Postmodern Holocaust Historiography?

Saul Friedländer's *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews*[1]

— Dr Wulf Kansteiner

The field of Holocaust studies has been hit by an intellectual earthquake whose precise magnitude and long-term consequences cannot be ascertained at this stage. In 2007 Saul Friedländer published *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews 1939-1945*. The book has been rightly celebrated as the first victim-centreed synthetic history of the Holocaust and won its author many prizes including a Pulitzer Prize. Friedländer has managed to write a transnational history of the 'Final Solution' that captures the evolution of Nazi anti-Jewish policies and the extensive record of collaboration and indifference throughout Europe in great detail. At the same time, with exceptional literary finesse, Friedländer integrates into that comprehensive history the voices of the victims which he carefully gathered from diaries and memoirs. Yet *The Years of Extermination* accomplishes a lot more than simply documenting how the victims reacted to a genocidal campaign whose history has all too often been told from the perspective of the perpetrators.[2] The book represents an ethical landmark because Friedländer developed an innovative, radical narrative structure which performs the victims' point of view and thus calls into question the limits of Holocaust studies and historical writing in general.

Friedländer manipulates key parameters of historical writing – space, time, and causality – in such a way that his readers experience a faint echo of the radical sense of alienation and displacement that the victims felt as they were expelled from society and deported to the death camps from all over Europe. Let's consider for example subchapter VII in chapter 7 (438-444). The chapter describes how Jews in occupied Europe reacted to deportations and the dissolution of the ghettos. In five and a half pages, Friedländer takes the reader from Theresienstadt to Paris, Dresden, Lodz, Warsaw, London, The Hague, and Brussels. In every city he introduces the reader to a victim of Nazi persecution often citing from diaries. This rapid change of location does not create a state of geographical ambivalence, i.e., the readers always know where they are at any given point in the text. But the multitude of quickly changing narrative settings prevent even attentive readers from retaining a clear, distinct image of the various locations and the events that happen in each location. The audience of *The Years of Extermination* is immersed in a tidal wave of fear, confusion, and misery.

Friedländer's manipulation of narrated time is even more unsettling. On first glance, the book appears to progress in a strictly chronological fashion since each chapter covers a clearly defined period of time. But Friedländer juggles so many different people, places, and narrative strands that the chronological chapter sequence gives way to a multidirectional chronological web once the reader enters the narrative. Every few paragraphs and often several times on a single page, the text jumps back and forth in time. The constant chronological vacillation can have some rather disturbing effects, as the example of Reinhard Heydrich illustrates. Heydrich, who died on June 4, 1942 after having been wounded by Czech commandos a few days earlier, is featured prominently in *The Years of Extermination*. He appears on seventy-three pages of the book. On some of these pages, however, Heydrich literally returns from the dead. Heydrich dies for the first time on pages 349 and 350; he is alive again on page 352, dead on page 357, alive on pages 362, 367, and 368, dead on page 374, alive on page 377, and then never mentioned again. In every single instance that Heydrich appears, the context explains the situation completely adequately but the lack of chronological sequentiality, in this case as well as in many others, makes it impossible for the reader to gain a clear sense of narrative progression. On a subconscious rather than a conscious level, Heydrich's zombie-like existence in the pages of the book calls into question simplistic, comforting illusions of linear time to which historians conventionally subscribe.

Finally, Friedländer offers a particularly effective and disturbing deconstruction of historical causality. On the one hand, *The Years of Extermination* provides a consistent, explicit model of causation. Time and again, Friedländer attributes the anti-Jewish rage of the Nazis as well as the willing collaboration and widespread indifference of so many people across Europe to various forms of anti-Semitism, ranging from Hitler's racist, redemptive anti-Semitism to more conventional forms of Christian anti-Jewish prejudice. On the other hand, Friedländer covers a multitude of events that escape his own explicit explanatory model. In essence, the explicit framework of anti-Semitism is implicitly overwhelmed by empirical excess. Consider, for example, the cases of Belgium and the Netherlands. Friedländer reports that the Dutch, especially those living in the cities, were very tolerant of Jews. Nevertheless, the docile Dutch police and the highly efficient Dutch bureaucracy proved terrible weapons in the quest to rid the country of Jews, most of whom

had lived in the Netherlands for many generations (122, 375, 406). Belgium, in comparison, featured rabidly anti-Semitic, pro-German organizations whose members staged their own pogroms (259). Yet many foreign-born Jews who had found refuge in the country without being integrated into Belgian society were ultimately rescued by ordinary citizens (423). Timing, administrative structures, political convictions and other factors appear to have played a more important role in these cases than seemingly malleable anti-Jewish dispositions.

