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Historical Experience and Cognition

Juxtaposing Perspectives on National Socialism

It would be a truism to qualify Nazism and its core event, the Holocaust, as “historical.” No one seriously denies the capacity of historical cognition to integrate this catastrophic era of the German and European past into the stream of history. However, as I suggested in the previous chapter, it is primarily a descriptive approach to the period that makes the phase amenable to processing by historiography. The interpretive, *verstehende* perspective on the era, no less pressing in its importance, gives rise to a number of complications. A historian wishing to “understand”—rather than merely describe—Nazism rapidly comes up against an analytic impasse, that is, a dimension appearing to elude the usual modes of human comprehension. As secular consciousness grapples with the enigma of the Nazi era, it must deal with a paradox that presents a number of diverging views about the universal historical significance of Nazism. Becoming *historical*, the phenomenon has taken on a *suprahistorical* meaning. Yet the historian can address this meaning only by putting the reality of industrial mass extermination—the most radical act of the regime—at the center of efforts to reconstruct the era.

The historian’s decision to study National Socialism with the mass extermination as its focus is not arbitrary. Although such a perspective may orient itself, empirically and experientially, toward the victims, the meaning that emerges has a universal character. The radical perspective appropriate to the deed’s radical nature makes cognitive use of the experience of the victims for theoretical and interpretive purposes, namely, to penetrate to the universal historical significance of the mass extermination.¹ To this extent, the question of the historical locus and meaning of Nazism depends on the choice of historiographical perspective.

In the present essay I probe a number of epistemological questions on the character and historical significance of Nazism and the Holocaust. I endeavor to demonstrate the limits of the usual methodological approaches toward their history and its universal significance.

The historical picture of Nazism’s core event, the mass extermination, is characterized by an extreme polarity: the juxtaposition of banality and monstrosity. The banality underlies the perspective of those reconstructing events from the angle of the perpetrators, of the Nazi bureaucratic apparatus. Insofar as this perspective reaches out to include societal phenomena beyond the more narrow confines of the Nazi era, it obscures the exceptional character of the period within the perspective of the victims; in doing so, it focuses on continuities reaching through and beyond the era, emphasizing elements of abiding “normalcy.” In contrast, owing to its psychological impact, the element of monstrosity experienced by the victims becomes the principal pillar for their attempts at explanation. At times, this focus on monstrosity as Nazism’s core element leads to suprahistorical interpretations. More generally, perspectives concentrating on the mass extermination as Nazism’s focal event tend toward finalistic interpretations.

The use of different historiographical approaches thus reflects a marked divergence of historical experience. In a conclusion to this chapter, I propose a historical perspective that may illuminate the counterrational behavior that lies at the universal core of the Holocaust.

The characterization of Nazism and the Holocaust as a “historical crisis” makes them comparable with watersheds as significant for the universal process of civilization as the Reformation or the French Revolution.² Yet the Reformation radically altered the Occidental word’s relationship with God, and the French Revolution transformed the relationship of the individual to authority and dominance. With the mass murder of millions and the depths of its depravity, the Nazi period is surely a cause for moral shock. But the notion of a “historical crisis” seems inappropriate at first sight: that chapter in history has left no visible changes in the secularly grounded and rationally organized structures of civilization. Consequently the period has not even gained the status of a fundamental watershed in historical consciousness—in distinct contrast, for example, to World War I.

In order to grasp why Nazism nevertheless marks the onset of a “historical crisis,” we must confront basic issues of historiographical presentation and representation, of the sort referred to above. Let us note, for a start, the generally accepted historical practice of approaching an era principally

along the avenue of description. But any approach also contains, a priori, a number of suppositions shaping the perspective, thus predetermining the description.³ Such is the case even when the historian is content with nothing more than the modest aim of reconstruction. Implicit value judgments can, for example, underlie questions articulated in a pretheoretical, intuitive form, but categorizable as specific to both the era and the object. Thus, we understand Ranke's classic dictum of admonishing historians to present the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*,⁴ articulating his ideal of the past's objective "mirroring," as an expression of the profound Prussian faith in the veracity of the governmental document (especially in the field of foreign policy), seen as a fundamental and trustworthy source in the narrative hermeneutic reconstruction of assumed reality.⁵ Furthermore, the epistemologically oriented query as to "how it really was" identifies the objects at issue with societal normalcy.

The extent to which the historian's epistemologically oriented question implicates the particular features of a given epoch or specific object of investigation becomes clear with consideration of the historiography of the Weimar Republic. Heinrich August Winkler has pointed out that the historian of Weimar approaches his object—in general, of course, not consciously so—with a quite different purpose from the one expressed in Ranke's dictum. His curiosity directs another query to his data: namely, *Musste es so kommen?* (was it inevitable?).⁶ Was the surging of the National Socialist tide societally preprogrammed, or preordained by events? Was the transfer of power to Hitler politically inevitable?

These historians would thus appear to have their sights fixed constantly on the history of the Republic as the *prehistory* of National Socialism. To that extent, the historiography of the Weimar era is engulfed, *nolens volens*, in the vortex of the subsequent Nazi period. Moreover, the question "was it inevitable?" ranges beyond a reconstruction of past reality as an object of research. Rather, the question implies a need to explore various possibilities—the alternatives to Hitler and the degree of their feasibility at the time.

In respect to Weimar, the Rankean dictum becomes a mere preliminary to the necessary enterprise of ferreting out political alternatives within the framework of societal possibilities. Dominating that historiography on Weimar are largely politically oriented questions. Controversies over commission, omission, and responsibility are quite "appropriate," and in close keeping with the historical significance of Weimar as the *political* prehistory of National Socialism. This holds true even when those questions reach into the realm of *social* history.

Where historical cognition of the Weimar Republic reflects the influence

of the National Socialist period that succeeded it, we can observe a closely related and striking historiographical phenomenon in the case of Nazism proper. The historian of Nazism, in short, will direct the historian of Weimar's fundamental question, *Wie war es eigentlich möglich?* (how was it actually possible?), straight back at the central event of National Socialist rule: the mass crimes perpetrated by the regime. In both cases, that spontaneous, pretheoretical query for historiographical comprehension presupposes, in an intuitive and methodologically still unreflected fashion, a judgmental key position: namely, that crimes of such a nature and magnitude are "actually" not possible in our civilization and exceed its bounds.⁷ Empirically, the events did occur, yet they elude our powers of comprehension, imagination, judgment—and, in the final analysis, even the civilizational shaping of the era's consciousness and the forms of thought that constitute it. The historian thus faces new, previously little-pondered problems of depiction and understanding. These problems cluster, in the form of omissions and distortions, around the core of the event labeled a "historical crisis." The crisis, in turn, becomes a crisis of historiography itself.

