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Harold Marcuse, Review for *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* of:

Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe, edited by John-Paul Himka and Joanna Michlic (University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 778 pp., cloth \$50.

review: 2375 words

This anthology collects twenty essays about the reception of the Holocaust in eastern Europe since 1989-90, arranged alphabetically from Albania to Ukraine. The editors of the volume contributed essays on two of the countries in this group, which they see as bracketing the range of post-communist engagement with "the Holocaust" (9). Michlic, who co-authored the essay on Poland, was then at Brandeis and is now a professor at the University of Bristol. She is perhaps best-known as co-editor of a documentation of the debates triggered by Jan Gross's 2001 book about the July 10, 1941 massacre of Jewish Poles in Jedwabne.¹ In fact, she sees that debate as having made Poland the country where the "second phase of restored memory has reached the most sophisticated level" (9). Himka, now a professor emeritus at the University of Alberta, is a specialist in Ukrainian history. His assessment is that in Ukraine "the first phase of restored memory still has the upper hand," with "the second civic phase trying to establish itself in public discourse" only with great difficulty. This two-phase model of Holocaust recollection is implicit throughout the collection, and is discussed in greater detail below.

Assembling so many excellent essays is an astonishing achievement. The contributors were asked to follow a similar chapter structure: After an introduction describing the wartime situation with an emphasis on relations between Jews and the "majority nation," and a brief overview of memories of the Holocaust under communism, seven post-1989 topics were to be covered: high politics and public debates, education and scholarship, culture (literature, cinema, music, theater), grassroots projects and sites, diaspora narratives, indigenous Jewish communities, and antisemitism and Holocaust negationism (meaning both denial and relativization). As one might expect given the broad range of events during the Holocaust, the various countries display a wide range of Holocaust retrospection (or lack thereof), and various authors draw from a similar diversity of sources to attempt to gauge that activity. These include sites, museums and research institutions, memorials and their inscriptions, conferences, scholarly publications, textbooks and curricular materials, speeches, polls, films, fiction, internet forums, newspaper comments, and more--basically anything that sheds light on public dealings with the past. Common to all essays, however, is the extensive use of primary sources and secondary literature in the native languages,

¹ Antony Polonsky and Joanna Michlic, eds., *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

making this collection exceptionally valuable to scholars of Holocaust memory without the requisite linguistic skills.

The parallel essay structure allows several patterns to emerge. Countries encompassing the high Jewish population of the Pale of Settlement, which also suffered under prewar Stalinist Sovietization (Belarus, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine), saw high rates of indigenous slaughter of Jews, who then as now--with minimal if any basis in reality--evoke the trope of "Judeocommunism." Poland, especially where the Soviets took over in 1939, fits this pattern as well (Jedwabne has come to symbolize this phenomenon). Estonia is an outlier: with a small Jewish population murdered quickly by Nazi Einsatzgruppen without much native participation, it does not have much of a "dark past" to contend with. However, as Anton Weiss-Wendt's essay makes clear, antisemitism there is as evident and virulent as in the other countries of this group.

In southeastern Europe one can discern two distinct groups: those whose governments had the opportunity to ally with Hitler's Germany, and those whom Germany saw as directly governable, or who could be put in thrall of actual or potential Axis allies. The former had opportunities both to shape their own policies towards Jewish citizens and refugees, and to enforce (or not) Nazi directives against Jews. Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia allowed native antisemitism to run free, but also diverged in some respects from the Nazi grand scheme of total Jewish extermination. Retrospective official memories focus on that divergence, ignoring or blaming perpetration on Germany alone. The latter group of 'victim' countries saw their non-Jewish populations lethally threatened as well, giving them more reason--if less opportunity--to show solidarity with Jewish residents.

Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia with Kosovo and Montenegro, and Slovenia--all occupied by Germany's allies and with relatively and absolutely small numbers of Jewish citizens--can with far greater justification look back on an experience of shared wartime victimization. Thus today they perform far fewer contortions in their memorialization of the Holocaust, in contrast to their Nazi-allied counterparts, which often invoke the Judeocommunism trope to turn Jews from victims to perpetrators, if not during the Holocaust, then at least under pre- and postwar Stalinism.

