book review essay

There Is Always Something New to Discover

The Holocaust, Gender History, and Commemoration Policies in Central and Eastern Europe

Review essay by **Monika Vrzgulová**

Denisa Nešťákova, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbala Klacsmann, and Jakub Drabik, eds., *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2021, 292 pp., $119.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9781644697108.

Plachá Pavla, *Zpřetrhané životy: Československé ženy v nacistickom koncentračnom tábora Ravensbrück v letech 1939–1945* (Torn lives: Czechoslovak women in the Ravensbrück Nazi concentration camp in 1939–1945), Prague: Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, Puchra, 2021, 496 pp., €34.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9788075640628.

Kata Bohus, Peter Hallama, and Stephan Stach, eds., *Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism: Remembering the Holocaust in State-Socialist Eastern Europe*, Budapest: Central European University Press, 2022, 340 pp., €71.00 (hardback), ISBN: 9789633864357.

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Research on the Holocaust, including memory policies, has been characterized by decades of concentrated interdisciplinary efforts by experts across the world. It can be stated that the causes of the Holocaust, its stages, and its geopolitically determined forms and impacts are known to us today. We have a certain idea about them, which is, however, constantly being refined and complemented by new generations of academics. They look at this period through the prism of older or later discovered or disclosed sources and data, using new theoretical concepts and perspectives. This process is evidenced by three new publications, among others, that represent the work of researchers who have focused on the Holocaust from a gendered perspective and explored the forms and contents of Holocaust commemoration policies in Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War period.

The starting point of the process that resulted in the publishing of the special volume *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust* was an international conference with the same title, held at Comenius University in Bratislava in

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2019. I had the honor to be part of it, listen to the presentations of papers, and discuss them with the participants. The conference was organized against the backdrop of the rising attacks against academic freedom and women's rights that have become widespread in Central and Eastern Europe nowadays. The studies presented in the volume focus primarily on this region, tackling a number of issues gendered experiences of World War II and the Holocaust. The editors wanted to encourage others "to fill the lacunae that still—four decades after the enrichment of Holocaust studies by way of attention to gender—exist when it comes to female experiences" (xii). They also pointed to another problem faced by those organizing conferences on "gender"—how to deal with the often prevalent equation of "gender" with "women" or "female" experiences.

The volume opens with three texts by important representatives of Holocaust research through the gender lens, which give a theoretical-philosophical framework to the publication (Dalia Ofer, Natalia Aleksiun), while also offering a critical reflection on the current conditions of research and female researchers (Andrea Petö). The next chapters discuss several thematic areas representing various types of situations and challenges faced by both women and men under radically changed life situations during the period.

Two texts explore gender stereotypes under Nazi occupation and authoritarian regimes. They observe the disruption of previously functioning gender roles and changes in lived experience. Agnes Laba focuses on shifts in the concept of masculinity during World War II, their manifestations in daily life, and their impacts on women's self-image and roles in society. Laba clearly points out the close links between the gender roles of men and women and their mutual influence. Based on an analysis of printed media targeting young girls, Eva Škorvánková highlights the consistency of and changes in prewar gender expectations, as well as changes in the ideal of femininity promoted by the Slovak state in the period 1939–1945.

Two other chapters also cover the wartime Slovak state. Denisa Nešťakova worked with testimonies of children from the labor camp in Sereď. They are the starting point for her reflection on the manifestations of the changing role of mothers of imprisoned Jewish families. Marina Zavacká analyses women's experiences in the internment camp in Ilava, set up for the "enemies of the Slovak state," shortly after its establishment in 1939. She concludes that the life of the women interned in the camp did not significantly differ from that experienced by men, except for their work assignments.

