The extermination of European Jews during World War II has been the topic of a multitude of publications. The scholarly and non-scholarly works on this subject now likely outnumber that of any other period in Jewish history.

The issues of the memory of, and psychological effects caused by, the genocide have also been addressed by several scholars such as Robert Jay Lifton, who has written on psychological reactions to the genocide, and Saul Friedlander, whose focus has been the memory of the Holocaust in (primarily) Western society. The memory of the Holocaust in Poland has been the subject of Iwona Irwin Zarecka’s study, *Neutralizing Memory: The Jew in Contemporary Poland*. While Irwin-Zarecka’s book appears to be limited to recognizing problems with the way in which the Jewish extermination during World War II is remembered in contemporary Poland, Michael Steinlauf in his *Bondage to the Dead: Poland and the Memory of the Holocaust* provides a more thorough insight into the complex political, historical, and psychological background which has influenced the treatment of these tragic events in post-War Poland. Steinlauf does not simplistically attribute the problematic nature of Polish treatments of the Holocaust to the monolithic catch-all of “Polish anti-semitism.”

The author points to three major factors influencing Poles’ ability (or inability—so-called psychic numbing) to deal with the memory of the Holocaust: political, psychological, and cultural/historical. Steinlauf argues that understanding the pre-war political situation in Poland is crucial when attempting to approach responses to the Jewish extermination during World War II. He notes that the pre-War (even pre-1918) debate between the pluralist and the nationalist factions (the “Endeks”) about the character of the Polish state continued to influence Poland after World War II and is visible today in attempts to deal with the memory of World War II and the genocide of the Jews. Steinlauf carefully documents how history and memory have been used in political struggles in Poland, and he especially underlines the manipulation of memory of the second World War.

One thing which this book lacks most notably are over-simplified explanations. The author avoids generalizations and stereotypes, pointing to the exceptional complexity of Poland and Polish responses to the genocide during the World War II. Steinlauf refers, for instance, to Catholic nationalists who were not shy about their anti-Jewish sentiments but who, nonetheless, helped to save the Jews during the War, or to the role of Catholic intellectuals in reviving the Polish Jewish past.

When discussing Polish post-war responses to the Holocaust and the ability/inability to deal with this unprecedented crime, the author compares and contrasts Poland and Germany. He argues that in Germany “a small portion of the guilty could be punished and the crime could thereby be symbolically expiated” (p. 60). Poles on the other hand were witnesses, not perpetrators—there was no direct crime, thus nothing to
expiate. Moreover, Poles were also victims themselves, which only has added to the complexity of the post-traumatic response.

On a cultural/historical level, Polish perception of Polish history as a history of suffering and martyrdom throughout the ages (nota bene: similar to the popular perception of Jewish history, labeled by S. Baron as “lachrymose” history) played a major role in the ability/ inability to deal with the Holocaust. After the war, for a variety of cultural and political reasons—carefully discussed in Steinlauf’s book—Jews became “competitors” in suffering.

The last chapter, which analyzes the efforts (or the lack thereof) to deal with the Holocaust during the period of 1989-1995, is, however, the weakest in the book. Perhaps, because this era is not yet a closed chapter from which one can draw conclusions.

Throughout his book, Steinlauf proves to be informed and knowledgeable. He appears to possess an exceptional understanding of Polish history and culture and a remarkable ability to deal with the extremely controversial and emotionally charging topic of the Polish treatment of the Holocaust. Bondage to the Dead is an important, carefully thought through, and well-documented study and thus constitutes a significant contribution to the complex and widely disputed issue of Polish-Jewish relations in the twentieth century. It merits consideration for courses dealing with twentieth-century East European history.


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=3260

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.