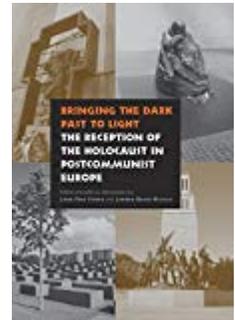


John-Paul Himka, Joanna Beata Michlic, eds.. *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. 892 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8032-2544-2.



Reviewed by Polly Zavadvker

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In a now-classic study *The Holocaust in American Life* (2000), Peter Novick noted that the mass murder of European Jewry was first widely studied and publically commemorated in countries where it did not take place, namely, in the United States and Israel. As a result, a Western perspective, one that privileges narratives of Jewish suffering, has shaped much of what we know and think about the Holocaust. Yet in fact, five out of every six of the Jews killed in Europe during World War II were killed in the East, in countries that became Communist after the war. Communist ideology played a decisive factor in shaping how citizens of the Eastern bloc understood both the war in general and the genocide of European Jewry in particular. Postwar regimes uniformly practiced a policy of silence with regard to the fate of Jews during the war. On the one hand, in official discourse the fact that Germans had singled out and targeted Jews as victims was never acknowledged; on the other, discussions about the suffering of civilian populations were replaced with teleological narratives that privileged an-

tifascist resistance and Soviet liberation. This ideological reading of history was also psychologically comforting for large parts of the public, for it helped to conceal inconvenient truths that local people might have helped the Germans carry out deportations, expropriation, and/or murder of their country's Jews.

The fall of Communism brought an end to the long official silence on the Holocaust, and since then countries where the Holocaust happened have begun to come to terms with the dark past. Until now, knowledge of how they have done so has been fragmentary and uneven. The editors of *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, scholars of Holocaust memory in Ukraine and Poland, respectively, offer the first comprehensive treatment of this subject. This extraordinary collection of essays is almost encyclopedic in length (nearly seven hundred pages of text), as well as in geographic scope and scholarly breadth—twenty chapters devoted to individual countries from Albania to Ukraine. This volume powerfully demonstrates that under-

standings of the Holocaust in the countries where it happened cannot be disentangled from the legacies of Communist rule. The implication of this finding is something with which scholars, diplomats, and the general public with an interest in the Holocaust will have to grapple for years to come.

This volume provides a coherent introduction to an enormous topic. An introductory chapter by the editors and concluding chapter by Omer Bartov discuss the shared features and differences among the twenty countries that are examined by the individual authors. Each chapter begins with a concise account of the war and Jewish genocide for that respective country, followed by extensive discussion of the postwar period under Communism, and over two decades that followed it. Topics explored within each chapter include how the Holocaust has figured in political debates and policy; historiography and scholarship; and the educational system and popular culture, including literature, films, memorials, and museums. To varying degrees, the authors discuss the relationship between the Holocaust and present-day antisemitism, as well as how Jews, including survivors, sought to commemorate the dark past both during and after the era of socialism.

The chapters are structured similarly and in general are of high quality. They collectively introduce the reader to sources in dozens of languages, including newly available archival documents, news media, scholarship, and oral histories. Another major contribution of this volume is that alongside chapters on countries for which there exists a large or growing body of literature (Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, and Russia, for example), there is original research about countries that have remained peripheral to Holocaust historiography, such as Bulgaria, Slovakia, the Baltic states, and former Yugoslav states.

There are a number of shared features among post-Communist countries' reception of the Holocaust. One common tendency was ex-

pressed in an initial rejection of the Communist past and reemergence of right-wing nationalist political parties that, simply put, viewed Communist crimes as worse than Nazi ones. In a chapter on Hungary ("The Memory of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Hungary: Part One, The Politics of Holocaust Memory"), Paul Hanebrink cites an influential 1999 article by historian Maria Schmidt (an advisor to the right-wing Fidesz Party, whose leader, Viktor Orbán, has served since 2010 as prime minister) entitled "Holocausts of the twentieth century."^[1] While not denying that Jews suffered during the war, Schmidt argued that the term "Holocaust" applied to Communist atrocities as well, and advised Hungarians to focus on their own history as victims of Communism (p. 275). Moreover, some right-wing nationalists have revived the antisemitic canard of "Judeocommunism," portraying Jews not as victims of fascism but first and foremost as Communist oppressors. Himka, in "The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Ukraine," cites a list, published in 2008 by the Security Services of Ukraine, containing the names of nineteen perpetrators of Holodomor (Ukraine's famine of 1932-33), of whom eight, or 40 percent, were identified as Jews. Yet as Himka observes, the vast number of officials who could potentially be implicated as perpetrators of the famine could never be sorted by nationality (p. 652).