The next part of the volume shows that, paradoxically, persecution sometimes strengthened women's influence and power within their communities. Anna Nedlin-Lehrer describes in her text the resistance activities of Zivia Lubetkinova and Havka Folmanova Rabanova in the Warsaw ghetto. She reveals their strategies and actions, by which these members of the Dror youth Zionist movement "crossed" borders or benefited from established gender stereotypes and evaluations. Laurien Vastenhout explores the activities of Gertrude van Tijn and Juliette Stern, members of the Jewish Councils of the Netherlands and France. In their activities and in the atmosphere of endangerment dominated by men, she observes the room for maneuver of the two actors. Their actions reminded me of their contemporary, Gisi Fleischmann, in Bratislava.[1]

The rescue and resistance networks created by women from the majority population in occupied Krakow and the challenges and danger faced by them constitute

the topics of three chapters. Joanna Sliwa studied the life of non-Jewish helpers who provided Jewish children with shelter in occupied Krakow. She reveals the risks of being reported by their neighbors and family members, as well as other dangers faced by these women in the private sphere. Through the gender lens, Sliwa analyzes daily life in households during the Holocaust and discusses to what extent a household as a traditionally female (private) sphere was still shaped by traditional gender norms.

The other two contributions examine the role of women in resistance activities. Hannah Wilson studied women's accounts of the uprising in the Sobibor extermination camp. She demonstrates that the female perspective that can be found in oral testimonies or written memoirs enriches our knowledge of this uprising, as well as the narrative of Jewish resistance in general. Wilson highlights the importance of women's endeavors to preserve the memory of Sobibor not only through testimonies but also through their participation in the war trials of the former camp staff during the 1960s. Women's resistance activities are also described by Modiane Zerdoun-Daniel, who focuses on Jewish female partisans in Lithuania, their daily struggle in the combat units, and the challenges that the intersection of Jewish identity and the female gender posed to them.

Increased vulnerability to sexual violence was one of the most serious problems faced by Jewish women during the period under study. Marta Havryshko analyses the handling of women rape survivors' testimonies in the Soviet prosecution of Ukrainian Nazi collaborators. In her interpretation, she also draws attention to the methodological challenges and issues related to the critical reading and analysis of these sources. Florian Zabransky deals with the theme of male sexuality and its manifestations. He explores how three Jewish teenagers reflected on their sexuality in Nazi Germany in their postwar testimonies and memoirs. Zabransky focuses on the transfer of male sexual performativity and affirms that in the analyzed sources, sexuality is linked to issues of belonging and identity, as well as to the notion of courage. The author reflects on the question of why the history of male sexuality has so far been marginalized in the study of the Holocaust, finding the answer in social norms and factors such as male power or silence about sexuality, which determine the topics that can or must not be openly discussed in scientific work.

Women and their life stories are also the main topic of Pavla Plachá's book *Zpřetrhané životy: Československé ženy v nacistickém koncentračním táboře Ravensbrück v letech 1939–1945* (Torn lives: Czechoslovak women in the Ravensbrück Nazi concentration camp in 1939–1945). The author concentrates on those women who were citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic before 1 October 1938, demonstrating the ambition to talk for the first time about both an entirely heterogeneous and, in the Czechoslovak commemoration policies, partly still overlooked group of women. She intends to present as comprehensive a picture as possible of the fates and lives of women from the territory of the interwar Czechoslovak Republic, something that has so far been absent from the scholarly literature. Her inclusive approach follows women deported to Ravensbrück from different territorial, ethnic, social, and cultural backgrounds. It is a valuable contribution that expands present-day research and knowledge and I see it as an attempt to apply the concept of multidirectional memory to the Czechoslovak geopolitical environment.

Plachá divides the monograph into three parts. In the first one, she takes the reader through the different periods of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia—from the latter half of the 1940s until its collapse in 1989. Each period had a specific social and political atmosphere that was translated into ideologically biased official commemoration policies, also with regard to the Ravensbrück camp. As a result, in contemporary public discourse specifically adjusted narratives have been disseminated about selected groups of women imprisoned in Ravensbrück. On one hand, this discourse includes female representatives of the communist resistance and women from Lidice; on the other hand, the women that the communist regime considered inappropriate or unworthy to be remembered had to be forgotten. The author uncovers the dynamics and actors involved in the commemorative narrative about women in this camp in the different stages of the Czechoslovak communist regime.