This crisis is visible in the antithetical collective perspectives that dominate historiography on the Holocaust—in the unresolvable dichotomy of perspectives between victim and perpetrator. In order to understand its nature, we must explore the specific character of the bureaucratically organized mass murder.

The specificity of this particular crime against humanity appears to lie in its radically abstract character, that is, the above-mentioned phenomenon of a project of industrial mass extermination organized along lines of highly differentiated division of labor. The historian encounters a social collective enterprise enlisting virtually every member of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, no matter how indirectly, as a participant—all those involved in the social, economic, administrative or military spheres. Or put somewhat differently, the project comprised myriad fragments of societally divided labor, often quite nonspecific, and capable of serving a wide range of possible purposes. To this extent, it was possible to be a part of the annihilation without necessarily being aware of one's participation in the overall deed.

Of central importance for the deed's historiographical reconstruction is the reality of implication in a capital crime, by means of socialization into the *Volksgemeinschaft*, in varying degrees of passive segmentation. Confronted at a later point with the deed's accomplishment, those abstractly implicated in it will not be aware of having been involved. Analogies to the production

processes of highly differentiated societies immediately come to mind here. Just as the producer is alienated from his product through the division of labor, socially segmented perpetrators are alienated from their sense of political responsibility and their criminally relevant guilt—aside, of course, from those immediately and sadistically involved in the mass murder. One of the most outstanding examples of the phenomenon is the smooth functioning of the Reichsbahn within the mass-extermination process. And remarkably, the more closely the historian focuses on the abstract and labor-divided structure of the overall process of extermination, the further he moves from the horror of the deed.⁸

Efforts to approach Nazi mass murder in terms of division of labor are relatively recent. In the 1940s and 1950s historiography was so strongly marked by compelling problems of ideological criminality, and of the event's sheer horror, that no approach was possible other than one shaped by *juridical* questions—questions of crime and punishment. Reconstruction of the events was guided principally by moral and ethical motives. Epistemologically directed interest centered on questions closely bound up with the complex of individually traceable responsibility and guilt. The Nuremberg trials were not the only impetus for this approach or the basis for ensuing treatments of the phenomenon of Nazism, in terms of both documentary data and the juridically oriented perspective. Rather, the issue of guilt had such weight on its own that the corpus of Nazi documentation served more as incrimination evidence for a real tribunal of justice than as historical source material for the reconstruction and evaluation of history as such.

In the 1960s and 1970s there was a marked change in historiographical perspective. A structural approach, based on concepts drawn from sociology and political science, increasingly took precedent over the juridical perspective, focusing on individual action and responsibility. This fundamental shift in analytical angle may well have been linked to the adoption of theoretically oriented methods, centered on the work of social scientist émigrés like Franz Neumann.⁹ Nonetheless, it cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the reception of specific theories—even though Hans Mommsen, in direct reference to Hannah Arendt, has elevated the formula of the “banality of evil” to a founding concept in the structural approach to Holocaust research.¹⁰ And yet the predominantly juridical inclination of Arendt's book on Eichmann does represent a thematic milestone in the transition from a perspective seeking its historical object in individual responsibility to one focusing on an essentially depersonalized structure.

Though Arendt's Eichmann book has become a cipher for the historical and moral evaluation of Nazi crimes, as well as for the possibility of system-

atic mass murder in the modern era, it was not Arendt alone who inaugurated the new historiographical direction. A number of historians who offered their knowledge and expertise to the criminal courts in the 1960s and 1970s underwent a similar shift of perspective: a growing sense, while pursuing the traditional question of individual guilt, that the mass annihilation was based essentially on depersonalized, functional participation, despite numerous instances of direct individual complicity. Estrangement between criminal deed and criminal awareness formed the context in which historians took up Arendt's thesis of the “banality of evil,” incorporating it into their historiographical approach.

The thesis in no way mitigated the harshness of a reality marked by massive cruelty and sadism. Such savagery was in fact not necessary for the smooth functioning of the industrial machinery of murder. On the contrary, it often proved a hindrance. The result was that *indirectly* implicated persons, despite their actions being central to the implementation of the mass extermination, were seldom charged with major criminal offenses, let alone with murder—an act requiring morally despicable qualities few wished to attach to “normal” cogs in the machine. Hence there were hardly any *murderers* in the formal juridical sense of the term, though there were excessive numbers of accomplices (*Helfershelfer*) to various degrees of segmented involvement.¹¹ Raul Hilberg for instance has pointed out that not a single employee of the Reichsbahn was convicted for his indispensable participation in the abstract bureaucracy of death.¹² It is also important to note that the totalitarian fog of the regime, which enveloped a political system contradicting general forms of rational bureaucratic behavior, contributed to obfuscating individual responsibility, hence any relevant guilt in a criminal sense. The opaque character of this system could not fail to have an impact on the historical reconstruction of National Socialism: reflected, as I have described it, in a methodological retreat into the description of structures.¹³ In turn, this tendency reinforced a growing awareness that the governmental administrative document had forfeited part of its function as a reliable source. With the mass extermination being regarded by its administrative perpetrators as a “sensitive” area requiring bureaucratic reticence, the documentation of its planning had been concerned less with any direct record of actual decisions than, ultimately, with concealing those decisions by way of a reign of “organized chaos.”¹⁴ As a result, the instruction or order, the unauthorized personal initiative, opportunistic omission, and failure to act, entered into a barely reconstructible, obfuscated alliance, with the legitimating racial ideology looming in the background.

This historiographical perspective on National Socialist rule in general,

and the mass extermination in particular, finds itself in quite clear-cut harmony with a German collective memory inclined to play down any causal connection between the Nazi *weltanschauung* (which had infected many) and the mass extermination. Where the quasi-judicial perspective, directly linking ideology and action, is in close harmony with the victims' picture of experience, the perspective of the collective involved in the deed, using an impersonal division of labor, tends to dissolve even the last remainder of identifiable culpability into exculpatory structures. Through the use of psychological selection, it gives certain elements excessive emphasis. Doubtless, such elements are relevant for reconstructing the total picture; but in a kind of "subjective objectivity," they isolate components of banality inevitably present in the division of labor necessary for the extermination process.

