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Holocaust Documentation in Eastern Europe

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It is now common wisdom that Eastern Europe was *the* major site of the Holocaust. Within the regions stretching from Estonia in the North to the Mediterranean in the South, and as far as the Northern Caucasus in the East, more than 5 million Jews were murdered between 1939 and 1945, who made up 90 % of all victims of the Holocaust. But even a large part of the Jews deported from France, Belgium and the Netherlands actually had been immigrants and originally came from the East, and the majority of victims from Western Europe and the Reich were deported to Eastern Europe and killed there in the extermination centers and execution sites.

Eastern Europe became a murder site out of several reasons: The first and foremost was Nazi German imperialism and its specific features in eastern Europe. Parts of Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Western regions of Soviet Union were envisaged as German Living Space "Lebensraum", with a major restructuring of the population, which was to be completely outlawed. Though the "Lebensraum" concept was never properly defined, it meant the absence of Jews. Actually it were almost the same regions where most of European Jewry lived, Poland, the Baltics, the Western parts of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania. In Poland, the Baltic states and the Soviet Union mass murder of Jews started right at the German invasions, but also other parts of the population were highly affected by German violence, Polish and Soviet elites, Soviet POWs, Roma, partisan suspects and mentally ill.

An impressive wave of research developed already during the early postwar years, predominantly in Poland and Hungary, and predominantly undertaken by Jewish scholars and survivors, by Jewish and national investigation commissions. This research almost ceased during the communist period, very early in the Soviet Union, at a later point in Poland. Until the 1980s there was a paradoxical situation that the least Holocaust research was conducted *on or in* Eastern Europe, though it was the central site of Holocaust history.

Almost all historical reconstruction relied on Jewish émigrés, in first place in Israel, but also in the United States, in France, and even in Argentina, not to forget the “Landsmanshaftn” who were preserving the memory of their destroyed communities.

During the late 1980s this situation started to shift; now the general institutionalized historiographies began to integrate either the Holocaust in the wartime historiographical narrative, or Eastern Europe in Holocaust historiography. And the fall of communism enabled historians to explore topics which had been by and large ignored for a long time. Now, for almost 25 years an impressive variety of research has developed, starting from a broad perspective of Eastern Europe as a space of extreme violence during World War II, reconstructing German extermination policies and national histories of the Holocaust, examining perpetrator institutions and personnel, ghettos, camps, everyday lives and identities of Jews under persecution, and many other subjects. Nevertheless, major blank spots remain, in a geographical perspective especially concerning Greece, but also the Ukraine and the occupied territories of the Russian Federation. But also other perspectives require new and in-depth research, like an integrative analysis of crimes against Jews and non-Jews, the histories of Jewish children and gender relations during the Holocaust, and, probably most imminent, the relationship between the societies in Eastern Europe and the Holocaust. And there are many more.

Holocaust research in the beginning was based on two major source groups: German administrative files, which were collected for war crimes trials, and witness statements of survivors. Of course, other important collections like the Ringelblum and other ghetto archives are in use for decades. Nevertheless, the late 1980s, early 1990s gave access to a much broader source base. The opening of archives of former communist Eastern Europe marks a breakthrough for Holocaust historiography. But it must be emphasized, that this occurred in the context of a renewed worldwide interest in Holocaust history, and new efforts like the establishment of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and intensified activity of Yad Vashem. There are many other institutions, Holocaust centers, traditional and new Museums, Holocaust chairs at universities, local initiatives and so on. Most of them not only pursue research and commemoration activities, but also gather and create sources, compile their own collections.

Of course, there is an enormous variety of sources relating to the Holocaust, from notes of conversations between Hitler and Himmler at the one end to inscriptions of Jewish inmates

in prison walls at the other. Though the threefold perspective of perpetrators – victims – bystanders, which was entered by Raul Hilberg in Holocaust historiography, is under debate, it is still useful for a general classification of sources. There is no clear definition of Holocaust-related sources, since the directions of research change over time and space, and thus new sources previously unexplored for the purpose of Holocaust historiography come into focus.

The majority of perpetrator sources were created in an administrative process and according to formal rules. They are kept more or less in State archives in Germany, or former occupied or allied Axis states. Anti-Semitic propaganda material from the prewar and war years is also available in libraries worldwide. Only tiny fragments of autobiographical perpetrator sources have been found, like diaries, letters. Some are included in the files of criminal investigations, others presumably in private property.

The state of victim sources is quite different. The Jews under German hegemony were only allowed to have very restricted institutional structures, like the obligatory Jewish Councils or welfare institutions. Jewish cultural and political organizations, Jewish communities often ceased to exist, their records were confiscated and by and large destroyed. Most other Jewish sources, except leaflets, remained in the individual realm, diaries, correspondence, notes, objects. And the perpetrators wanted to destroy most remains of Jewish life, especially Jewish voices from the Holocaust. Thus Jewish wartime documentation is extremely fragmented and dispersed in repositories, but also in private collections.

It is almost impossible to define what can be called bystander documentation. Although it pertains to all contemporary documentation relating to the Holocaust created by *neither* perpetrators *nor* victims, there is a common sense that this perspective includes sources on reactions by international public and diplomacy, by organisations outside German hegemony, and by all individuals who were not directly involved in the Holocaust. Of course, this is an almost unlimited field of documentation, and it changes over time according to the research questions which come into mind.