The second part of the book deals directly with the Ravensbrück camp—from its establishment and organization through the description of the prison community up to daily situations and challenges faced by the imprisoned women. The author does not avoid issues such as sexualized violence in the camp, homosexual relationships between female prisoners, or the violence and conflicts immediately after liberation. She interprets her findings through the lens of gender and highlights women's specific experiences from the concentration camp.

The third part of the monograph explores the different categories of imprisoned Czechoslovak women in the camp, created either on the basis of the ethnic principle or according to the reasons for the women's internment. The thick biographies of selected women present their fates, family backgrounds, and postwar lives. Readers can learn about groups of women from the Tešín region, female relatives of representatives of both the domestic and foreign resistance, members of religious orders, or Jehovah's witnesses. There is also information about women sentenced for prohibited relations with Jews or with so-called Aryans; women sentenced for economic crimes; women of Jewish, Roma, and Sinti origin; and those who were classified in the camp as "criminal" and "asocial." All these categories of imprisoned women made up a heterogeneous prison community, and Plachá's book becomes a space for telling—for the first time—their life stories before imprisonment, in the camp, and after liberation all in one place. I consider these short yet informative biographies to be an important accomplishment by the author, as she gives individual women a face and a human dimension. She incorporates "small" women's stories into "big history." The author has worked with extensive materials and data of various types and managed to prepare a professional, competent, and authentic story of Czechoslovak women in this camp. The reader-friendly text complements a number of authentic documents, prisoners' personal photographs, and drawings by Nina Jirsáková of the everyday life of women in the camp, which she herself experienced. The book is a topical contribution to gender-sensitive international research on the history of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, and the cultures of the memory of World War II and the Holocaust.

The special volume *Growing in the Shadow of Antifascism: Remembering the Holocaust in State-Socialist Eastern Europe* communicates with the previous book, which deals with ways of commemorating women held in the Nazi camp in Ravensbrück within socialist Czechoslovakia. The authors of this publication have attempted to challenge

the widespread notion that there was no memory of the Holocaust in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe that came under the rule of totalitarian communist regimes shortly after the end of the war. The examples of four countries (the GDR, the USSR, Hungary, and the Czech part of Czechoslovakia), focusing on historiography, places of memory, artistic representations, and public discourse, show that although antifascist discourse was promoted, the fate of the Jews during the Holocaust nevertheless became a part of national memory in different intensities and forms.

While I was reading this book, the research findings from Slovakia were constantly emerging in my mind like the missing puzzle pieces to complete the picture. Some of these findings bear signs of similarity to those presented in the book, while others are different, but still question the black-and-white presentation of Holocaust memory politics behind the Iron Curtain. Rather, they testify to the marginalization of the Jewish experience in public commemoration, its distortion, and the creation of alternative memories within the legitimized antifascist narrative.

Individual case studies from selected countries of the former "Eastern Bloc," where commemoration policies were at first sight primarily influenced by the Soviet model, show that this statement may have been valid at the macro-level of state bodies and institutions. Nevertheless, one can find *memory agents* at the meso-level, who more or less vigorously introduced into the communist antifascist narrative the issue of Jewish fates during the Holocaust; for instance, in the form of their artistic adaptation. Even in Slovakia, it is possible to find literary works[2] written in the period from the end of the war until the collapse of the communist regime that reflect on the Holocaust and the fates of local Jews, similar to those mentioned by Benjamin Lapp, Alexander Walther, Anja Tippner, and Richard S. Esbenshade in their chapters.