In its own way, the overriding monstrosity of the murder project condenses within the perspective of the victims into a form of complementary objectification. And in the historiographical realm, the obvious dichotomy between (functional, labor-divided) banality in implementation and monstrosity in individually experienced victimization reflects the fundamental divide between two different approaches to, and presentations of, the Final Solution. This dichotomy is doubtless one principal source for the fury of the criticism that has been leveled at Hannah Arendt, principally by her Jewish opponents. By coining the expression "the banality of evil," Arendt seemingly adopted the perspective of the perpetrators, with its emphasis on functionalities.¹⁵ Yet in the eyes of the victims, evil was by no means limited to "banalities"—for them, in plain and simple terms, it was an absolute monstrosity.

In a certain manner, we can understand approaches generally classified under the rubric of social history as offering an additional mode of presentation for the period of National Socialism—but not for the mass extermination. This approach, it would appear, is more in harmony with the specific collective experience of the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. It focuses, necessarily, on social and economic phenomena that—though here tied up with National Socialism—readily occur in periods before and after, thereby neutralizing the human subject's relation to the event—hence its specific political history. Conversely, concentration on the political implications of Nazism as a historical rupture leads, again, to a historiography in proximity with the perspective of Nazism's victims. For the effort to understand and represent Nazism's meaning cannot rest content with a focus on continuity—that is, on the normal conditions through and beyond the incriminated area—but must also consider the exceptional character of that epoch, and its universal implications. As Fernand Braudel has indicated, social and eco-

conomic history, the history of mentalities and institutions, are oriented toward a different time span than a history centered on political developments and the unfolding of major events.¹⁶ The former approach, extending by its very nature beyond the life spans of history's individual actors, is obliged to abstract itself from the circumstances of a historical period: from the existential experience of the historical subject. Submerged in a complex of "continuities," and mainly rooted in a subjective experience of normalcy, such an approach is, in the end, unable to grasp the extreme and exceptional phenomenon of the mass extermination.

Historians utilizing techniques of "oral history" have observed that Germans rarely frame the Nazi era within the key years 1933 and 1945 but rather make a fundamental distinction between "good times" and "bad."¹⁷ In such periodization, the Stalingrad debacle is the watershed between "good" and "bad times," the latter continuing, significantly, beyond the end of the war until the 1948 currency reform. Such an approach has found apt scholarly expression in the scope and focus of *From Stalingrad to Currency Reform*.¹⁸

However little this periodization fits one based on a political history of key events, it reflects the lived experience of Germany's World War II generation. Inversely, since the *victims'* experience of suffering apparently corresponds to the political duration of the Nazi regime, their sense of historical sequence would rather accord with the standard political periodization. It is striking, however, that the historical memory of those destined to die—to great extent because they were Jewish or of Jewish ancestry—creates a periodization that, owing to the monstrosity of the intended and executed deed, will often extend beyond the twelve years of the regime, thus assuming a suprahistorical character—a phenomenon that I explore below.

Weighed down by the nightmare of the deed, consciousness desires explanations—those reconciling a collective inner world with an external world that—measured in secular rational terms—is radically incomprehensible: a reconciliation that is, of memory and history. The monstrosity of a suffering experienced individually, yet determined by belonging to a collective, leads to a transposing of the mass extermination into a context of *collective historicity*: it becomes the seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of suprahistorical consciousness. In this regard, we find the emergence of different explanatory topoi. The most frequent and striking topos is the recurrence of anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic outbreaks in Occidental history. When reli-

giously grounded, it contributes to the formation of a liturgical memory, and to that of a *negative teleology* of the catastrophe: a teleology reverberating, already, in the words “Shoah” and “Holocaust.”¹⁹ Such a negative teleological perspective naturally lays considerable stress on a causal linkage between anti-Semitism and the mass extermination. It grants to the connection between ideology and deed a finality that, measured against the complexity of the implementation of the Final Solution, inevitably results in distorting reductions.

There can be no doubt that anti-Semitism lies at the heart of the Nazi *weltanschauung*, and of the Nazi genocide. But for the Jewish victims, the latter not only reflects an ideological context but follows a practical program—the outcome of a causal chain stretching from the anti-Semitic measures of 1933 to the Nuremberg laws of 1935 and *Reichskristallnacht*—and intensifies the pattern of traditional pogroms in a qualitative jump to mass extermination in 1941. But in the end, despite its apparently clear-cut nature, the Holocaust historian can hardly rest with such a schema, which fails to fully and specifically explain how *human beings* as such, regardless of their cultural-ethnic or “racial” origin, could in fact be sent like freight for systematic mass annihilation. With anti-Semitism as cultural-historical matrix, the ground for the shift from “normal” anti-Jewish measures to extermination was prepared by another motif in its syncretistic ideology: the motif of euthanasia.²⁰ The Nazi policy of ending “life not worthy of living” (*lebensunwertes Leben*) can be viewed as an ideologically blinkered effort to use biology to resolve social problems. At a time when the Jewish question was considered “solvable” within the framework of a policy of emigration and expulsion, a large number of citizens of the Reich had already been forcibly sterilized in the framework of legal programs; it was only a small step from such eugenics to the medical murder of tens of thousands of individuals defined, in one way or another, as handicapped or retarded.

In turn, mechanized mass murder can be understood as a continuation of such eugenically based extermination. There is, in fact, ample evidence of such a continuum, most obviously in the transfer of the personnel of Aktion T4 from the Reich eastward in the framework of Aktion Reinhard. It reveals an anti-Semitism originally geared toward expulsion fused with the perverted medical ethos of the euthanasia program.²¹ Yet we would be misguided to argue that the annihilation of the Jews was an *inevitable* consequence of “practical” eugenics, despite all the Nazi rhetoric about *Schädlinge* (human pests) and *Untermenschen*.²² “Science” and biological racist ideology had a preparatory function, lowering the threshold of what was considered permissible to a crucial degree; the deed itself, however, evolved much

more from conditions established by the Nazis for *anti-Semitic* reasons, that is, the barbaric concentration of Jews in the east, conditions that—as we noted in the previous chapter—they “rectified” using measures grounded in social and racial “hygienics”: factory-like murder on a mass scale. Nonetheless, even acknowledging this crucial juncture between traditional anti-Semitism and radical eugenics, we would be misguided here, as well, to grant it a “final” causal status. We need only note the absence of any murder program in a number of countries where anti-Semitism was sometimes as virulent as in Germany—these countries also having many doctors and scientists who believed fervently in “racial hygiene.” Moreover, it is enough to point to the notorious tradition of eugenics that evolved in both Scandinavia and North America to show the limits of any linkage between Auschwitz and the spirit of social and racial hygienics. After all, in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s, some 30,000 persons were forcibly sterilized for “eugenic” reasons, without this culminating in any mass extermination of life “not worthy of living.” In order, then, to grasp the historical *specificity* of Nazi mass murder, we need in the end to return to a sphere of political action and personal accountability: to a specificity resting within the political-historical constellation at the time.