As a result of Friedländer's scrupulous handling of the evidence similar questions can be raised about the motives of German perpetrators, French and Eastern European collaborators, Italian resisters, passive church officials, and even Jewish observers in Palestine. The more one studies the multiple facets of Holocaust history presented in *The Years of Extermination*, the more the key concept 'anti-Semitism' that Friedländer has carefully erected begins to fray at the edges and appears questionable. Readers are left with a lot of different anti-Semitisms that had different consequences in different settings. In addition, we get a sense of other factors at work, but only a few of them are identified for us, and Friedländer never integrates these factors into an overarching analytical model.

Friedländer, the doyen of Holocaust studies, could have easily developed a more dynamic, flexible and conceptually satisfying explanatory model. The point is, however, that Friedländer does not want to present a comprehensive, analytically pleasing explanation of the Holocaust. Instead, Friedländer wishes 'to offer a thorough historical study of the extermination of the Jews of Europe, without eliminating or domesticating that initial sense of disbelief' caused by the recognition that the Nazis indeed intended to murder all Jews without exception (xxvi). To maintain that sense of disbelief Friedländer has to protect it from knowledge that 'rushes in and smothers it,' as Friedländer puts it on the same page. The task of producing and protecting disbelief entails, among other things, that Friedländer implicitly trips up his own analytical framework, thus rendering anti-Semitism both omnipresent and opaque.

Many important developments in Holocaust historiography and Holocaust culture are reflected in *The Years of Extermination*. During the last fifteen years historians in the very dynamic field of Holocaust studies have worked their way through a number of interrelated dialectical concepts. They have tried to understand the precise interaction between the centre and the periphery of the Nazi empire in the decision-making process. In addition, they have sought to determine to what extent the perpetrators were driven by ideological motives and/or were subject to non-ideological, social-psychological dynamics that quickly turned them into murderers.[3] This conceptual map – centre vs. periphery and ideology vs. structure/psychology – was prefigured in theoretical publications of the 1970s and 1980s and fully developed in path-breaking publications such as Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*.[4] Friedländer positions himself very clearly in this conceptual landscape. He identifies ideological commitments and the centre of the Nazi power as the origins of the 'Final Solution.' At the same time, Friedländer subtly integrates interpretations and research results into his book which were originally developed from alternative analytical points of view. In this way he destabilizes his own explicit analytical framework and transposes his readers into a state of analytical unease.

Unlike many of his colleagues Friedländer engages in an interesting, complex dialogue with contemporary visual Holocaust culture. Friedländer uses Holocaust iconography to help his reader retain their bearings in the dispersive narrative universe of *The Years of Extermination*. The beginning of section IX in chapter 5 is a fitting example. In the course of a few pages and often using only a few words, Friedländer evokes well-known images of deportations. The text creates in the reader's mind registration procedures, deportation lists, the rounding up of the victims, their march to the railway station, and the terrible trip and arrival in the East (306-307). At the same time, Friedländer invokes these images that are well known from films like *Schindler's List* and *Holocaust* to correct problematic aspects of popular Holocaust culture. He shows, for example, that the allegedly passive bystanders we know from the movies often actively participated in a Nazi culture of violence and victimization. Moreover, he sidesteps the heroization of Holocaust survivors, which has played an important role in the construction of the Holocaust paradigm since the 1970s, while expressing a great deal of respect for the victims of the Nazi genocide.[5] Thus, on a number of different levels, Friedländer's book is a narrative performance at the threshold of history and memory written by one of foremost experts in the field who is himself a victim of Nazi persecution.[6]

Finally, *The Years of Extermination* is the product of extensive theoretical discussions about the nature and limits of historical writing which have been conducted amongst historians and historical theorists in response to the linguistic turn of the 1970s. The most important of these postmodern critiques was launched by Hayden White.[7] White concedes that history deals with real people and events whose existence can be verified according to generally accepted rules of evidence. In this respect, history is a form of non-fiction writing. At the same time, history primarily conveys meaning through its narrative structures and therefore is inextricably intertwined with the conventions and traditions of fictional discourse. The heated debates triggered by the radical epistemological relativism of White and others occasionally invoked the 'Final Solution' as a kind of theoretical litmus test. That occurred for instance in 1990 when Friedländer organized a conference designed to test White's ideas in the field of Holocaust studies.[8]

The contextualization of the *The Years of Extermination* highlights Friedländer's accomplishments and the radical implications of his work. Friedländer invented a new narrative format for the writing of history which integrates academic historiography with elements of contemporary visual culture. Moreover and more importantly, he cast seemingly conventional historical prose into a decidedly dispersive narrative structure with the result of crafting an ethical intervention of exceptional importance. In the last resort, Friedländer ranks moral insight above explanation because he is convinced that the disbelief of the victims in the face of the Nazi onslaught is still the most appropriate reaction to the Holocaust. By simulating the victims' point of view Friedländer hopes to contribute to the construction of a morally sensitive cultural universe whose consumers are hopefully more willing to transform disbelief into resistance than their 20th century predecessors.

