The Holocaust: A New History

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In *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, Timothy Snyder proposes to his friend Tony Judt that the historian's task is 'like making paths' through a forest by leaving signs. Judt qualifies this. 'The first thing', he argues, 'is to teach people about trees. Then you teach them that lots of trees together constitute a forest. Then you teach them that one way to think about the forest – but there are others – is as a place capable of containing paths. Next you point out what you (the historian) take to be the best path through the forest, while acknowledging that there are other paths, though in your view less satisfactory. Only then are you free ... to "theorize" about paths: whether they are human creations, whether they distort the "natural" shape of the forest and so forth'. Judt concludes by deriding those historians 'bored by mere tree description, [who] derive greatest satisfaction from teaching the etiology of paths'.⁽¹⁾

For better or worse, Laurence Rees's book *The Holocaust: A New History* does not concern itself with the etiology of paths. It is a book aimed at the general reader, and so it would be unfair of me to bemoan its absence of theoretical scaffolding. Yet Rees does make a path through the forest – all historians do. What makes this book stand or fall therefore is the quality of its tree description and how well it charts a path through this, particularly dark, forest.

The existing literature on the Holocaust is enormous. There are 16,000 books on the subject in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. alone.⁽²⁾ Most of these have appeared in the past thirty years, in line with the growing public awareness and commemoration of the Nazi genocide. We have reached the point where scholars have started to apologize for writing 'another book on the Holocaust', as Peter Hayes does at the beginning of his recent book *Why? Explaining the Holocaust*.⁽³⁾ Rees however seems almost oblivious to this, and simply gets on with the task of telling us what happened, explaining how it happened, and attempting to understand why. Is this really a sufficient selling-point in a market saturated with titles on the Holocaust?

I admit I did not want to like this book when I first heard about it. 'Isn't he that BBC historian?' I remarked sneeringly to a colleague when she told me about its publication. But I imagine I'm not the only one who approached this book with scepticism. It follows on the heels of some excellent new syntheses, aimed both at the scholarly community and the broader reading public.⁽⁴⁾ What's more, it's lauded to the skies on its back cover ('the first accessible and authoritative account of the Holocaust in more than three decades' it

opines, unconvincingly). I study topics related to the Holocaust and I teach the subject at university level. Before reading this book I thought I had a good grasp of what happened in the Holocaust – a view shared, no doubt, by rather a lot of people, not just academics and History teachers. Yet, given the amount of factual material that was new to me, when I finished the book I realized I didn't know much about the Holocaust at all and, to be frank, unless you've studied it in considerable depth, you probably don't either.

What makes this a 'new history' (at least according to Rees) is its use of eyewitness testimony from survivors, perpetrators and bystanders. Rees has been collecting this for the past quarter century for use in his books and TV documentaries, though much of it has not been published before. The potential problems with using testimony are well known and don't need to be repeated here. In particular, the testimony of perpetrators – Rees includes that of SS officers and Romanian and Lithuanian collaborators – is notoriously unreliable, as these people have an understandable desire to exculpate rather than incriminate themselves. Rees assures us in the Postscript that all testimony was cross-checked and not included if there were 'any misgivings' (p. 427). In fairness to him, Rees never uses testimony to advance or support points of fact. Rather, it acts as a sort of compelling top layer, giving the book a mesmerizing quality in places, which I would compare to watching Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. Above all, the testimony provides imagery – some of it unforgettable. An SS man describes pouring deadly Zyklon B crystals through a ventilation shaft in the roof of a gas chamber at Auschwitz. He recalls how the crystals 'trickled down over the people' standing below (p. 255). There are countless other examples, most of them so graphic that to repeat them here, out of context, would seem like tasteless fetishization of human suffering. Needless to say, this is not the effect that Rees aims for, nor the one he achieves. Instead he succeeds in inserting an appropriate level of emotion into a topic usually associated in the public imagination with faceless, industrial-scale mass death. This is how the Nazis wanted it to be.

Testimony alone does not constitute serious history though, and fortunately Rees has done plenty of textual research too – drawing on findings from German archives and some of the best recent studies (he is, perhaps, a little too partial to the work of his 'dear friend' Ian Kershaw, but that's a minor quibble). Rees never mentions a historian by name outside of the acknowledgements (par for the course with popular histories), but I had no reason to doubt the solidity of his account. Even the first chapter, 'Origins of hate', which provides the historical backdrop to Nazism – 19th-century scientific racism and the rise of political antisemitism (a topic I know a little about) – is factually and interpretively spot-on.