To recall our preliminary point, the intuitive historiographical query directed toward National Socialism is not “how it really was” but rather “how was it actually possible?” This is the motif shaping historical cognition: it stresses the universal historical crisis that indeed was marked by the advent of National Socialism, though without the presence of major changes in society and consciousness such as were engendered by the Reformation and the French Revolution. What characterizes the crisis must be decoded through a specific, though simultaneously universalizing, context of experience.²³

As I argue at length in chapter 6, we have such a context, paradoxically, in an eminently particularistic historical empirical phenomenon: that of the Judenrat. For in our close look at that institution as defining a particular situation we saw that it encapsulated the experience of perpetrator *and* victim, as well as making manifest a dynamic charged with both banality *and* monstrosity. Although the official Jewish representative body in dealings with the Nazis, the Judenrat was likewise a mediating agency of National Socialist will—one that utilized Jews in its dealings with Jews. Here, in the interlinked opposing wills, in the Jewish elders’ need to *think* the Nazis, and through its very specificity, the council brings us to the center of

the phenomenology of mass extermination. In this manner, by examining the reactions and behavior of Jewish councils, we approach the content of a "historical crisis" that has remained invisible. This is what has been referred to as a crisis of universally valid, action-guiding forms of thought—in this case, forms based on a ruthless enemy's presumed utility orientation and desire for self-preservation, or *traditional evil*.

The "historical crisis" represented by National Socialism nullifies that rationality of action—a rationality on which society and its functioning continues to be based. Precisely because such rationality is the cognitive building block of our *Lebenswelt*, our world of lived experience, the crisis is scarcely comprehensible—and then only through the psyche of the victims. Beyond this, the indispensability of rationality produces in its wake a persistent phenomenon of denial: a relegation of industrialized extermination, and the radical boundary experience of its victims, to mnemonic oblivion. Such forgetting underscores the function, for our post-Auschwitz culture, of a historiography that in its particularity and universalism, strives to adequately confront the radically negative deed.

PART III

Holocaust Narratives

Varieties of Narration

The Holocaust in Historical Memory

History and memory are commonly viewed as antithetical. Historical research is rightly skeptical about evidence recycled, as a purported reflection of reality, by memory. After all, sciences base their claims to verity on time-tested instruments of knowing and proof, a gamut ranging from source criticism to the densely aggregated fields of discourse and debate on method and epistemology. Nonetheless, historiography cannot escape the confrontation with memory, which represents a world that relativizes, and hence undermines, scholarship's claims to universal validity. The present chapter offers some reflections on the interrelationship of historiography and memory within an event still struggling to find its proper locus in historical research: the Holocaust.

In his major work on Europe from 1815 to the present, the American doyen of German history, Gordon A. Craig, makes no mention whatsoever of the Nazi Final Solution, the destruction of the Jews of Europe.¹ Such an omission cries out for explanation. After all, Craig is certainly not one of those historians who deliberately bypass the Holocaust, denying it any serious significance. In his many publications, he has often given ample space to such topics as Jewish emancipation and the contortions of anti-Semitism; and elsewhere he has written about the Nazi Final Solution, even though he does not claim any special expertise on the topic.

How, then, can we account for this seemingly anomalous omission in his comprehensive study of European history in modern times? Is this a simple oversight, sheer neglect, a moment of scholarly laxity of no further import?

By asking this, I do not intend to treat the omission as scandalous or even to hint at some deeper, unconscious motivations. Rather, my query pre-

cedes from what would seem to be a plausible assumption: namely, that Craig's neglect of the Holocaust in this book is rooted in the far more fundamental factors that shape research—the systematic preliminary decisions a historian makes; the perspective and periodization, the preferred method and narrative structures that he or she chooses to stand by.

Historiography is always "situated." And there are various contextual clues suggesting that the omission of the mass murder of European Jewry in Craig's work reflects its overall layout and structure. It can be argued that his perspective on European history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the closely linked periodization that such a perspective entails, necessarily predisposed him to sidestep the Holocaust. The fact is that in his presentation of European history over the last two centuries, he develops a historical systematization that is thoroughly Anglo-American in stamp and stance.

An inveterately "Anglo-American" perspective on German and Continental history does not somehow necessarily omit the Holocaust or give short shrift to the Jewish catastrophe. Nonetheless, considerable evidence supports the assumption that, in reconstructing historical events, an Anglo-centered historiography of German and European history in modern times tends to proceed from a set of preliminary "blueprinting" tendencies that seriously impede the integration of the Holocaust into its thematic framework.² A case in point is the preference for a scheme of periodization that conjoins the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into a single epoch.

Historians reared in a Continental tradition are far less likely to splice the two centuries into a conjunct age. After all, seen from their shared perspective, the centuries appear quite dissimilar. In the light of the succeeding catastrophic era, the nineteenth century seems like a veritable epitome of optimism, a promise of the forward march of history. The contrast is clear, even stark: on the one hand, the age of industrialization and the emergence of nation-states, democratization and the genesis of parliamentary government, positivism and the belief in progress; on the other, that dark concatenation of events encompassing two world wars, mass murder, and totalitarian experimentation with human nature.³

Of course, what can be characterized vaguely as an Anglo-American periodization does not profess agnosticism in the face of the cataclysms of European history—in any event, not when it comes to an assessment of their moral dimension. But its perspective is likely to generate a slew of distinct emphases. For example, the distance from the Continental vortex of events that is scrupulously maintained by the historical naval nation and manifested in the principle of the *balance of power* also has implications for histo-

riography, informing analogous patterns of interpretation. It holds in particular for the characteristic approach to political, diplomatic, and military history that pervades classical British historiography. In turn, associated images of history mold perceptions that increasingly have their own logical consequences, producing a context of interpretation manifest in method as well as in topic selection. And it is in this choice of both methodology and theme that the distant stance of the imperial sea power toward the Continent and its convulsions exerts its influence. In short, the high-relief distinction between the optimism of the nineteenth century and the catastrophes of our own age, consonant with Continental memory, tends in the British perception to be flattened down, abraded to relative inconsequence.