I think it is reasonable to add a fourth group of documentation to this specter, the postwar documents. They include all investigations and autobiographical sources created after the end of occupation or the end of the war. Currently there is an estimate of about 160,000 existing survivor testimonies, which can easily be counted as victim documents. But is much more difficult to categorize the hundreds of thousands of criminal files, restitution

documents and other post-1945 paperwork relating to the Holocaust. And there is a major methodological difference between the pre-1945 and the postwar documentation, that is the retrospective nature of the latter.

Holocaust documentation consists of all documents relating to the Holocaust as it happened in the West and North from Norway and the occupied British isles to Vichy Algeria in the South, but also the sources from the immigration countries all over the world. So what is specific about the Holocaust documentation for *Eastern* Europe? Research on Eastern Europe requires an enormous capability to read foreign languages, probably about 20, including Finnish and Macedonian. But I think four other points are most relevant:

The first aspect is the specific nature of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe: The persecution and murder of east European Jewry was a much less bureaucratic process than in central and Western Europe. As a consequence, there probably were much less institutions involved and much less paperwork produced. This applies, of course, predominantly to occupied Poland, Baltics, Soviet Union, and parts of Romania.

Second: The Holocaust in Eastern Europe, again in these areas and in Yugoslavia, included systematic mass murder *in place*, with very low rates of survival in most of the regions. This meant that the murderers deliberately destroyed their documentation very early. There is, for example, almost no German document available from one of the "Einsatzgruppen" in the Soviet Union or from "Aktion Reinhardt", the murder of Jews within the extermination camps in the General Government. On the other hand, the almost complete annihilation of Jews especially in Poland, in the Baltics and in the occupied parts of the Soviet Union, meant that Jewish documents were lost, and a comparatively small number of victims was able to testify after the war. Both the lower degree of bureaucracy and the small percentage of survivors are among the reasons why it remains such a difficult task to establish the victims' names in these regions.

A third aspect which affected Holocaust documentation is, of course, communist rule in most parts of Eastern Europe after 1945. After a short period of a limited Holocaust awareness on 1945/47, the specific nature of crimes against Jews *was* ignored or even denied, especially within the Soviet Union, now enlarged by the Baltics, Eastern Poland and Bessarabia. There were almost no efforts to commemorate or document the Holocaust inside the Soviet Union between the late 1940s and the late 1980s, although with some remarkable exceptions. Thus we have almost no testimonies created within the Soviet Union

during this important period, when most of the witnesses were still alive. In other East European countries, the situation varied, for example, conditions in Poland were somewhat better between the mid-1950s and 1968.

My fourth point is the important role of the Secret Police for investigating Nazi war crimes, which is rather specific for East European countries. Within the Soviet Union, some 320,000 persons were investigated and put to trial for alleged collaboration, probably some thousands or ten thousands among them for participation in crimes. This is important documentation, especially on a micro level, but it requires extraordinary source criticism due to the ideological nature of the investigations. In some of the former communist countries culture of archival secrecy prevails, especially regarding collaboration and the related documentation.

Now, almost 25 years after the collapse of communism, a European-wide awareness of Holocaust history has evolved, though the cultures of memory are rather different in Western and Eastern Europe. In some countries, Holocaust history even seems to collide with current trends of nationbuilding, especially as far as the meaning of non-German cooperation in the Holocaust is concerned. Nevertheless, most countries have established modern democratic systems of archival administration and public access. With some exceptions like the Russian Secret Service and Russian Military archives, or Church repositories in some countries, it is now possible to attain access to most Holocaust documentation.

Nevertheless, as research is broadened, deepened, and identified more relevant collections, it also becomes more difficult to get either a comprehensive overview, or to identify relevant sources for one topic, scattered in archives all over the world. It is a major task of the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure, to integrate existing information on relevant collections, and to create new such information, by setting up a general database of Holocaust related archival collections, and gradually translating the collection descriptions into English language. Additional to the major collections of Yad Vashem and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, this will enable both professional researchers and local public historians to identify the collections pertaining to their subjects or regions, and prepare their archival trips.

But the most important prospect for the future is the integration of Holocaust history.

Nowadays it is almost impossible to write the history of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe

without considering collections stored in other areas, like files of central agencies in the Berlin Bundesarchiv, German criminal investigations in the Bundesarchiv Ludwigsburg, major collections of victims' documents and testimonies in the United States, in Israel or elsewhere. The EHRI database will provide the necessary information in the future.

But EHRI is also an effort to bring together research communities, enhancing the exchange of knowledge *and* approaches in Holocaust history. Thus it will also provide a basis for the exchange of experiences in different archives, unearthing documentation which at first glance is not Holocaust-related, but actually contains some precious information on Holocaust history.

And EHRI is an effort to integrate all European documentation, especially the wealth of Eastern European history into Holocaust research, while western researchers are not familiar with Eastern cultures and societies. By a standardized indexing system, the database will also serve to identify parallel patterns in Western and Eastern European Holocaust history, for example concerning the reaction of Jewish communities, of societal behavior and forms of collaboration. In other word, it will facilitate comparative research, which is only beginning. As the witnesses will not be able to testify in the near future any more, it is even more important to collect all available evidence, to preserve it and to make it available, not the least because Holocaust documentation is a part of European cultural heritage.