

READING THE HOLOCAUST



INGA CLENDINNEN

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READING THE HOLOCAUST

The events of the Holocaust remain 'unthinkable' to many men and women, as morally and intellectually baffling as they were half a century ago. Inga Clendinnen challenges our bewilderment. She seeks to dispel what she calls the Gorgon effect: the sickening of the imagination and the draining of the will that afflict so many of us when we try to confront the horrors of this history.

Clendinnen explores the experience of the Holocaust from both the victims' and the perpetrators' point of view. She discusses the remarkable survivor testimonies of writers such as Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo, the vexed issue of 'resistance' in the camps, and strategies for understanding the motivations of the Nazi leadership. She focuses an anthropologist's precise gaze on the actions of the murderers in the police battalions and among the SS in the camps. And she considers how the Holocaust has been portrayed in poetry, fiction, and film.

Searching and eloquent, *Reading the Holocaust* is an uncompromising attempt to extract the comprehensible – the recognizably human – from the unthinkable.

Inga Clendinnen is the author of *Ambivalent Conquests: Spaniard and Maya in Yucatan, 1517–1577* and *Aztecs: An Interpretation*, both published by Cambridge University Press.

The hero Perseus undertook to cut off the head of the Gorgon Medusa, half human, half monster, and so hideous that all living creatures turned to stone at the sight of her.

Athene lent the hero her shining bronze shield, and Hermes his winged sandals and curved sword.

Perseus sought out the Gorgon, and found her sleeping.

Holding her reflected image steady in the shield he carried on his left arm, he struck her head from her shoulders.

Even in death the head retained its power to petrify.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV

Alas, to our great grief, we now know all. I spoke to an eyewitness who escaped. He told me everything. They're exterminated in Chelmno, near Dombie, and they are all buried in the Rzuszow forest. The Jews are killed in two ways: by shooting or gas. It's just happened to thousands of Łódz Jews.

Do not think this is being written by a madman.

Letter from Jacob Schulmann, Rabbi of Grabow Synagogue, to Łódz, 19 January 1942

When all is said and done, a single word, 'understanding', is the beacon light of our studies.

Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* 1944

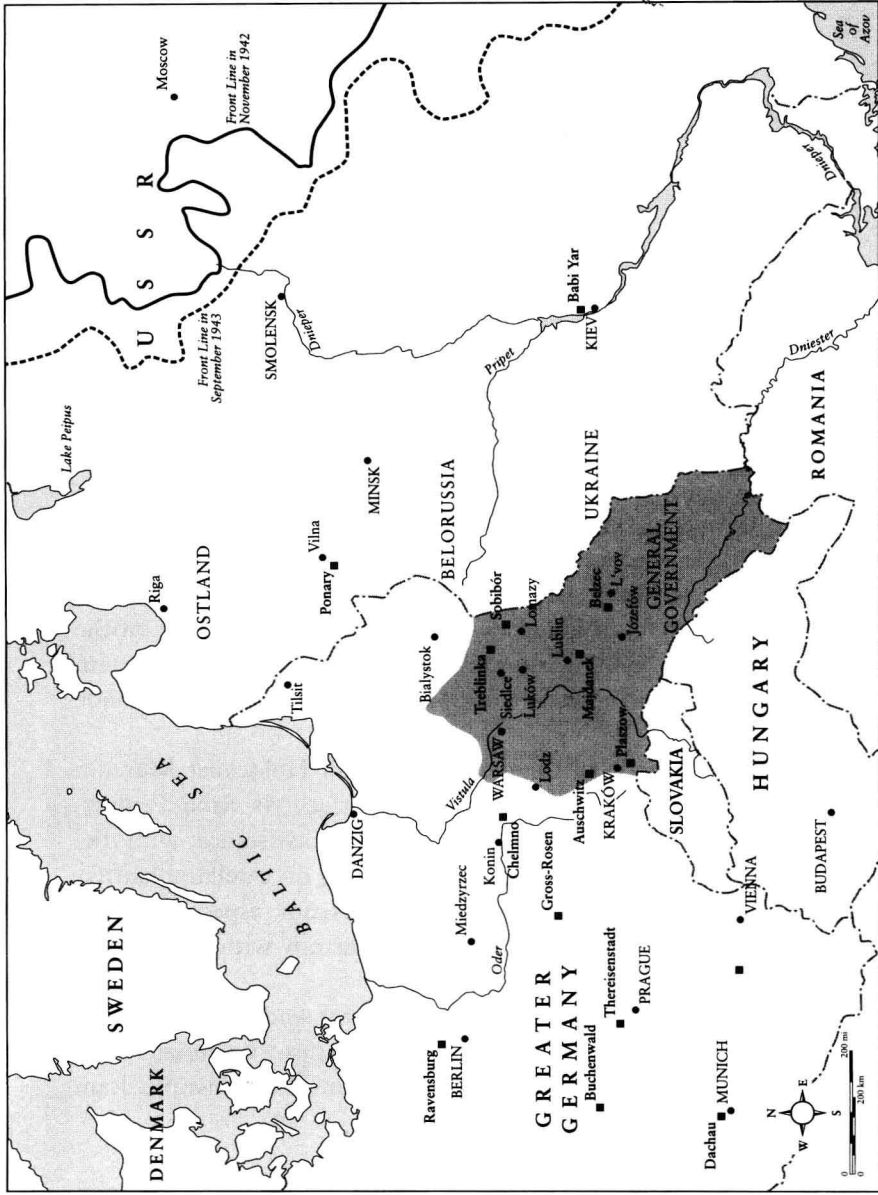
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This has been a taxing book both to read for and to write, and I have been a bad companion for its whole duration. Fortunately my husband John's patience, like his good will, seems inexhaustible. I am deeply grateful for both.