Dr Wulf Kansteiner is Associate Professor of History at the State University of New York, Binghamton.

Further Reading

Browning, C. (1992) *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland,* New York: Aaron Asher

Friedländer, S. (2007) *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933-1939.* New York: HarperCollins

Friedländer, S. (1997) *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939.* New York: HarperCollins

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

Friedländer, S. (1979) *When Memory Comes.* New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux

Kansteiner, W. (2006) *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz.* Athens: Ohio University Press

REFERENCES

1 Friedländer, S.(2007) *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1933-1939,* New York: HarperCollins. See also Friedländer, S. (1997) *Nazi Germany and the Jews: The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939,* New York: HarperCollins. This essay is based on a more extensive analysis of Friedländer's book in Kansteiner, W. (2009) 'Success, Truth and Modernism in Holocaust Historiography: Reading Saul Friedländer 35 Years after the Publication of *Metahistory,' History & Theory* 48/2, pp.25-53.

2 See for instance Longerich, P. (1998) *Politik der Vernichtung: Eine Gesamtdarstellung der nationalsozialistischen Judenverfolgung,* München: Pieper; Hilberg, R. (2003) *The Destruction of European Jews.* 3 volumes. New Haven: Yale University Press, and compare to Yahil, L. (1990) *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932-1945,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3 Stone, D. (2009) 'Who is a Perpetrator? The Changing Construction and Interpretation over Time,' available at www.bpb.de/files/BLGDJB.pdf.

4 Browning, C. (1992) *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland,* New York: Aaron Asher.

5 For a critique of TV Holocaust culture see for example Kansteiner, W. (2006) *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz,* Athens: Ohio University Press.

6 See Friedländer's autobiography *When Memory Comes* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1979).

7 See especially White, H. (1973) *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press and White, H. (1987) *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

8 Friedländer, S. (ed.) (1992) *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution',* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Dr Wulf Kansteiner is Associate Professor of History at the State University of New York, Binghamton.

Polychronicon was a fourteenth-century chronicle that brought together much of the knowledge of its own age.

Our Polychronicon in *Teaching History* is a regular feature helping school history teachers to update their subject knowledge, with special emphasis on recent historiography and changing interpretation.

Designing enquiries to help pupils think about Friedländer's interpretation of the Holocaust

Key Stage 3: 11 to 14 years

Which textbooks should we use?
The ethics of historical representation

There has been much debate in recent years in Holocaust education about the ethics of representation – about, for example, the ethics of relying heavily on perpetrator images of victims, as many textbooks do, and thus perpetuating the perspective of the perpetrators and the dehumanization of victims. Instead of doing this, many have argued, we should aim, as it were, to re-humanise victims of the Nazis' by restoring their individual stories and by looking at the lives that they had before they were victimized. In other words, we should aim to understand what the Nazis destroyed and not just their acts of destruction.

Victim's perspectives and experiences form the heart of Friedländer's work. Pupils might be asked to examine how far school textbooks and resources focus on these stories, or where such resources use non-Nazi primary sources relating to those the Nazis made victims. An enquiry that asked pupils to agree on criteria for ethical representation and to apply them by assessing a range of textbook presentations of the Holocaust against these ethical criteria would be likely to engage pupils and to get them debating an important question. What is wrong with exclusive reliance on perpetrator materials? How can we use such sources in ethically responsible ways? What role should non-Nazi sources play in textbook accounts?

A Level: 16 to 19 years

Telling tales? Narrative strategies in history

Sixth form students need to engage with historical interpretations. How often do we ask them to think about history as a form of writing, however? How often do we ask them to think about what an author is saying *by the way in which* they say things or about what the way in which a story is told can tell us about the story teller and their purposes and assumptions?

Friedländer conveys his meaning by his content but also by the formal choices that he makes and by the way that he writes, seeking to 'perform' the perspective of the victims. Why not ask sixth formers to consider the meanings that are conveyed by the *form* that historical work takes? What are orderly textbook paragraphs trying to tell us about the past simply by their form (that this is something we can straightforwardly know, something that we can manage and something that we can make sense of and order?).

Historical representation is not simply a factual matter. As Friedländer shows us it is an ethical matter and it is also a question of form. What forms are appropriate for complex stories? What kind of histories are adequate to the enormity of the Holocaust? Should stories about the Holocaust be fractured and multiple, for example, like light deflected by shards of glass?

The Editors