Thus, it should not be surprising if Craig's oeuvre is geared to historical preconceptions of a type quite different from those predominating among Continental historians. After all, the design of any historical project is always linked to some paradigmatic perspective. And to a significant degree, that very perspective is shaped by the primacy of power politics, that is, the primacy of the principle of balance. Such a perception has a long reach, stretching at least from the Napoleonic wars and the subsequent reorganization of Europe by the 1815 Congress of Vienna, to the foundation of the Second (Wilhelminian) Reich, the ravages of the Great War, and Hitler's totalitarian claim to continental hegemony. It thus catalyzes and constructs an image of history with massive implications for the analysis of political behavior, especially that concerning Nazi Germany. True, the British image of Germany was imbued with a view of Prussia that originated in the nineteenth century, but it was then also projected onto the Third Reich—as though that polity were a hegemonic power of the traditional type, albeit an inordinately aggressive variant.⁴

Craig's image of history does not simply follow these lines. Nonetheless, the interpretive scheme that he employs to analyze the history of political events does follow the general thrust of such a paradigmatic mode. To that extent, the structure of his historical narrative participates in a culturally biased view of Prussia—and hence of Nazi Germany—as, above all, a fundamental threat to the principle of the balance of power. Seen from such an angle, a conflation of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries into a single epoch in European history hardly requires revision.

A perspective so tilted toward the history of power politics and the centrality of balance does provide a useful lens in the sense that it can meaningfully interpret and give a congruent treatment to diverse chains of events in European history. Yet there is a major drawback specifically pertaining to Nazi Germany: if, in view of the enormity of its crimes, Nazism holds a spe-

cific significance in the universal history of mankind, a perspective founded merely on the concept of power relations becomes exceedingly problematic. At the very least, the view of Nazi rule as a culmination of Prussian history vitiates the explanatory meaning of long lines of continuity. Through such a contorting aperture, the specifics of Nazism blur and disappear. Examples of such a sharply angled perception are legion, among them Britain's tragic underestimation—on various occasions—of the extent of Prussian-German military opposition to Hitler. Attempts to establish contact with that opposition foundered in some measure as a result of Britain's blinkered and negative image of Prussia.⁵

Easy acceptance of such continuities could only have a dramatic impact on views of the Holocaust, both during and since the Second World War—whose very designation suggests a straight continuation of the Great War, a further phase in the traditional struggle for hegemony in Europe. Perceptions of this sort contributed to the tendency, then as now, to marginalize events, such as the mass killing at Auschwitz and elsewhere, that took place beyond the frame of military action. Industrialized mass extermination was covered up by the images of warfare; that Auschwitz was not bombed by the Allies in 1944 reflected in part the fact that the fate of European Jewry remained hidden behind the filters of the logic of war.⁶

Again in the Allied judiciary's treatment of Nazi crimes and criminals after the war, the Anglo-American view of Nazi Germany as an extension and apotheosis of Prussia pointed in a similar direction. From the outset at the Nuremberg tribunal, the overriding concern was far more to punish those Germans held responsible for a war of aggression as well as for war crimes and crimes against humanity committed *during* the war proper, rather than to examine the genocide against the Jews and other victims of systematic atrocities perpetrated *beyond* those parameters. The breakup of Prussia by Allied decree in February 1947 also dovetailed with that anachronistic tradition that views Nazi Germany as the caretaker of the Borussian *Machtstaat*.

Thus, the design of historical surveys such as Craig's *Europe Since 1815*, based on a peculiarly British periodization, points to the fact that long-standing narrative traditions are intricately woven into the web of historiography. It becomes clear that memory and history should be seen not as outright antitheses but rather as variant expressions—differing in density—of a narrative structure that is common and antecedent to both.

The primary focus here is not on British memory and historiography. I note their striking distance from the Holocaust mainly in order to stress one ba-

sic point: the proximity of collective memories and popular images of history to their congruous types of historiography. By elaborating on the previous chapter's distinction between German experience and Jewish suffering, I now intend to explore the meaning of this linkage for political cultures far more directly affected by the Holocaust. It is doubtless insufficient to claim that historiographical narratives derive solely from the historian's rootedness in a given "ethnic," national, or other collective belonging. The precepts of historical methodology and the criteria imposed by the discipline cannot, with all their complexity and universality, simply be shaped by the demands of collective memory. Yet the opposite claim is no less problematic; it would be excessively rationalistic to ignore the impress of traditional and group memories on historiography. Especially at those critical junctures where mere empirical evidence, the putative historical facts, enter the flow of the narrative, variant experience tends to produce critical divergencies in historical interpretation. And in questions of cause and causality, this tendency becomes still more acute. The historian works by and large under the impact of group remembrances that generally differ in terms of their duration and rates of decay. Their impact strongly influences the way in which the historian represents the events and circumstances of the past.⁷

As far as the narratives termed "German" or "Jewish" are concerned, there is much evidence for the claim that the different approaches are molded along the patterns of a courtroom discourse. True, the thrust toward justificatory narratives is not confined to the issue of the Holocaust: it lies at the basis of most historical writing. Yet this tendency becomes accentuated in the face of such an extreme event as the Holocaust and its moral backdrop.

Courtroom discourse is generally characterized by a juxtaposition of long- and short-term recollections. The fact that the plaintiff's memory usually reaches further back in time than the more modest recollections of the defendant is taken into due account, as is reflected by certain procedural structures of the trial. Peter Burke stresses the judicial character of patterns of historical memory by recalling that, in England in the early modern period, there was an official (known as the "remembrancer") whose job it was to repeatedly remind a debtor of the necessity to pay his debt. His function was to assure that, for the sake of social peace, the still-outstanding claims would not be forgotten.⁸

Collective memory is similarly marked by differing degrees of durability. Peter Burke distinguishes between nations with a long, as opposed to a short, memory span. The Irish, Poles, Serbs, and Jews are generally assigned to the former category, with the British, French, and Germans being placed

in the latter. Despite all differences between the individual and the collective, it is evident that even on the level of shared sentiments, the creditor's claims clash with the defensiveness of the debtor. This discrepancy is clearly evident for historiography in general, and for the Holocaust in particular.

Indeed, at the earliest stage of the confrontation with the mass crimes of the Nazis, there stood a *trial*. And the Nuremberg tribunal probably influenced the later historiography of Nazism more than any other postwar event, its judicial structure exerting a tremendous impact on the collection and systematic sorting of materials, and later, on the basic patterns of historical argument. To be sure, the parallel with trial discourse requires careful nuancing. After all, those who write history must conform to the rules of a discipline; they are expected to offer a rational analysis that tempers the influence of collective biographical experience. Hence it would be inaccurate to simply posit an adversarial polarity between "German" and "Jewish" memory.

