

Emanuel-Marius Grec

Review of Ovidiu Raetchi, *Istoria Holocaustului: Desființarea omului*

De la ascensiunea lui Hitler până la execuția lui Eichmann

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Abstract

Ovidiu Raetchi's Romanian-language book on the history of the Holocaust tries to navigate choppy research waters by constructing a philosophical or, one might say, existentialist inquiry: how does dehumanisation affect a society's inner fabric and how does this lead to mass murder? Starting with the volume's subtitle on the destruction of humankind, Raetchi succeeds in writing a massive volume that leaves its reader with more existentialist questions than answers, as any good book should. However, in its analysis, the book also manages to offer a balance between Nazi Germany's leadership role in a genocidal endeavour and the roles played by its allies that made the Holocaust the European destruction programme that it was.

It is particularly difficult to write a general history of the Holocaust, especially when the object of study is prone to so many potentially problematic questions. Does one focus more on Nazi Germany? What attention should one give to its allies? What about the issue of collaboration? Furthermore, there is the matter of historical representation, which was defined in the now classic edited volume by Saul Friedländer. That volume examined how Nazi terror could be represented beyond a purely empirical narrative and was informed by the ubiquitous question of how scholars could historicise National Socialism without minimising the Holocaust's place in history.¹ Ovidiu Raetchi's Romanian-language book on the history of the Holocaust tries to navigate these choppy research waters by constructing a philosophical or, one might say, existentialist inquiry: how does dehumanisation affect a society's inner fabric and how does this lead to mass murder? Starting with the volume's subtitle on the destruction of humankind, Raetchi succeeds in writing a massive volume that leaves its reader with more existentialist questions than answers, as any good book should. However, in its analysis, the book also manages to offer a balance between Nazi Germany's leadership role in a genocidal endeavour and the roles played by its allies that made the Holocaust the European destruction programme that it was.

The book is divided into four main parts, each of which is split into smaller chapters running a total number of thirteen. The main bulk of the work is preceded by a prologue that serves as an introduction as well as a note on the importance of concepts. This is another aspect that highlights the author's interest in providing not merely an empirical account of facts, but also in addressing how we might attach meaning to the questions that we are asking. The volume is not just an attempt to

¹ Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

show its readers what the Holocaust was: it focuses also on the Holocaust's multiple stages. In order to achieve this, each part of the book represents a stage in the development of discrimination and mass murder: the first one approaches the Holocaust through words and laws (35–280) and the second does so through bullets (281–354). In the third part, the book moves towards the Final Solution and “the Holocaust by carbon-monoxide and Zyklon B” (355–596). Lastly, it describes the end of the Holocaust, detailing Hitler's fall and the phase of punishment that proceeds all the way to the importance of the Eichmann trial (597–631). Each section's chapters treat various stages of the genocide, with an emphasis on aspects such as the aforementioned Holocaust of words, laws, and bullets, as well as the destruction of Poland, the effects of Barbarossa, the Final Solution, the “periphery” of the Holocaust, and what the author calls “the summit of annihilation”, with reference to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The book is in many respects very good, from its cohesive and straightforward writing style to the research that it took for such a project to be realised, not to mention the philosophical questions it tries to pose by straddling the line between Hitler's persona and the role played by local communities in the destruction of Jews. Yet, there are two aspects that I found particularly important because they show what the book's final goal is. The first one is the audience and the author's clear desire to go beyond the academic world. *Istoria Holocaustului* is not a book that dwells on ambiguity: the prose is straightforward, and concepts are not analysed by themselves but always in conjunction with examples and succinct historical explanations, such as those found in schoolbooks and introductory lessons on the Holocaust. Furthermore, Raetchi neither offers a historiographical comparison of various streams of thought on Holocaust history, nor does he provide readers with the ebbs and flows of debates that have captured the academic world in recent decades. His book reads like a historical novel in which historical interpretations of the Holocaust are found in its story, not in its explanations. For example, when discussing the Western world and the Balkans in the Nazi imagination (249–280), he manages to present the historical context of these regions in the twentieth century. Yet, simultaneously, he makes the chapter feel like a schoolbook for adults as he goes country by country, providing concrete examples, as he strives to present the most significant destruction policies of the Reich's allies and puppet states. This brings me to the second aspect that I found particularly important in the book: the balance it provides. It is quite difficult for a historian to offer a multitude of perspectives when it comes to choosing a methodology for *how* to write about the Holocaust.² What Raetchi does well is to blend his writing narrative so as to present the wider audience with the inner intricacies of a variety of approaches. For example, the book succeeds in presenting both sides of the internationalist-functionalist debate, not in a necessarily explanatory way, but rather by looking at the most appealing aspects of the authors who brought about this discussion. He uses Daniel Goldhagen's theory on Antisemitism to frame a debate around this approach, while also showing its limitations in accounting for a more complex explanation of ordinary people's choices in the Holocaust.³ One finds Christopher Browning's book equally present, especially when explaining ordinary soldiers' eagerness or reluctance to kill.⁴ The fact that Raetchi does not present the