Whether in fiction, reportage, or memoir literature, the person of the author often combined their Communist Party affiliation, Jewish identity, and survivor experience.[3] Benjamin Lapp introduces the work and efforts of the historian and activist Helmut Eschwege who, as an East German citizen, was prepared to talk with non-Jews about Jewish history and, as a scholar, wrote about the history of German Jews in an environment in which this history was not fully recognized or given sufficient attention. Alexander Walther also focuses on the German Democratic Republic (GDR). He analyzes the work of the journalist Heinz Knobloch and considers his books as an example of a different way of commemorating the Shoah and the fate of German Jews than that offered by state propaganda in the GDR. Richard S. Esbenshade focuses on Hungarian literature on the Holocaust from the late 1950s to the 1970s. He challenges the idea that there was no representation of the Holocaust during this period. Esbenshade outlines a new paradigm of Holocaust memory—the possibility of a common space between "Jewish memory," which emphasizes only the genocide perpetrated against Hungarian Jews, and a hostile nationalist memory, which denies the responsibility of non-Jewish Hungarians for the deportations and any connections between the fates of the two communities during and after the war. Anja Tippner explores Anatoly Rybakov's novel *Heavy Sand*. She observes how Rybakov switches between different modes of writing to inform Soviet readers about the Holocaust and to record the fate of Soviet Jews within the larger structure of the World War II narrative. The author sees this work as a commentary on Michael Rothberg's theory of "multidirectional memory,"

in which different groups of victims do not necessarily compete for attention but can make each other visible in the public eye.

The commemoration of Jewish victims, the creation of places of memory, monuments, and plaques with the names of the Holocaust victims, and their artistic representations are at the center of several texts. Daniel Véri's study examines official memory politics, in particular the earliest state-funded Hungarian art projects related to the memory of the Holocaust during communism. He focuses on two groups of works: state-commissioned works that tended to visualize the official politics of memory, that is, the antifascist historical narrative; and noncommissioned works, created almost exclusively by Jewish survivors, that emphasize the figure, identity, experience, and perspective of the victims through a variety of themes and stylistic approaches. Kata Bohus focuses on the public commemoration of the antifascist struggle and martyrdom of the Hungarian Jewish community during early communism. She offers a critical reassessment of the "myth of silence," arguing that memorialization of the Holocaust did occur during the first years of communism in Hungary and was not completely suppressed.[4]

Using the Lithuanian Ninth Fort Museum in Kaunas as an example, Gintarė Malinauskaitė argues that despite the political instrumentalization of this place and its ideologically conceived exhibitions, Lithuanian Jews, especially male partisans, managed to at least partially express their memories of their traumatic experiences of imprisonment in this fortress.

Katarzyna Person and Agnieszka Żółkiewska focus on the strategies employed by the Jewish Historical Institute in the use of documents collected in the Warsaw Ghetto. They reveal how editorial practices and de facto self-censorship in the publication of the documents were assimilated into the official state narrative of World War II in socialist Poland. Peter Hallama traces the historical research on the Holocaust in the Czech part of then Czechoslovakia with the example of historian, communist journalist, and survivor Miroslav Kárny, who cooperated with the Terezín Memorial, the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters, and the Jewish Museum in Prague. Hallama problematizes the claim that the Holocaust was taboo in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s and 1980s. During that period, Ivan Kamenec, historian and survivor in the Slovak part of socialist Czechoslovakia, embarked on pioneering work and elaborated on this topic in his dissertation, defended before the beginning of the normalization period after Czechoslovakia's occupation by Warsaw Pact troops (21 August 1968). He had to wait twenty years, however, for the dissertation to be published as a book.[5]