Nonetheless, the basic outlines of a courtroom-like structure emerge quite clearly when we pursue a lurking suspicion: namely, that the intentionalist school of research on Nazism and the Holocaust is ultimately claiming culpability. Which is to say, as I defined it at several earlier points, that this tendency in research is more consonant with the memory of the victims, whereas the structuralist or functionalist approach seems more in harmony with German memory. Such recollection tends toward a certain leniency, befitting a behavior more in the realm of negligence than culpability.⁹

By dint of its negative "radicality," generating an exceptional divergence in the choice of perspectives, the Holocaust seems to differ fundamentally from other historical events. This radicality emanates from various elements in the cataclysm: the relative swiftness of the mass murder; the large number of victims; the special modes of killing, and, above all, the locus of the murder in a zone beyond warfare and lacking any apparent meaning when measured by previous historical experience. Such characteristics cannot help but have an impact on historical narration. At first glance it may appear a paradox, but gauged in terms of the victims' experience, Auschwitz has no appropriate narrative, only a set of statistics. And this fact is consonant with an entire complex of phenomena centered on its negative radicality. One such phenomenon is the extreme relationship between *time* and *number*. The singular slaughter of millions took place in an extremely short period of less than four years; and if the industrial mass destruction is taken as the actual core of Auschwitz—leaving to one side such events as the mass killings by the Einsatzgruppen in the early phase and the death marches

toward the end of the war—then the actual span of the Holocaust is contracted still more, to the period from the spring or summer 1942 to the autumn of 1944.

Characterizing Auschwitz as an administrative and industrial event entails far more than just condemning it as particularly reprehensible. To classify the mass murder in this way is to emphasize the *standardized* nature of death, a repetition of one and the same action for weeks, months, and years. The metaphor of statistics thus becomes cauterized into the negative icon of the six million. Beyond its mere empirical meaning, this figure symbolizes the appropriate narrative, which the event itself lacks.

Given Auschwitz's *unnarratability*, the vacuum fills with surrogate tales possessing an epic structure. This epic form evokes a reversal to what seem familiar, historical images and recollections, those pointing to an antecedent remembrance. Thus, the history of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, although peripheral in its importance when measured against the atrociousness and scope of the administrative and industrial mass murder, takes on the meaning of a narrative that substitutes for what cannot be properly recounted. In view of the statistical vacuum that Auschwitz creates for posterity, the uprising provides a compensatory tale.

Moreover, for Jewish memory, the absence of a narrative appropriate to the event leads to the historical phenomenon or mode of consciousness that can be termed *compressed time*.¹⁰ In other words, in place of a historical representation of the Holocaust comes a narrative that concentrates mostly on its real or supposed prehistory, that is, on the history of anti-Semitism. That narrative is as long as it is ramified. Analogous to a negative teleology, it is able to shift the enormous, unnarratable weight of the Holocaust back to a temporal continuum emerging from the distant past. It can, however interpreted, imbue the event with meaning. Among the various Jewish narratives of anti-Semitism, one stands out in particular: that of Jewry in the Polish lands. The Polish-Jewish relationship has such particular salience because its patterns became, by and large, the dominant form of narration for Jews in general after 1945. Its principal distinguishing mark is that everyday Polish anti-Semitism, experienced historically in *concrete* terms over longer periods of time, comes to represent the basically *abstract* and short-term phenomenon of Nazi mass murder. In the interests of continuity and narrativity, the historical experience of Eastern European Jewry becomes the common narrative providing the images that illustrate the Holocaust.¹¹ A strange conflation results. The Holocaust committed by Nazi Germany becomes somehow placed in a framework of narration that is clearly outside

its causal scope and empirical explication. In short, the history of the Holocaust becomes largely integrated into the history of experienced everyday anti-Semitism.

Though structured along substantially different lines, the motif of anti-Semitism is also salient in the attempts characteristic of non-Jewish memory to represent the Holocaust and come to terms with it. Beyond all other specificities, the event assumes a special importance because of the fact that its main victims were persons of *Jewish* descent. This fact does not automatically assign the Jewish victims some kind of superior moral standing, as compared with other victims of Nazism. Rather, it holds an important psychological and cultural fact: namely that the Jews continue to occupy a special place in Western consciousness. And no matter how secular its external configuration, it still largely attaches to layers of perception with a sacral and Christian content. Partly for this reason the mass murder of the Jews appears to touch deeper emotional and psychological cords than the victimization of others by the Nazi machinery of destruction. The "significance of the Jews" still poses an urgent existential problem for Western self-understanding.

In its own turn, this deeper dimension calls forth Gentile memories located far before the concrete historical event. Imbued with quasi-mythical, suprahistorical images, these memories form a subliminal source for endowing the Holocaust with powerfully symbolic meaning. Such mythic interpretations have their own validity, acknowledging the reality of anti-Semitism as a major aspect of European history. In this fashion, a sense of guilt pervades the process of coping with the enormity of the mass annihilation. Its articulation follows the form of confession, or of mere defense.

A deed such as the Nazi mass extermination, implemented with bureaucratic and industrial efficiency, and thus based on a high degree of division of labor, induces a massive sense of distance in the perspective of the perpetrators—a dissociation from any adequate sense of personal responsibility. Yet this dissociation is repudiated—massively so—by the existential experience of the victims. For them, the effect of the extermination, based on a mobilization of an entire society, takes on an immediate concrete form, absolutely monstrous both in its intrinsic enormity and in terms of individual personal suffering.¹² After all, as we observed, the purpose and meaning of the administrative and industrial annihilation was precisely to interpose emotional distance between perpetrators and victims, in order to make

it easier for the former to kill indiscriminately. And such an organizational form of mass murder had its intended results, those implicated in the collective outrages remaining relatively well shielded from any *individual* sense of guilt. However, in a compensatory shift mediated by collective memory and belonging, that guilt has come to be felt all the more by later generations. In Germany today, it is a conspicuous component of public culture and public ritual.