Inga Clendinnen, March 1998



Northeastern Europe under the Nazis, 1942.

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B E G I N N I N G S

I have known about Nazis for as long as I can remember. The outbreak of World War II very nearly coincided with my fifth birthday, and for the next few years I lived in the uneasy dread that the two events were obscurely, fatally, connected: that it was, in an intimate sense, my war. I was especially terrified of Germans, because they clearly gloried in their wickedness: they wore black uniforms, flaunted an insignia of a human skull couched on human bones and unabashedly proclaimed themselves 'Nasties'. At a time when Australia stood in real and present danger from the Japanese, my dreams were full of the stolid minions of the men in black, in their grey uniforms and pudding-bowl hats, invading across the back paddock, through the back gate and into the kitchen to kill us all.

As it turned out, I was not far wrong in my reading of the Nazis. By the time I was twelve I knew that my child's nightmare of the early 1940s had been reality for thousands of people not much more formidable than I, although as a gentile household mine might have been spared. Later, at university, I had friends whose families had been killed by the Nazis, and a few who had survived Nazi concentration camps. I learnt the basic alphabet of those camps: that there were work camps, where the labour of 'enemies of the state' was exploited until they could work no more and were killed; and death camps, where bulging trains arrived to discharge their human cargo directly into the gas chambers. For the first time I heard the word 'ghetto', and understood that the Nazis had re-invented the enclosed Jewish sections of some medieval towns as holding camps for Jews en route to death. I learnt no more from my friends, because they chose to speak no

further about these things, and I did not like to ask because I felt myself a child in their company.

Like many of my generation I continued to be attentive to the Holocaust, reading the better-publicised scholarly contributions and witness testimonies as they appeared in translation, watching the better-publicised films and television documentaries. I did this for much the same reasons that I read the memoirs and poems which came out of the trenches of World War I, as a matter of moral and social duty: attention ought be paid to extreme human suffering and we must do what we can to make some human sense out of it.

There was also an element of guilt. These great events brushed my own privileged, uneventful personal history only lightly. While my father fought in the France of the trenches, my brothers were too young for World War II, as were my sons for the small wars which followed it. In this, as in many things, I have been unduly fortunate. I have lived through interesting times, but I have not had to suffer them.

Despite a similarity of motive, the two reading experiences had very different outcomes. In both wars suffering was acute and prolonged, and the deaths counted in millions. The scale of the killings in what was properly named The Great War, along with the use of gas and machines to inflict death and injury at a distance, made nonsense of whatever threadbare military conventions had survived into the twentieth century. There were, nonetheless, vast differences between the piled corpses of World War I and the mass killing of civilians which accompanied its successor.

In 1914-18 the primary victims were soldiers. The German and Allied troops trapped in the trenches were equally victims, with the agents of their predicament partially unwitting and largely elsewhere. While it was made possible by war, the Holocaust was not a war. The harm was done, directly and deliberately, to unarmed, unresisting civilians of all ages and conditions, who had offered their persecutors no injury. One was a bungle, the other a crime.

There was another difference. A lesson was learnt from World War I. A generation of young men learnt to despise old men who told them it was a sweet and fitting thing to die for their country. Through the words of Wilfred Owen and other soldiers, complemented by those of scholars like Paul Fussell and John Keegan, we have come to a reasonably good understanding of life and death in the trenches: how that

lethal attrition had come about, how it was for those who survived it, how it might have been for those who died.¹ The Great War is adequately mapped and held in the collective memory.