Rees doesn't mention the present-day relevance of what he's writing about, yet it's almost certainly a concern for him, as his narrative subtly but definitively debunks some of the persistent myths about the Holocaust, which, sadly, appear to be more popular now than they were a few years ago. (As someone who teaches the Holocaust at university, I can vouch that some pretty noxious ideas have been finding their way into students' minds by way of the internet.) One of them is that Hitler did not know anything about the extermination of the Jews, and if he did, he would have disapproved. Throughout the book, Rees demonstrates, with hard evidence (speeches, reports of conversations) that not only did Hitler clearly know what was happening and approve of it, but also that he was one of the more radical, if not the most radical voice in the Nazi elite with regard to the 'Jewish question' – from the beginning until the very end. Hitler never gave an explicit written order, but this was of course intentional – leave no paper trail lest it be discovered and become a political liability. 'It's much better to meet than to write', he told associates in October 1941, 'at least when some matter of capital importance is at issue' (p. 230). To believe that Hitler did not know about the Holocaust is thus to succumb to his own strategy.

Rees also peppers his account assiduously with statistics; these can serve to depersonalize and sanitize mass murder, but they are nonetheless important at a time when Holocaust denial often takes the form of downplaying the number of victims ('around 300,000' is what an impressionable young student once told me). Rees cites a telegram discovered in 2000 containing the Nazis' own record of the numbers killed at Majdanek, Treblinka, Bełżec and Sobibór up to the end of 1942 (p. 313). The figures go down to the last person. Why would the Nazis lie, in an internal communication, about the number of people they had killed?

Elsewhere, Rees keeps a knowing, but unacknowledged eye on the present. Hitler was not a Zionist (the fact that this still bears repeating is itself depressing); he described any prospective Jewish state in Palestine as ‘a central organization for [the Jews’] international world swindle ... a haven for convicted scoundrels and a university for budding crooks’ (p. 86). Some of Rees’s descriptions of Hitler’s political tactics also sound a little too familiar to be coincidental; for example, ‘He would pile false charge after false charge in such quick succession that they could not be answered’ and ‘it did not matter to him that his “facts” were wrong’ (p. 111). As the Germans say, *wehret den Anfängen*.

Rees is a natural storyteller, and his narrative features some impressive set pieces which can be read through, so to speak, without one’s feet touching the ground. His account of the Evian conference in July 1938, in which country after country refused to take in any additional Jewish refugees – and the Nazis’ gleeful response to it – is particularly crushing (pp. 129–36). Other examples include the stunning deal cut between the Slovak government and the Nazis, in which the former basically agreed to pay the latter for every Jew they took off their hands (pp. 260–1) and the unfolding of the brutal ‘Harvest Festival’ killings at Majdanek in November 1943, in which over 18,000 Jews were murdered with machine guns in a single day (pp. 353–4). I’ve read accounts of these events before in more scholarly texts, but none made me consider what it must have felt like to be there. There were times I had to put Rees’s book down, feeling lightheaded.

A particularly commendable feature of Rees’s ‘path’ through the Holocaust is the emphasis he places on the intrinsic connection between the Nazi persecution of the Jews and their persecution of other groups. As such, his coverage of the Sinti and Roma (Gypsies), Jehovah’s Witnesses, disabled people and homosexuals is not included half-heartedly in the interests of appearing ‘politically correct’, but rather to elucidate the relationship between these different cases. In a striking passage, Rees describes the development of the ‘fake shower’ method to murder disabled people as early as January 1940 in the so-called ‘T4’ action (pp. 166–7). He also describes Himmler’s contradictory (and frankly bizarre) attitude towards ‘pure-blood’ Gypsies versus those who had ‘intermingled’ with the German population, which became significant after the Nuremberg Laws were extended to Gypsies in November 1935 (pp. 122–3). Through such examples, Rees finds a way out of the binary that so often defines discussion of this sensitive issue: either that Nazi persecution was ‘all about the Jews’ or, more often, that Nazi persecution was about all of these groups in the same way and in equal measure.