Historiography must thus acknowledge a split between what I described in the previous chapter as antipodal worlds of experience: banality on the side of the perpetrators and monstrosity on the side of the victims. It is unlikely there will soon be any reconstruction of Auschwitz that can splice the two worlds of experience together. As suggested, Hannah Arendt's apparent choice of the world of banality over that of monstrosity was cause for the accusation leveled against her of having betrayed the Jewish people. In her report on the Eichmann trial, Arendt was intent on repudiating the Jewish historical narrative as developed by Gideon Hausner, the Israeli chief prosecutor: a narrative grounded in a bleak and fatalistic perception of Jewish history in the diaspora, and in a conception of anti-Semitism as virtually suprahistorical in character and scope—indeed, a negative teleology of Jewish experience. What provoked the anger of Arendt's Jewish critics was the fact that in addressing such a historical interpretation, she offered a historical narrative of her own that universalized the crime by marginalizing anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism as the pivotal factor behind the Holocaust is undoubtedly at the core of the historical narrative most attuned to the experience of the victims. The *longue durée* in the Jewish experience of anti-Jewish sentiment is congruent with a view of the Holocaust as premeditated. And this focus clearly gives rise to a narrative in the form of a prosecutor's brief. The most prominent recent version of such a narrative is the controversial and much discussed work by Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.¹³ Goldhagen constructs the history of the Holocaust as springing from a deeply ingrained and long-existent German anti-Semitism—an anti-Semitism of an annihilistic nature. In order to emphasize an extreme hatred that supposedly animated the perpetrators, Goldhagen focuses selectively on specific events involving an immediate physical proximity of the murderer to his victims. These include the massacres committed by police reserve battalions, which he describes in copious detail, and the death marches in the final phase of the war. But for the same reason, Goldhagen refrains from presenting a description of the Final Solution in its more narrow sense:

namely, the assembly-line gassing of millions of Jews, based on division of labor and on technical rationalization; the kind of industrial killing that does not require any emotional involvement.

Seen against the backdrop of an evolving historiography, his theses invite a reading in counterpoint to Arendt's in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Where Arendt underscores the banality of the events—semantically proximate, already, to the zone of assembly-line murder—Goldhagen shifts the spotlight back to purported anti-Semitic motives of the perpetrators. To that extent, his narrative of the past draws close to that shaped by Jewish memory. It is, of course, questionable whether anti-Semitism in itself offers a sufficient explanation of the perpetrators' motives. Indeed, the approach exemplified by Goldhagen blurs distinctions between the diverse layers of motivation behind the anti-Jewish actions. Some agents of mass murder doubtless acted according to traditional anti-Jewish revulsions, others—regardless of their innermost convictions—according to Nazi ideology in which the Jews loomed large as the very epitome of the enemy. But a great many others made natural use of the Jews or the Jewish question, and its ideological importance for the regime, as a ticket to advancement—an opportunism or careerism that, in any society, is always amoral. The anti-Semitism of conviction that Goldhagen musters for his argumentative onslaught is far too erratic to be serviceable as a unitary mapping of the road to Auschwitz. Such reservations notwithstanding, Goldhagen offers a valuable contribution to the further course of Holocaust research, challenging readers and researchers to a long overdue reorientation of perspective. His book represents one response to a dominant, antithetical tendency in Holocaust historiography: a tendency to vault past the Holocaust's Jewish victims in their existential and historical status as victims chosen for death only because they were Jews.

In lieu of anti-Semitism, various possibilities attempt to explain the path to genocide. Götz Aly, for instance, seems now to have moved away from his earlier "economistic" approach that (as we saw it) defines the Jews as victims of totally blind processes geared to rationalization and maximization of gain. His new interpretive framework is, in fact, the almost precise reverse of Goldhagen's. Where Goldhagen focuses on anti-Jewish hatred, on the police battalions and the death marches, Aly takes up the Nazi policy of *Flurbereinigung* as executed in the Warthegau region of Posen and the contiguous parts of Poland that were incorporated into the Reich.¹⁴ Here again, we find a careful shift of emphasis away from a specific anti-Jewish policy executed by the Nazis. Aly now highlights, properly, not only the expulsion of Poles into the Generalgouvernement but also the "resettlement" of ethnic

Germans into the vacated areas. In order to place Nazi policy in the context of "ethnic cleansing" and define genocide as the ultimate consequence of such actions, Aly underplays the broader context surrounding his key year of 1940: namely, the German anti-Jewish measures in the 1930s—the systematic exclusion and forced emigration from Germany and Austria—as well as the murderous actions begun in summer 1941 against the Jews on Soviet territory. It is crucial to note that the massacre and genocide of Jews here *preceded* the mass murder of Polish Jewry. In any event, an immediate linkage—insinuating direct causation—between the early "ethnic cleansing," the subsequent ghettoization, and the later annihilation of Jews in the Polish areas not connected to "Barbarossa" is in the end unconvincing. In order to paper over the apparent lack of causal elements, Aly offers his readers a kind of chronology in each chapter, lumping together sundry developments of the time, whatever their proximity might actually signify. Such a surrogate for causality is meant to disguise an inability to prove what Aly's thesis asserts: the centrality of the early "ethnic cleansing" operations for the Final Solution.

A closer look at Aly's work reveals a particularly troubling thesis. As he sees it, Germans brought in from the Sovietized Baltic and Bessarabia and resettled *into* the Warthegau were just as much victims of population politics as the Poles and Jews resettled *out* of the region. In the logistics of the resettlement policy, Aly finds an overriding uniformity: the trains rumbled on indifferently, transporting Poles, Jews, and ethnic Germans to and fro. From there he need take only a short step to include the problem of the expulsions of the Germans from vast areas of East-Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the war within this same syndrome. And however real and terrible the suffering of Germans who were driven from their homes, to link their fate conceptually with the evolution of policies of mass annihilation so significant for European Jewry is rather problematic. In the context of Aly's own, hidden narrative, there is a suggestion of covert rivalry between victims' recollections—a rivalry challenging the historical memory of the Jews as central victims of the Holocaust.¹⁵ And such a rivalry touches on the problem of German *guilt*.

Conflict in Holocaust interpretation and representation arises principally from questions of *continuity* and *causality*. In the historical construction, an approach embracing the perspective of the victims will stress an immediate connection between an intention to destroy expressed long before the act, and the measures that actually led to the destruction. Generally, such an in-

terpretation will find support in key documents—most notably, the corpus of German archives, consisting in large part of the materials amassed at Nuremberg—that dramatize the judicial character of the historical discourse. Such documents may be especially suitable in proving deliberate, criminal intent or culpability. Yet in the light of present-day research, they appear to have only limited value in the reconstruction of the historical *circumstances* that led to the Holocaust. Among the fundamental documents suggesting a direct link between intention, decision, and realization are, for example, the Euthanasia Decree issued by Hitler in September 1939; Hermann Göring's note to Reinhard Heydrich dated July 31, 1941, empowering him to execute the Final Solution in the territories occupied by Germany; and the minutes of the Wannsee Conference on January 20, 1942.