The state of Jewish cemeteries in the European countries provides a tangible testimony of the Jewish community, its fates during and after the Holocaust, and the state and majority's postwar relationship to it. Yechiel Weizman's text, based on precious personal testimonies, sheds light on the ways in which material Jewish remains, especially abandoned cemeteries and destroyed synagogues, hid specific memories of the murder of the Jews and acquired a unique social function in mediating and negotiating perceptions of the Holocaust in communist Poland. The situation in Poland described by him is close to what a fraction of the Jewish community faced after the Holocaust in Slovakia. Destruction, removing tombstones, searching for "gold," bringing garbage to cemeteries—these were the ways in which the local population

in many places intentionally devastated Jewish cemeteries.[6] Can these examples be considered acts of indifference or deliberate forgetfulness? In searching for answers, it is necessary to examine not only the commemorative policies dictated or defined by a particular communist regime, but also the national context and historical realities of the country during World War II and the Holocaust: whether it was an ally of the Third Reich, whether an antifascist resistance developed, what role the communists played, whether the country was at the center of the war, who the victims of the civil war were, and what the fate of the Jewish population was. Another important factor for analysis is the nature and extent of antisemitism in the country—not only in the interwar period but also in earlier ones. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that each communist regime in the Soviet bloc countries had its specific stages, the manifestations of which also had an impact on the politics of memory, as Audrey Kichelewski rightly notes at the end of the book.

I would like to take the liberty of a small Slovak excursion—complementary to the reviewed volume. Since its birth in 1993, today's Slovak Republic has been seeking ways to create commemoration policies that would embrace multiple perspectives. During World War II, the nationalist Slovak state, an ally of Nazi Germany, occupied part of the present-day Slovak Republic. After the First Vienna Award (1938), a substantial portion of today's southern and eastern territories was annexed to Horthy's Hungary. To this date, this fact does not find a correct expression in the commemoration policies, which, at the national level, usually reflect on the historical realities of the Slovak state. After the end of the war and the restoration of Czechoslovakia (with almost prewar borders, except for Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which was passed to the Soviet Union), a new challenge emerged: how to commemorate two or three different historical experiences in the common Czechoslovak state, namely the experience of occupation and the Holocaust (in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia) and the declaration of state independence of the Slovaks, their collaboration with Nazi Germany, the Holocaust, and finally the occupation in 1944 (in the Slovak Republic of 1939–1945)? Finally, through living in a territory where the inhabitants, according to their ethnic or racial affiliation, experienced a completely different impact of the policies of the then Hungary on their lives, the Jews experienced a fatal one. The inclusion of the fate of Jews in the narrative of the antifascist resistance and its abstract, unspecified victims appeared to be an excellent solution to this task. Their silencing and marginalization during Communist rule in Czechoslovakia (1948–1989) were associated with an effort to forget and, simultaneously, to help unite the inhabitants of a state with different historical experiences. However, only seemingly did the society unite—demonstratively in a public space controlled by the regime. The private sphere was characterized by different memories and interpretations of former Holocaust victims, perpetrators, and bystanders (who often benefited from the fates of Jews).[7]

In his already mentioned chapter, Richard S. Esbenshade asks a question that he focuses on Hungary, but that can be easily applied to any other Eastern European postcommunist country, namely whether the distorted narratives and representations of the Holocaust that he identified in Hungarian literary works succeeded in creating a greater "shared space" in society for Jews and non-Jews. In other words, he asks whether these were a good way of suppressing conflicts between them and restrain-

ing antisemitism. He partly answers himself. His answers also rely on the knowledge obtained from research on memory policies in the former communist countries since the 1990s, as well as findings about the actual manifestations of antisemitism or the so-called fight against Zionism (as the contemporary communist narrative claimed it was) in the countries of state socialism.

This special volume dedicated to the remembering of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern Europe demonstrates the gradual transformation of narratives and, thus, the incorrectness of the idea of a monolithic remembrance of the World War II period within the antifascist discourse of former state-socialist and communist countries. It offers examples of various approaches, strategies, and bearers and actors of the commemoration policies related to the fates of Jews. The studies in this volume show that Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, which he applied to parallel collective recollections of the Holocaust and colonialism in democratic societies, is also relevant to understanding the memory of the Holocaust and antifascism in Eastern Europe during the times of state socialism.