There is a consensus among the volume's authors that right-wing discourse has not just expressed ethnic nationalism, but also served to deflect discussion about collaboration with Germans among locals. Yet Himka and Michlic maintain that more "progressive, pluralistic and civic" restorations of Holocaust memory have also emerged over the past two decades (p. 8). The motives behind this phenomenon range from the cynical to the admirable. In regard to the former, there are significant political incentives for post-Communist countries to address their relation to the Holocaust. Indeed, the term "instrumentalization" appears throughout several chapters to de-

scribe instances when Holocaust memory provided post-Communist political leaders with a means to an end—most often, as the editors put it, with a “European entry ticket” (p. 9). Bartov, for example, writes in the conclusion that the Holocaust made Germany look “better than ever” when its leaders placed a vast memorial to murdered Jewry in central Berlin, and displayed a symbol of reconciliation with the dark past on “the best piece of real estate in the newly built, oh-so-chic capital of its reunited state” (p. 683). In “Public Perceptions of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Romania,” Felicia Waldman and Mihai Chioveanu discuss how Romanian policymakers’ attempts to ban Holocaust denial in 2002 were meant to secure a favorable reception at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit that year in Prague—a move that prompted major protests, including defacement of synagogues. And in Russia, in 2006, a state-sponsored publication of Holocaust-related documents from Russian archives revealed active participation of Baltic populations in the perpetration of the Jewish genocide. The purpose of the collection was to provide damning evidence that the Baltic peoples had sided with the Nazis, and Klas-Göran Karlsson (“The Reception of the Holocaust in Russia: Silence, Conspiracy, and Glimpses of Light”) suggests that the publication’s message is that “the Baltic states and their titular populations, who since the demise of the Soviet Union have actively turned their backs on Russia and entered into European and Western networks, did the same in the war years by siding with the Nazi fascists” (p. 511).

Reading this volume gives one ample cause to be pessimistic about popular attitudes toward the Holocaust in post-Communist Europe. New laws, memorials, and publications relating to the Holocaust can appear, yet have no effect on changing popular perceptions or collective mentalities. In Belarus, Macedonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and elsewhere, high-school textbooks are still unable to mention the fraught subjects of locals’ complicity with Nazi policies, or their countries’

histories of prewar antisemitism. Recent polls are also revealing: in Hungary, 42 percent of respondents felt it was time to “turn the page” on the history of the Holocaust (p. 284); in Poland, only 8 percent of respondents were willing to state that only Poles were responsible for killing Jews in Jedwabne. Michlic and Małgorzata Melchior (“The Memory of the Holocaust in Post-1989 Poland: Renewal—Its Accomplishments and Its Powerlessness”) conclude that Polish society is simply “not yet ready to accept the model of critical history that challenges soothing national memories” (p. 439).

However, developments in the realms of culture and scholarship that are documented in this volume do give cause for cautious optimism. A younger generation of scholars in Romania, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland has called for open and honest treatment of their country’s relationship to the Holocaust; some of them are producing pioneering research on the topic, which is stimulating divisive, heated debates. Even in countries where scholarship is mainly produced outside the country’s borders, notably in Belarus, these studies trigger public and academic interest within the country, and as Per Anders Rudling in “The Invisible Genocide: The Holocaust in Belarus” suggests, they provide an intellectual basis for opposition to the authoritarian regime now in power. In Slovakia, scholars have adamantly protested attempts of ethnic nationalists to whitewash the past and helped renew a culture of debate that was paralyzed under socialism. And in latest developments, world-class Jewish museums opened in Moscow in 2012 and in Warsaw in 2013, both of which feature exhibits on the Holocaust.

There is an irony in that although post-Communist European countries have not adopted a Western perspective on the Holocaust, their partnerships with Western-based institutions have proved vital to the continued growth of Holocaust-related scholarship and culture. A growing

number of countries are sponsoring exhibits, archival preservation projects, and conferences in partnership with Yad Vashem; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research; and others. The future of Holocaust reception in post-Communist Europe will undoubtedly continue to develop as part of a dialogue between countries that are still reckoning with their Communist pasts and Western perspectives that acknowledge the particularity of the Jewish experience of the Second World War.

Note

[1]. Mária Schmidt, “‘Holocaustok’ a huszadik században,” *Magyar Hírlap* (November 13, 1999); repr., Mária Schmidt, *Egyazon mércével: A visszaperelt történelem* (Budapest: Királyi Magyar Egyetemi Nyomda Rt., 2003), 10–16.

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