2 Jean-Marc Dreyfuss and Daniel Langton, *Writing the Holocaust* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 2.

3 Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

4 Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 2017).

intentionalist and functionalist approaches teleologically – meaning that he does not view them as goals that explain the Holocaust, but rather as theoretical tools with which his readers can better understand a very complex phenomenon – makes the book feel uninterrupted and pleasantly linear in its storytelling. Acknowledging multiple instances of analysis is the key to writing a good historical piece for the wider public, and the book seems to strike a balance between writing history and creating an equally important memory of the victims. Although one might see it as a perpetrator-oriented book, and to some extent it is, we cannot ignore the fact that the humanity of victims and survivors is brought to the fore by insisting on the powerful impact that instances of dehumanisation, such as words and discrimination policies, can have in attempting to rob people of their humanity.

While the book's organisation is meant to provide clarity amidst a quite lengthy piece of writing, it is also the work's most problematic aspect. In this sense, differentiating the stages of the Holocaust in such a manner runs the risk of creating the impression that these instances are unrelated, especially for those who read the book as an introduction to the Holocaust. The Holocaust by bullets, for example, cannot be understood without looking at the ways in which Jews were used as slave labour in the Nazis' war effort, which in turn led to an expansion of the Jews' persecution and to the Final Solution. Offering separate sections about the Nazi genocide creates the false impression that "A Holocaust" was different from "Another Holocaust", a problem which would normally be avoided in volumes written within Holocaust studies, but one which can lead to a great deal of confusion when writing a book meant to be read as a general history. That is not to say that Raetchi writes like a popular historian, but rather that the organisation and structure are the first things that one sees when looking at the table of contents, which is equally valid for both professional historians and the broader public.

These ideas notwithstanding, the book is an immense step forward in presenting a concise and extant history of the Holocaust, one which does not shy away from trying to tell the story from multiple angles. Its style of writing might be a powerful motivator for a translation in the future, as it is clear, to the point, and not bogged down in wooden language. I would also like to emphasise the research efforts involved in writing such a volume. As others have shown, it is not easy to use and create a methodology when studying the Holocaust; in fact, it might be one of the most challenging instances that historians have to face, especially when confronted with using multiple methods borrowed from sociology, political science, and anthropology.⁵ Raetchi is not new to historical writing and that is evident in the pages of this book; furthermore, his volume is published in a Romanian series, *Kritika*, which claims that it wants to reconstruct humanity through books. It is thus not surprising that this volume tries to offer a balanced overview of the way perpetrators acted during the Holocaust and of the role that Adolf Hitler played in relation to the history of National Socialism in general. It also attempts to do so with regards to the intricacies of local communities that contributed to mass murder in the Holocaust, as well as to how scholars and readers alike might come into contact with the humanity of victims and survivors, a humanity that the Nazis tried to take away. The fact that the book offers views from both below and from above, including from the bureaucratic tenets of Nazi Germany and its allies, makes it an up-to-date contribution to a much-debated field. Despite the presence of its tricky structure, which could benefit from a remake, the book's only major flaw is that it has not yet been translated into other languages.

5 Dan Stone, ed., *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, 1st ed. (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014).

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