only written accounts as evidence.

Gigliotti could also have used a broader range of sources. Her overwhelming reliance on English-language materials weakens her account. Of the 398 items listed in her bibliography, only 12 are in German, 3 in French, and none in Polish or Yiddish. None of the German or French materials play a significant role in her analysis. Gigliotti does address this issue, albeit unconvincingly, by citing Alan Rosen’s discussion of English as a “tertiary language of representation” (p. 19). Yet, by not using the full range of non-English-language materials, the author denied herself access to sources that would have reinforced her case. Because the role of discourse and word choice is central to her analysis, moreover, her reliance on translated works leaves open the possibility of missing, or even misunderstanding, linguistic nuances that would have been evident in the original language.

Given Gigliotti’s openness to cross-disciplinary research, it is surprising when she does not exhaust this avenue. An important example in this regard is her discussion of the phrase “cattle cars,” commonly used to refer to what was actually a multitude of modes of transportation to concentration camps. She addresses the problematic, almost exclusive use of the term by explaining that it has come to stand for all deportations to concentration camps through “retrospective knowledge” (p. 92). Concepts from psychology would have expanded her discussion, including why even the victims referred to the boxcars in which they were frequently moved as cattle cars. She glosses over this significant issue in her own linguistic choices. After acknowledging that the cars actually used by the German National Railway (Deutsche Reichsbahn) and the other European railways involved in the deportations were not, in fact, cattle cars, she then explains that she chose to use the term anyway because that is how boxcars were perceived by the victims.[6] She is silent on the topic of why so many people with disparate backgrounds embraced the same image. At a minimum, Gigliotti should have sorted out references to distinguish between contemporary and subsequent uses of the term.

Gigliotti attempts to put the deportation journeys into historical context by comparing them to nineteenth-century rail travel. She relies on the classic work by Wolfgang Schivelbusch, The Rail Journey.[7] Here, one can only encourage caution. Schivelbusch’s contention that rail travel was unsettling or destabilizing for people in the nineteenth century is based on literary sources produced by the social elite. Their impressions were not necessarily shared by the great mass of less educated, working-class riders, who eagerly used trains to broaden their economic and social horizons. Consequently, the psychological effects that the death transports had on the
Jewish victims may have been quite different from what Gigliotti imagines. In chapter 5, she builds on Schivelbusch to make a case that railway transportation destabilized Jewish communities in central and eastern Europe during the nineteenth century, claiming that "railway shock" was a theme in Jewish history (p. 129). She likens this experience to the Holocaust by pointing out that Boder observed this phenomenon in his postwar interviews with survivors (p. 129). This argument, while interesting, seems hard to sustain. It would be necessary to know what travel experiences the victims had had prior to their deportations, bearing in mind that by the early 1940s, railways had been operating in Europe for approximately a century and had been the dominant form of transportation for about three-quarters of that time. Consequently, many of the victims were likely to have had prior experience with rail travel. Those experiences would have differed depending on whether the victims came from western or eastern, urban or rural areas, an issue that she does not address.

In another attempt at historical contextualization, Gigliotti discusses the impact that the stations had on Jewish victims's consciousness after they were loaded onto the death transports. She bases her contention on a short passage in Jeffrey Richards and John MacKenzie's *The Railway Station: A Social History*. Her analysis refers to small country stations. Yet, this section of Richards and MacKenzie's book is actually about stations in general, with only brief, unrelated references to rural stations and Jewish deportations. Their argument focuses on how Victorians modeled the architecture of their stations on cathedrals and palaces. To be sure, railway stations served a representative function both for the railways that owned them and frequently also for the city and the country where they were located. One should also bear in mind that the Jewish victims were most frequently loaded into the transports in freight yards, places with utilitarian architecture, and not at passenger stations.

Given the theoretical approach taken by the author, it is furthermore worth highlighting her use of the word "transit." There is no mention about some scholars' critical stance for using "transit" in the discussion of the Holocaust. In railway circles and most regulatory arenas, to say nothing of the general press, "transit" is used to refer to urban commuter transportation systems. An analysis of the implications of the term in discussions about the Holocaust would have been illuminating.

Other terms used by the author are equally troubling. For instance, Gigliotti states that the SS (Schutzstaffel) "requisitioned" trains from the Reichsbahn (p. 14). In fact, the SS requested trains from the railway and, on one famous occasion, Heinrich Himmler actually pleaded for trains from Albert Ganzenmüller, the state secretary in the Reich Transportation Ministry, who was responsible for the daily management of the Reichsbahn.[10] Terms such as "witness" and "testimony" also invite discussion. Gigliotti defines "witness" in the Holocaust context rather late in the book (pp. 130-131). This important term should have been defined and explained in the introduction, particularly for those readers less familiar with debates about Holocaust methodology and terminology. Suffice it to say that "witness" has religious and juridical implications, discussion of which belongs in any examination of this topic. An explanation of the differences between testimony (another loaded term) and evidence would also have been helpful.

Simone Gigliotti offers the reader a thought-provoking analysis of the deportation of Holocaust victims using railways. Railroad historians will find it unsettling, mostly because of its methodology. Railroad history should be shaken up, so this will be all to the good. Her heavy reliance on English-language materials detracts from her analysis, though not fatally. Her contention that the experiences of the victims during the rail journeys should be the subject of scholarly discussion is valid. However, there should be no doubt that those who have read the sources have long known that these people went through hell, and that the vast majority did not survive. Those who did were often permanently scarred psychologically. Nor is it news that these train movements were frequently scenes of resistance, from attempts at escape to ambush.[11] One should see this book as a contribution to a debate that has been taking place among Holocaust historians for decades. It could and should have taken that debate a step further by providing more analysis on some of these debates. Still, a number of audiences will find this book interesting. Railroad historians could learn from Gigliotti's use of methodology. World War II historians will be reminded what the war in Europe was about and that commonplace terminology about the Holocaust should be problematized. They also could learn much from her methodological innovations. Simone Gigliotti’s *The Train Journey* is a good illustration of how new approaches using existing sources can fruitfully illuminate a topic.

Notes

[1]. See Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The*...


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-german


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30161

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.