With the Holocaust I had none of that sense of accumulating comprehension. I read dutifully – and remained unenlightened. And every time I read I would be invaded by a paralysis, a chilled inertia in the face of what seemed an impenetrable monotony of suffering, an impenetrable monotony of cruelties. My childhood nightmare was made real, but no more comprehensible. A classic history like Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews* provided the bony structure of the Holocaust – the events, the main actors, the main decisions – set out with clarity and precision. I could learn who ordered what, how many died in what region, by what method. Forceful interpretations of motives were offered. But I still could not comprehend it. I could not frame the kinds of questions that would let me make the human connections – connections with both perpetrators and victims – which lie at the root of all purposeful inquiry. The repetitive cruelties, the blank anguish of pain and despair, remained indecipherable. And this for events of little more than fifty years ago.

I felt guilt about my bafflement because I suspected its origins: that it arose because my reading of the Holocaust had been no more than dutiful; that I had refused full imaginative engagement. I had felt a similar repugnance before. I had circled the Aztecs of Mexico for years before I decided to write about them, because I was unwilling to commit myself to the full pursuit of a people for whom the ritualised killing of humans was, in some seasons, a daily event. A decade of reading and thinking later, I thought I at least understood what the Aztecs had been up to.² The horror roused by the Holocaust was more intimate, more inchoate, and more comprehensively disabling. I suspected a failure of nerve. And when illness forced me to abandon university employment and a long-term research project, I knew I had been given the opportunity, rare among academics, to do some concentrated reading and thinking in an area not my own.

Therefore these essays. I am nervous about them. Like most historians, I prefer to stay snug inside my own field, a familiar territory populated by Aztec priests and warriors, Mayan peasant-sages, Spanish clerics and conquerors. Encroaching onto unfamiliar territory – especially this territory, so jealously guarded – is an anxious business,

lacking as I do the local languages, local connections and local knowledge of the terrain.

Reading as an outsider, I am writing for outsiders. While I will discuss films, photographs and documentaries, my main focus is on books. Over the last decades the Yad Vashem Research Institute in Israel and the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University have been collecting filmed interviews from Holocaust survivors. As I write, more interviews are being recorded by the Shoah Foundation in my home city of Melbourne. That material will surely expand our understanding when we find ways to exploit it, but for the moment books remain our chief source of information and our surest, most accessible and most democratic medium of communication.

Writing as a reader and not as a scholar, I have read only a fraction of the Holocaust literature available in English, which is itself only a fraction of the literature available in Yiddish, Hebrew, German, Polish, Hungarian, Dutch and other languages. The books I discuss are those which proved their value by providing me with the system of ladders I needed to scramble out over the abyss. They are also accessible to the general reader and likely to be available in any good library. I have sampled current scholarly opinion by way of two recent collections of conference papers, each wide-ranging, each sophisticated, each pivoting around the question of understanding the Holocaust, and each confirming that fifty years after their occurrence, the events of the Holocaust remain for some of their most dedicated students as morally and intellectually baffling, as ‘unthinkable’, as they were at their first rumouring.³

The primary aim of these essays is to challenge that bafflement, and the demoralisation which attends it. I want to dispel the ‘Gorgon effect’ – the sickening of imagination and curiosity and the draining of the will which afflicts so many of us when we try to look squarely at the persons and processes implicated in the Holocaust. I want to arrive at a clearer understanding of at least some of those persons and processes to be confident that the whole is potentially understandable. This is not a matter of arriving at some ‘Aha! now I comprehend everything!’ theory or moment. The understanding I seek comes from framing sufficiently precise questions to be able to see exactly what is before us, whether persons or processes. It is both cumulative, and never complete.

BEGINNINGS

I write as a general reader who also happens to be a historian (the historian is to blame for the footnotes). I have not tried to keep the voices separate. They have been too long married for easy divorce. These are essays in the strict sense of the word – personal explorations along self-made paths, not progressions down the well-signed highways of academic scholarship. I have written neither for specialists nor for those for whom the Holocaust was a lived actuality, but for perplexed outsiders like myself, who believe with me that such perplexity is dangerous. In the face of a catastrophe on this scale so deliberately inflicted, perplexity is an indulgence we cannot afford.

IMPEDIMENTS

By the spring of 1942, when the 'Final Solution' in Europe was just getting underway, two million Russian prisoners of war were already dead, some by shooting, most from exposure and starvation.¹ Of the estimated five and a half million Russian soldiers who lived long enough to reach German prisoner-of-war camps, just over a million survived the war. The struggle with Germany cost the Soviet Union more than twenty millions of its people, a figure far too huge to be comprehended.² Poland lost nearly as many Gentiles as it did Jews, although almost all its Jews were destroyed.

