

Enzo Traverso



Understanding the Nazi Genocide

Marxism after Auschwitz



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Enzo Traverso

Translated by Peter Drucker



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The International Institute for Research and Education (IIRE)

To the memory of Ernest Mandel (1923–1995),
revolutionary intellectual and ‘non-Jewish Jew’,
whose life and work taught me what internationalism is.

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Foreword

With this book on Marxism and the Nazi genocide, the IIRE Notebooks for Study and Research enter new territory. Earlier Notebooks have examined central twentieth-century events such as the Russian revolution and Spanish civil war, but none has focused on the slaughter of millions of European Jews in 1941–45. Enzo Traverso's work contends that no Marxism that fails to make sense of this defining moment of modern times can be much of a guide to the twentieth century now drawing to an end, or, presumably, to the twenty-first century that is about to begin.

Traverso's argument is that a Marxism capable of comprehending the Shoah must be profoundly different in some ways from Marxism as it was commonly understood a century ago in the Second International. He questions the idea of socialism as an inheritor and continuation of capitalist progress. To this Second International Marxism he counterposes the Marxism of Walter Benjamin, who extrapolated from the history of 'progress' to foresee a nightmare from which only revolution could awaken us. Benjamin was among the few to appreciate late capitalism's pent-up capacity for explosions of mass rage, exacerbated by bureaucratic organisation and advanced technology. The Nazi genocide vindicated his prophecy. Traverso evokes the Warsaw ghetto uprising as an image for our times of what should impel us to rebel: not a sense of inevitable victory, but an ethical imperative.

The book's argument is founded on a solid knowledge of and engagement with other recent writings on the Shoah, including those in English. It shows how it was rooted in fascism, and fascism in capitalism, without placing any simplistic equal signs. Traverso is able to show how racism and anti-Semitism are creatures of the present as well as of the past. He rejects a portrayal of anti-Semitism as an illness of the

diaspora for which Israel is the cure, however. He argues that anti-Semitism can only disappear in a world where difference is tolerated and valued, a world attainable only by tearing out the deep social roots of intolerance.

After leaving his native Italy and working for several years as editor of the IIRE Notebooks' sister publications in French, Traverso has become the best-known writer on 'Holocaust studies' from the radical Left in the French-speaking world. Two of his earlier books have been published in English: *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate (1843–1943)* (Humanities Press, 1994), and *The Jews and Germany: From the 'Judeo-German' Symbiosis to the Memory of Auschwitz* (University of Nebraska Press, 1995). He has been a Lecturer at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris and is currently a Lecturer in Political Science at the University of Amiens.

For the opportunity to publish this book, we gratefully acknowledge the original French and German sources in which its different parts were first published. 'Auschwitz, Marx and the twentieth century' was written for the anthology *Ausblicke auf das vergangene Jahrhundert*, eds. Wladislaw Hedeler and Mario Kessler (Hamburg: VSA, 1996). 'The blindness of the intellectuals' was first presented to a colloquium at New York University in April 1998 on the 50th anniversary of the publication of *Anti-Semite and Jew* and was published in English in *October* magazine (New York, no. 87, winter 1998); we thank *October* for permission to reprint Stuart Liebman's English translation. 'On the edge of understanding' was first published as an Afterword to the second French edition of *Les marxistes et la question juive: Histoire d'un débat (1843–1943)* (Paris: Kimé, 1997). 'The uniqueness of Auschwitz' was presented to the May 1997 conference 'L'Homme, la langue, les camps' at the University of Paris IV–Sorbonne, and first published in *Pour une critique de la barbarie moderne* (Lausanne: Editions Page deux, 1997). 'The debt' was first published in *La Revue* (Paris, April–June 1993). 'The Shoah, the historians and the public use of history' was first published in *L'Homme et la Société* (Paris, July–September 1997).

Introduction

One of the most notable enemies of the French revolution, Joseph de Maistre, criticised its declarations and constitutions which were supposedly based on the ‘rights of man’. ‘I have seen Frenchmen, Italians and Russians in my life,’ he wrote; ‘thanks to Montesquieu, I even know that it is possible to be Persian; but as for “man”, I must say that I’ve never met him in my life.’¹ De Maistre’s contemporary Edmund Burke made the obvious point of the remark explicit, when he opposed the elusive ‘rights of man and citizen’ in the name of the historical rights of Englishmen, i.e. the hereditary privileges of the British aristocracy.² Burke’s and De Maistre’s vision is not one we share. Their critique none the less highlights a real limitation of Enlightenment culture: its inability to achieve a synthesis between a universal conception of humanity and a recognition of human diversity.