In actuality, these documents pose interpretive difficulties not entirely dissimilar to the blueprints of the Nazi "brain trusters." The theories propounding a direct link between the intention expressed in the documents and the mass murder proceed from a supposition that the actions of decision makers in the Nazi Reich were consonant with rational administrative behavior. If such rationality occupies the foreground, the question of personal responsibility becomes irrelevant. By its very nature, however, such an approach fails to take into account the fragmented, polycratic reality of Nazi rule. Thus, the Euthanasia Decree was not only written on Hitler's private stationery but was actually backdated to the beginning of the war on September 1, apparently for the sake of intervention in a dispute between the führer's subordinates over the spheres of their authority.¹⁶ Similarly, the memo from Göring to Heydrich bears a dubious date (July 31)—one that, like September 1 on the Euthanasia Decree, does not reflect any particular conjunction of events; it was prepared by Eichmann on Heydrich's order, to be endorsed by Göring. Finally, the Wannsee Conference was originally planned for December 9, 1941, but was postponed and finally rescheduled for six weeks later, in order to take place, not in Heydrich's office, but in an unofficial site, the Wannsee Villa, and not during usual working hours, but at noon. All of the carefully choreographed details had their purpose: to impress upon the assembled bureaucrats, representing party and state officials, that Heydrich was empowered with special authority over the Final Solution to the Jewish question in all parts of Europe under German control—that he was entitled to intervene at will wherever he desired. For Heydrich, the Jewish issue had metamorphosed into a currency of power and influence within the region's framework. Indeed, it sounds convincing that no decision had to be taken in regard to the execution of the Final Solution; the extermination of the Jews was long underway when the bureaucrats met

in Berlin. The mass slaughter seems, in short, hardly a process reconstructible by reference to planned, rational bureaucratic action by a central agency or government. It seems rather the result of continuous radicalization, nourished by different sources at the periphery as well as at the center of power. And the decision to exterminate seems even more plausibly the outcome of the Nazi agencies' practical inability to find a way out of the dead ends into which they had maneuvered themselves.¹⁷

And yet. Even in the absence of unambiguous causality, to interpret the destruction of Europe's Jews exclusively as a consequence of mere negligence, of unpremeditated action, is unacceptable to Jewish memory. The testimony of experience is too insistent. Jewish consciousness profoundly opposes any tendency to situate the Jewish victims in some locus beyond the fact of their being Jews. After all, they were murdered arbitrarily not as human beings, but as Jews, and the survivors often owed their lives to a deception about their ethnic origin. How, then, can we account for the trend toward "universalization" of the Holocaust, toward its sanitizing through "humanization"?¹⁸ For a start, we note that the desire at work here is less to explore and illuminate the murder of the Jews, so burdensome to consciousness, than to develop a far less binding critique of civilization and its discontents, framed largely in anthropological, not historical, terms. And that critique centers on a historiographically misconceived universalization of what transpired in the Holocaust: misconceived insofar as it appropriates the event not so much for the sake of understanding past reality, as for that of discovering potentialities for mass murder in the present and the future.

Such an approach amounts to a strategy of avoidance. Its triggers, so it seems, are subliminal narrative structures, bearing, in fact, a strong similarity to classic structures familiar from the tradition of theological disputation between Christians and Jews—between a Judaism universalized into Christianity, on the one hand, and the particularistic self-understanding embodied in the concept of God's chosen people, on the other. The concept of God's elect stands in stark opposition to the Christologic repudiation of that conception.¹⁹

These anterior structures of remembrance and narrative are manifest in the now notorious antagonism between Jewish and Polish memory, reflected with cyclical regularity in both recurrent rituals of remembering and Holocaust historiography. The Poles view themselves within a deep-seated mnemonic framework—that of the chosen people of Christ—a martyrologic tradition clashing with the even longer-term memory of the Jews. This

contrast spills over into historiography and even into book titles. Thus, we find the standard work by the Israeli historians Israel Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski on Poles and Jews during World War II entitled *Unequal Victims: Poles and Jews During World War Two*, and Richard C. Lucas's work *The Forgotten Holocaust: Poles Under German Occupation 1939–1944* is obviously an attempt to redress a perceived imbalance.²⁰

In the end, the “Jewish” and “German” approaches to the historiographical reconstruction of the Holocaust differ as much as do the memories of Germans and Jews with regard to the actual historical events. Jewish historiographical memory tends to view the mass murder from a certain telescopic distance, in order to set it against the backdrop of major political developments and ideological commitments: to view it from, so to speak, the perspective of *intention*. A reconstruction congruent with the German experience will largely focus on everyday life, on images leaning toward the trivial and accidental—in other words, on *negligence*. Put more bluntly: reeling from the enormity of the event, Jewish memory feels more adequately reflected by a *macroperspective* in its representation of the Holocaust. And indeed, it is far more plausible to symbolize the complex process that led to the disaster by consideration of the great historical ruptures, the incisive political shifts, and the overt ideological programs than by recourse to contingent circumstance. The “German” *microperspective* tends to dissolve the total picture into its seemingly trivial constituent parts.²¹

Memory and historical method, then, interconnect—in any event, more so than most Holocaust historiography cares to admit. There may be a link between this fact and the meaning of Auschwitz for the present and future: an event of veritable *suprahistorical* importance whose impact does not weaken as time passes. Yet the linkage does not relieve historians of their obligation to utilize conscientiously all tools available to reconstruct the past. After all, this is the homage that history owes to memory.

ELEVEN

Nazism and Stalinism

On Memory, Arbitrariness, Labor, and Death

In his book on the origins, progress, and effects of the forced collectivization and mass starvation inflicted on the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, Robert Conquest frequently resorts to images and metaphors generally reserved for Nazi mass atrocities to open his account of the widespread suffering in the Ukraine.¹ He writes, for instance, that over the Ukrainian expanses “a vast Belsen” extended in all directions: one fourth of the Ukraine’s population—men, women, children—displaced there; wasted figures, merely distorted shadows of their former selves. As in Belsen, we read, well-nourished policemen and special units of the Party ruled over their victims. And the parallel extends from such suffering to its consequences: decades later, the author encountered individuals who, having haphazardly escaped the Ukraine’s horror, were ridden with the same “survivor’s guilt” familiar in the context of the Nazi death camps.

On methodological grounds alone, the equivalence Conquest proposes between Nazi and Stalinist mass murder is highly interesting. We find, for example, the use of a later event to evaluate an earlier one—something quite unusual in historiographical praxis. Such an approach points to the transhistorical and iconic meaning of the Nazi crimes for the Western, which is to say secular Christian, consciousness. The image at the center of Conquest’s analogy, endowed with historical authenticity, is rather misleading. For a start, his effort to view the Nazi mass-murder project through the lens of “Belsen” is based on an illusion. As authentic as it was, the image British cameras captured with the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945 did not reflect what had occurred on location, in the Nazi camps on German soil. By and large, the wasted, expiring figures