The volume concentrates on Central and Eastern Europe as a space where research on the Holocaust and the related commemoration policies from the end of World War II until the present brings new, interesting knowledge. It also highlights possible future directions of research with a focus on comparing Eastern and Western representations of the Holocaust and memory policies. Such a comparison would undoubtedly point to many similarities, including the gender-based nature of discursive frameworks on both sides of the former Iron Curtain. Such research may show that memory policies in divided European countries had much more in common than was claimed by the ideologies that supposedly determined them.

All three of these publications were written mainly by researchers from the younger generation—either coming directly from Central or Eastern Europe or with a research focus on this geographical area. They prove that research on the history and memory of the Holocaust focusing on this region is continually yielding new findings and suggestions that undoubtedly inspire scholars focusing on Western Europe or non-European regions as well.

About the Author

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Notes

1. The following scholarly publications about her were published in Slovakia: Katarína Hradská, *Gisi Fleischmannová: Návrat nežiadúci (Gisi Fleischmann: Return undesirable)* (Bratislava: PT Marenčin, 2012); Katarína Hradská, ed., *Holokaust na Slovensku 3: Listy Gisely Fleischmannovej (1942–1944); Snahy Pracovnej skupiny o záchranu slovenských a európskych židov. Dokumenty (The Holocaust in Slovakia 3: Letters by Gisela Fleischmann (1942–1944);* The working group for attempts to rescue Slovak and European Jews. Documents) (Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečku, 2003).

Playwright and documentarist Anna Grusková wrote a theater and radio play about her, and shot a documentary film with the same title, *Rabbi Woman*. She also created a website: https://www.gisifleischmann.eu/?L=1 (accessed 28 June 2023).

2. An overview of fiction with a Holocaust theme published since the end of World War II in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland is offered in Elisa-Maria Hiemer, Jiří Holý, Agata Firlej, and Hana Nichtburgerová, eds., *Handbook of Polish, Czech, and Slovak Holocaust Fiction: Works and Context*s (Oldenbourg: De Gruyter, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110671056.

3. For the Slovak context we can mention the following books: Manca Schwalbová, *Vyhasnuté oči* [Extinguished eyes] (Bratislava: Pravda, 1949); Hela Volanská, *Stretnutia v lesoch* [Encounters in forests] (Prague: Naše vojsko, 1948); Alfréda Wetzlera, under the pseudonym Jozef Lánik, *Co Dante neviděl* [What Dante didn't see] (Prague: Naše vojsko, 1966).

4. In Slovakia, the commemoration of the victims of the Holocaust also took place on the initiative of Jewish communities in Jewish cemeteries and synagogues. Since 1946, mourning *askaris* have become an essential part of the calendar cycle, dedicated to the memory of "martyrs, brothers and sisters murdered in deportations and racially persecuted." Their Jewishness was hidden in a regime-compliant language. See Peter Salner, "Spomíname: Ale kto, ako a dokedy" [We remember: But who, how, and until when?], in *Holokaust okolo nás: Roky 1938–1945 v kultúrach spomínania* [The Holocaust around us: The years 1938–1945 in the cultures of remembrance], ed. Peter Salner (Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2020), 144–150; Peter Salner, *Židia na Slovensku po roku 1945* [Jews in Slovakia after 1945] (Bratislava: VEDA, 2016), 51ff.

5. It was first published in Slovak: Ivan Kamenec, *Po stopách tragédie* [On the trail of the tragedy] (Bratislava: Archa, 1991), and later in English: Ivan Kamenec, *On the Trail of the Tragedy: The Holocaust in Slovakia* (Bratislava: Hajko & Hajková, 2007).

6. Salner, *Židia na Slovensku po roku 1945*, 121–128.

7. Monika Vrzgulová, "Remembering the Holocaust after 1989: Slovakia More Than Thirty Years Later," in *War and Remembrance: War World II and Holocaust in the Memory Politics of Post-Socialist Europe*, ed. Paul Srodecki and Dana Kozlova (Brill: Schoeningh, 2023), 127–144.