The case of the Jews is in this respect very much emblematic. The French revolution emancipated them, turning them into ‘men like everyone else’. But the price exacted from them for their equality was the denial of their particular identity. Once they became citizens, Jews were no longer supposed to be Jewish. Since the universal human being existed juridically only within the nation-state, Jews were called on to transform themselves into French men and women, Italians, Germans, and so on. The heirs of the Enlightenment, whether liberal, socialist or Marxist, did not dare to challenge this homogenising paradigm. Thus throughout the nineteenth century the struggle for emancipation gave way to the duty of *assimilation*. Resistance was equated with obscurantism, rejection of ‘progress’, even nostalgia for the ghetto.

On the basis of this kind of approach, the only possible way of preserving Jewishness consisted in ‘normalising’ it, defining it not as something ‘other’, but in the form of a Jewish nation-

state. Zionism was the child of a culture incapable of imagining human diversity apart from and beyond national frontiers. Anti-Semites, on the other hand, remained interested in real Jews, not in abstract Jewish citizens, who in their eyes were nothing more than an optical illusion, an imposture, a disguise made possible by democracy and modernity.

With the end of the bourgeois liberal era, heralded by the First World War and definitively marked in subsequent years by the rise of totalitarian regimes, Europe's Jews were robbed, slowly but inexorably, of everything that they had gained from emancipation. Deprived of their rights, they became once more a people of pariahs, stateless exiles, a vulnerable, discriminated and persecuted minority, driven from one country to another, exposed to every form of harassment and in the end exterminated amidst almost general indifference. Stripped of German citizenship in 1935, Italian in 1938, Austrian in 1938, French in 1940, etc., they were as Jews no longer protected by any international law. They became 'superfluous' creatures:

Before [the Nazis] set the gas chambers into motion they had carefully tested the ground and found out to their satisfaction that no country would claim these people. The point is that a condition of complete rightlessness was created before the right to live was challenged.³

Emancipation had not erased the Jews' otherness. National Socialism transformed them into scapegoats of a world out of joint, which had collapsed in a gigantic eruption of violence. The revolution had turned Jews into citizens, starting from their membership of the human race; the Nazi regime declared them *Unmensch*en and set in motion their *expulsion*, in the most literal sense of the word, from the human race in Auschwitz and Treblinka.

Between emancipation and genocide, the history of European Jewry, as much in its metamorphoses as in its wounds, can be seen as an excellent laboratory in which to study the different faces of modernity: its hopes and liberatory aspirations on the one hand, its destructive outbursts on the other. This history shows both the ambiguity of the

Enlightenment and its heirs, including Marxism, and the extreme forms of barbarism that modern civilisation can take.

The genocide of the Jews is inextricable from its historical context, whose pre-eminently *barbarous* character is scarcely open to doubt. According to an estimate by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the total number of victims of the twentieth century's wars, massacres and genocides (between 1914 and 1990, thus before the Gulf War, Yugoslavia and Rwanda) is a horrifying 187 million human beings. The historian Eric Hobsbawm adds that this figure amounts to 9 per cent of the total human population at the beginning of the century.⁴ The Jewish genocide was preceded by that of the Armenians in Turkey, accompanied by that of the Gypsies, and followed by that of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994. We could also mention other genocides inspired by motives other than racial hatred, such as the decimation of the Ukrainian peasantry during the forced collectivisation of Soviet agriculture in the early 1930s or the horrors of Cambodia under the rule of the Khmer Rouge. Leaving aside these genocides, the twentieth century witnessed new, previously unknown forms of extermination, of which millions were victims in the Nazi concentration camps and Stalinist gulag and, on another scale, many thousands were victims with the US atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This (very much incomplete) picture of the horrors of our time suffices to indicate the multiplicity of perspectives from which one could examine modern barbarism. If I have chosen the Jewish optic, it is because of its character, which is in a certain sense paradigmatic. Auschwitz was preceded by a long history of persecutions during which anti-Semitism designated its target. This bigotry arose on the basis of the hopeless contradictions of a culture that, as Detlev Claussen has stressed, had emancipated the Jews without recognising them.⁵ Jewish history or the history of anti-Semitism is not the story of a predictable genocide whose stages can be studied in a teleological sequence, but it does show the preconditions of genocide and illuminate its backdrop.