Then there are a few unique cases. After its incorporation into West Germany in 1990, East German public memory of the Holocaust became indistinguishable from that of its former rival. Moldova, with its Bessarabian/Bukovinian/Transnistrian territories (unfortunately no map is included in this book) part of the Pale of Settlement that saw horrific treatment of large numbers of Jews, could be counted in the group with Lithuania and Ukraine, or with its erstwhile occupier Romania in the Nazi ally group, or (as its "memory" might prefer) with the group of victims of Nazi-allied countries. Russia, whose Soviet incarnation set the recollective agenda for most of the cases here for four decades, continues to promote its Great Patriotic War resistance to

fascism narrative. Bulgaria, arguably in the Nazi-ally group, but with a self-image as a 'rescuer' nation, illustrates the complexities of Holocaust commemoration across eastern Europe.

As Joseph Benatov recounts, after adopting its own slate of anti-Jewish laws in January 1941--in spite of vociferous domestic objections--Bulgaria gradually became an official ally of Nazi Germany over the course of that year. However, in fulfilling an agreement to deport 20,000 Jews, "only" the nearly 12,000 living in Bulgarian-occupied Thrace and Macedonia were sent, by Bulgarian personnel, to the German extermination centers. Pressure on King Boris III organized by a member of parliament kept Jewish Bulgarians in four cities safe from deportation, and Boris subsequently deported Sofia's Jewish Bulgarians into Bulgarian provinces instead of turning them over to Germany, enabling most of Bulgaria's 49,000 Jewish citizens to survive. Thus while King Boris and his Commissariat for Jewish Questions persecuted and sent many thousands of Jews to their deaths, they also enabled tens of thousands of others to survive. In communist times after the war, a nationalist myth of rescue by the king vied with an official (communist) narrative of popular mobilization that successfully pressured the king to drop his deportation plan. The debate over these interpretations remains unresolved, thereby illustrating one of the important insights driven home by this anthology's many case studies: national (both in the sense of governmental, and of nationalist-minded citizens and émigrés) public recollection of the Holocaust is determined far more by present political agendas than by the past events themselves.

A corollary of this principle is found in nearly all of the essays in this collection: the instrumental use of Holocaust commemoration as a means to gain access to or improve relations with the European Union, NATO, and the West more broadly. The 2000 Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, with its call for research and education about the Holocaust, as well as for an annual Day of Holocaust Remembrance, has been playing a role in most of these countries.²

Two incidents in Bulgarian-US relations illustrate, in this case with reverse impetus (i.e. east to west), how Holocaust memories are instrumentalized for political gain (see pp. 118f, 124ff). In the early 1990s the US was initially oblivious to the Bulgarian collaboration/rescue debate. At the inauguration of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1993, Bulgaria's president threatened not to attend when he learned he was not going to be seated with the "Righteous Gentiles." The US hastily made amends, recognizing Bulgaria as a 'rescuer' in several prominent venues. Ten years later this belated acknowledgement was revived: When the US was courting allies for the impending invasion of Iraq, the US Congress passed a cloying concurrent resolution linking a new Bulgarian-US partnership to the Bulgarian people's "historic rescue of 50,000 Bulgarian

² As noted on p. 15f, 24 n. 30, and in the index entry "International Day of Holocaust Remembrance," almost all countries in the collection have introduced a Holocaust memorial day. For the Stockholm Declaration, see <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/about-us/stockholm-declaration>, accessed July 10, 2015. Twelve of the countries in this anthology have become members of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, and four more are "observers." Belarus, Bosnia, Russia and Ukraine are not affiliated.

Jews from the Holocaust and ... their tradition of ethnic and religious tolerance" (125). In most cases, however, the instrumentalization worked the other way around. The contributors offer ample evidence that eastern European countries created Holocaust memorials, museums, memorial days, and curricular units in order at least to appear closer to Western ways of dealing with the Holocaust.

Features distinguishing Holocaust reception in eastern Europe from the West are expressed in four main themes laid out by Omer Bartov in his comprehensive concluding analysis: 1) the competition between memories of atrocities committed against Jews, and crimes committed by communist regimes; 2) the nationally unique, situationally determined mix of continuities and breaks with previously dominant memory paradigms; 3) the aforementioned instrumentalization of Holocaust recollection to improve relations with the West; and 4) what Bartov terms "The Holocaust as Obstacle"--interactions with the Western paradigm as an impediment to practicing what several authors call "ethno-nationalist" recollection, as opposed to Western-style cosmopolitan retrospection.