It remains true that the Holocaust was a peculiarly Jewish tragedy. In the immediate aftermath of conquest Germans killed Russian and Polish civilians casually, and their leaders very deliberately. These killings were carried out for pragmatic political motives – to be rid of the burden of prisoners, to destroy a future generation of enemies, to increase German living space. The victims' compatriots were permitted to live, if only as potential slaves for the Thousand Year Reich. In the Nazi hierarchy these were indubitably inferior peoples, but they were not by definition enemies of humankind. It was the Jewish Question to which the death camps were the Final Solution.

THE GYPSIES: FORGETTING

Only one other group was nominated for extinction. The Nazis began their attack on the Gypsies before their attack on the Jews. In 1933 Gypsies were defined as natural-born criminals, and therefore subject to laws against 'social deviants', while some were being involuntarily sterilised under the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased

IMPEDIMENTS

Offspring. By 1934 they were being corralled in closed camping areas. By 1936 there were Gypsies in Dachau, Germany's first concentration camp for political and social enemies of the state. In that same year, in preparation for the Olympic Games, more than six hundred Gypsies were herded into a closed encampment beside a sewage dump, with a consequent massive loss of life through disease. Some of the survivors were assigned to forced labour until 1943, when they were sent to Auschwitz, but from the first months of the war Gypsies were deported out of Germany to the east under much the same conditions as would later govern the deportation of Jews. After Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union there were mass shootings of Eastern Europe's Gypsies as well as its Jews.

There was, however, a difference in the Gypsies' positioning in Nazi ideology which bore on their treatment in life, if not on outcomes. Gypsies were classified as genetic asocials: that is, as defective humans, not enemies of humankind. Gypsies deported to Auschwitz escaped the vicious and systematic humiliations inflicted on the Auschwitz Jews, and were largely left to their own devices in their own family encampment, although on starvation rations and with no medical care. While some, especially children, more especially twins, were favourite targets for Dr Josef Mengele's macabre racial 'researches', they were not objects of hatred, being left to die quietly of hunger or disease.

Then on the last day of July 1944, with the closure of the camps imminent and some Gypsies already transferred to other camps, the order came to kill the remainder. Almost three thousand men, women and children (there were many children) died in the gas chambers in the course of a single night. Only on that night did they realise that they, too, had been marked for death.

This information comes from Isabel Fonseca's moving and untiringly intelligent study of the long history of persecution endured by Europe's Gypsies up to and including today.³ The Gypsies are largely absent from discussions of the Holocaust, as they are absent from the monuments which memorialise it. Fonseca believes that this absence is also an erasure – that for centuries before the Nazis came to power the Gypsies had been 'quintessential outsiders of the European imagination', and that despite the death of perhaps half a million of a tiny population at Nazi hands, 'quintessential outsiders' they have re-

IMPEDIMENTS

mained, through politic national amnesias and persisting scholarly neglect.

Fonseca acknowledges that Gypsies have themselves contributed to that forgetting, because they have chosen not to differentiate within nor dwell on their long history of persecution. The Roma term for their Holocaust, 'Porraimos', or 'the Devouring', is of recent coinage, and not in general use. In fact they have chosen not to bother with history at all, because to forget, with a kind of defiant insouciance – 'their peculiar mixture of fatalism and the spirit, or wit, to seize the day' – is the Gypsy way of enduring. Should Fonseca's work bring their sufferings to wider awareness, it is unlikely that her Roma friends will much care.

THE JEWS: REMEMBERING

If the Gypsies have made an art of forgetting, 'the Jews have responded to persecution and dispersal with a monumental industry of remembrance'.⁴ If, in face of persecution, Gypsies choose to let the past blur, to seek no meanings beyond those relevant to immediate survival, pious Jews have always sought the deeper significance concealed in what only appear to be this-worldly events. They have cherished through centuries the view that the vicissitudes of their history were charged with sacred meaning; that Jewish suffering was of eternal moment; that their god might torment them, but never abandon them.

Exclude for the moment the compacted horror of 'The Final Solution', a conceptualisation drawn from an undeniably human if pathological plane, and consider the words 'Shoah' and 'Holocaust'. Such words find their origins beyond the lexicon of the merely human.⁵ As the persecutions unfolded, different communities coined different words to interpret what was being done to them in terms of that higher significance, each name striving to locate present experience within a pre-existing map of sacred meaning: 'Churban' for the destruction of the First and Second Temples; 'Shoah' for the humiliation and destruction of Israel by surrounding nations; 'Holocaust', less precisely pious in its generic sense of destruction by fire, but carrying within it the resonance of the wholly consumed sacrifice inside the Temple.

Believing Jews traditionally thought that present suffering could be rendered more intelligible and therefore more endurable by being pre-