As mentioned earlier, Rees’s decision not to engage in any of the theoretical debates surrounding the Holocaust is both an advantage and a limitation. A narrative which sets the factual record as lucidly and engagingly as this does is to be welcomed, but there are times when even a general reader might want a bit more conceptual analysis. There has been so much excellent work done in recent years to interrogate what we mean when we say ‘Holocaust’ – Cesarani’s provocative formulation of the Holocaust as a ‘cultural construction’ being a prominent example (5) – that for Rees to content himself with a few lines (p. 252 and pp. 425–6), which even then only address two aspects of the issue (the temporal development and shifting meaning of the term ‘Final Solution’ and the question of whether the Holocaust refers to Jews only or other groups too) is a little disappointing, especially when his account otherwise does such a good job of exploring the scale and complexity of ‘what happened’ in the encounter between the Nazis and the Jews of Europe (not to mention the role of non-Nazis and non-Germans in this encounter).

For someone who has written one of the most popular books on Auschwitz (6), in this volume, Rees deliberately pulls his focus away from this infamous camp, with the intention of decentring our understanding of the Holocaust. He gives due attention to the ‘Reinhard’ camps – Bełżec, Sobibór and Treblinka – arguing that these camps ‘symbolize the singularity of the crime’, given that their function was solely to kill people. Yet, owing to the lack of images of these places of murder (the Nazis designed them as temporary sites and destroyed them completely after they had served their purpose) and also, counterintuitively, to the lack of survivors, these camps have been ‘overlooked’ (p. 355), if not in historical research then certainly in Holocaust commemoration and public understanding. Auschwitz only became central to the genocide in late 1943 and it wasn’t until 1944 that the railway line was extended into the

entrance of the Birkenau part of the camp (the ubiquitous image we have of the Holocaust), by which point most of the Holocaust's victims had already been killed and its end was less than a year away.

This is a much needed corrective to the popular interpretation of the Holocaust, which still fixates on Auschwitz. That said, Rees does not devote a huge amount of attention to mass shootings, which – as research conducted since the opening of archives in formerly communist eastern Europe has shown – constituted around half of all deaths in the Holocaust.⁽⁷⁾ Rees seems to believe that the gas chamber was the embodiment of some particular evil humans are capable of. He rightly notes that the main motivation behind their development was not to murder larger numbers of people than shooting, but rather to make the killing psychologically easier for the perpetrators (p. 223). Yet, as Rees himself acknowledges in discussing some of the reasons the Allies gave for not bombing Auschwitz, the Nazis could – and would – have killed just as many Jews with machine guns (p. 404).

This is clearly not a book for academic historians, nor even for History undergraduates (save for as a primer), since it lacks so much of the scholarly apparatus that engagement with a historical topic requires at this level. But there is without question space for 'another book on the Holocaust' aimed at the general reader. Not least because so much of the path-breaking research done over the past few decades has not yet percolated down into school syllabuses, let alone into public understanding. Rees has taken stock of the breadth of new knowledge obtained over the past three decades and has presented it in a manner so accessible that I would happily present this book to any literate person. That in itself is a remarkable achievement.

But it's also given me pause for thought, especially with regard to the way I teach the Holocaust. Some topics are just too important to be treated as mere topics of academic inquiry. After reading Rees's book, no longer will I open my seminar class with the line: 'So, how useful do you think the term "Holocaust" is as an interpretive tool for understanding the Nazi genocide of European Jewry?' Only to be met with blank stares. Instead, we'll look at the facts first. Facts don't 'speak for themselves', as the saying goes, but they do prevent a whole range of possible, misguided interpretations. Rees's book provides the facts in a gripping narrative interspersed with compelling, moving and relatable testimony. It's exactly what's needed in 2017.

Notes

1. Tony Judt with Timothy Snyder, *Thinking the Twentieth Century* (New York, NY, 2012), pp. 272–3. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Wolfgang Benz, "'Erstaunlich hingebungsvolle Mörder?'," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 21 August 2017, p. 13. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York, NY, 2017), p. 1. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Along with Hayes' aforementioned book, there's also: David Cesarani, *Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews 1933–49* (London, 2016), and Timothy Snyder, *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (New York, NY, 2015). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Cesarani, *Final Solution*, p. xxvii. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the 'Final Solution'* (London, 2005). [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See: Timothy Snyder, 'The Holocaust: The Ignored Reality', *New York Review of Books*, 16 July 2009 <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/07/16/holocaust-the-ignored-reality/> [2]> [accessed 29 September 2017]. [Back to \(7\)](#)

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