My main criticism of this collection derives from the pervasiveness of this presumed Western standard. There is an implicit expectation that eastern European countries should develop a Western understanding of what "the Holocaust" encompassed, in spite of their vastly different experience of it during the war. Further, there is an expectation that their recollection of this particular Holocaust should mirror that in the West. The underlying assumption is that countrywide collective memories will follow a normative path from a conservative, ethno-nationalist, inner-directed recollection to a more pluralistic, multicultural, democratic, civic-oriented retrospection. As Per Anders Rudling concludes in his examination of Belarus, "So central is the role of the Holocaust in the political culture in the West that the question of how the postsocialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe have chosen to relate to it has become something of a litmus test of their democratic maturity" (73).

However, this status of the Holocaust in the West is relatively new. The editors state at the outset that the meaning of the Holocaust has transformed--since the 1990s and in the West--from "a crime empirically committed by Germans, Austrians, and other Europeans against the Jews, to a paradigm for innocent suffering and victimhood" (1). This Western-based conception of the Holocaust only began to emerge in the late 1980s, and it is still evolving. For example, should the Roma people be included as victims? Many of this collection's authors also discuss public recollection of the treatment of that group as well, with the authors of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia going so far as to use the terms "Roma Holocaust" and "Roma genocide." While this issue holds no urgency in the West: What about the deportations and mass murders of innocents of other nationalities? These transpired in the east far more than in western Europe (such as in French Oradour). While several hundred of fewer than 1,000 Jews from Albania did not survive the war, the death tolls of resident Serbs killed by Albanians, and Albanian partisans killed by Germans, were likely much higher (27-30). While fewer than one-

quarter of Estonia's 4,300 Jewish citizens were murdered (by German Einsatzgruppe A with minimal Estonian support; the rest were able to escape eastward or survive in hiding), 6,000 ethnic Estonians, 1,000 ethnic Russians, 400-1,000 Roma and 15,000 Soviet POWs were murdered in German-occupied Estonia.³ One might cite similar, if not quite so dramatic, figures for Bosnia-Herzegovina and Slovenia. The point is not to play a numbers game, but to ask why Albanians or Estonians or anyone else should be expected to adopt and prioritize a recently and still changing Western understanding of the Holocaust.

The lack of penetration of an inclusive conception of the Holocaust in the West itself is highlighted by the only other anthology that offers a similarly wide-ranging multi-country overview, and includes the post-1989 period: the exhibition-accompanying two-volume anthology edited by Monika Flacke to accompany an exhibition in the Berlin German Historical Museum, *Mythen der Nationen* (Berlin: DHM, 2004).⁴ In his excellent introduction to that work, Etienne François delineates a spectrum of master narratives of the wartime past that range similarly from 'nationalization' to 'universalization.' In this collection, Bartov notes that the so-called "Historians Debate" initiated a transition in West Germany in 1986, but immediately implies with a sarcastic jab at Berlin that it was for appearance sake only (682f). As noted above, Michlic sees the 'Jedwabne debate' as having helped Poland move towards this more cosmopolitan reception of its various dark pasts (424ff, also 184, 569). It remains for future scholarship to develop a typology of collective memories of "dark pasts," and determine whether there is a normative path from one to the other.

³ Estonian International Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, "Conclusions of the Commission," http://www.mnemosyne.ee/hc.ee/pdf/conclusions_en_1941-1944.pdf, p. 3 (XIX), accessed Aug. 2, 2015.

⁴ Roughly half of the Flacke collection's 29 essays treat eastern European states, whereby the inclusion of Western states make an the East-West comparison unavoidable. François' introduction is titled "Meistererzählungen und Dammbrüche: Die Erinnerung an den Zweiten Weltkrieg zwischen Nationalisierung und Universalisierung."

Other multi-country overviews include David Wyman (ed.), *The World Reacts to the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1996), which covers nine post-communist countries in standard-setting detail, but was published so shortly after the demise of the Cold War that trends were just emerging. Other anthologies, such as Richard Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu (eds.), *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Raleigh: Duke, 2006) and Jörn Eckert's *Experience and Memory: The Second World War in Europe* (New York: Berghahn, 2010) focus on the overall postwar arc, not on the Holocaust or eastern Europe.