In Auschwitz we see a genocide in which racial hatred was virtually the one and only motive, carried out in disregard of any economic, political or military consideration. We also see

in Auschwitz a pre-eminently modern genocide. If racial hatred was its first cause, justified by an ideology that claimed the authority of science, its execution required administrative, technical and industrial structures: in short, a ‘rationality’ typical of modern capitalism. This genocide requires us to rethink the twentieth century and the very foundations of our civilisation.

After Auschwitz, Georges Bataille wrote in 1947, ‘the image of a human being is inseparable, from this moment on, from a gas chamber’.⁶ But Auschwitz can also serve as a starting point from which we can try to see humanity – on the other dialectical edge of this abyss – as a concrete universal, as a totality reconciled to its diversity, without oppression based on class, gender or race. If Auschwitz’s impact on its Jewish victims was the negation of humanity, then a new humanity can only see the light of day by transcending the civilisation that produced this horror. In fact we still live in such a civilisation: this shows the importance and timeliness of a critique of modern barbarism. This is the red thread that links the essays brought together in this Notebook.

These six texts were written over the last few years, for the most part either as contributions to conferences or solicited by journals (see the Foreword). The space limitations of a Notebook have made necessary a drastic, sometimes difficult selection. The texts that were ultimately chosen all highlight certain key aspects of the European Jewish twentieth century – anti-Semitism, genocide, revolt – and of Marxist approaches to understanding them.

Some of the essays in this collection contain some very harsh criticisms of the Marxist intellectual tradition. Auschwitz remains an ‘acid test’ for theorists, whatever their orientation, who identify with Marx’s thought. The incapacity of Marxism – the most powerful and vigorous body of emancipatory thinking of the modern age – first to see, then to understand the Jewish genocide raises a major doubt about the relevance of its answers to the challenges of the twentieth century. Marxists’ silence about Auschwitz – in Chapter 3 of this book I analyse the exceptional Marxist voices that tried to break this silence – suggests limits to their interpretations of the past, barbarous century.

But while Auschwitz is seized here as an opportunity for a necessary reassessment of the Marxist intellectual tradition, this reassessment is made from within the tradition, with the perspective of renewing it rather than abandoning it. No project for human liberation can see the light of day unless we are able to grasp the inhumanity of the twentieth century and reflect on the lesson of Auschwitz. At the same time, no genuine perspective of emancipation can be created from scratch. We cannot wipe out the past or forget the victories and defeats of a century and a half nourished and inspired by Marx's thought, whose movements were often organised and led by men and women consciously following in his footsteps. This is why one chapter in this collection advocates rereading Marx in the light of Auschwitz.

While a few reference points are given in order to help readers, particularly non-historians, orient themselves, analysis wins out over a reconstruction of events. These essays are written in the present tense, in an attempt to interrogate the past on the basis of today's debates, concerns and questionings. This is true to a certain extent of any historical research, since historians do not live in proverbial ivory towers or refrigerated studies that preserve them from the heat of the world's passions. But there are different ways of interrogating the past. My way is the way of an historian who is also what used to be called an activist. There are more of us than is usually imagined, despite the label of 'old-fashioned' that media terminology, as impoverished as it is arrogant, tries to pin on us. I took my first steps in the political and intellectual world in the early 1970s, in Italy, when I thought I was living in a time overshadowed by the prospect of revolution, in Europe as in Vietnam or Latin America. More recently I have become convinced that the dominant characteristic of the twentieth century is barbarism. This has not led me to renounce my beliefs or abandon my commitment, but rather to modify their horizon.

If the awareness of living in a time of barbarism makes the task of transforming the world all the more imperative, it shows that the transformation will not 'go with the flow' of history but rather against the current. This approach has changed my reading of the past. For example, the memory of

the Warsaw ghetto uprising – an event unnoticed by its contemporaries, an event whose historical impact was quite simply zero if we compare it to, say, the October revolution – seems to me today exemplary and essential to thinking through a project of liberation. It is in this spirit that this Notebook has been conceived.

CHAPTER 1

Auschwitz, Marx and the Twentieth Century

For various reasons Auschwitz is both a symbol and a problematic crux of Nazi crimes. We should nevertheless note that the current use of the name, as a synthesis and metaphor for the whole machinery of extermination, is a relatively recent one. With the exception of a few isolated intellectuals, Theodor Adorno first among them, there were very few people who used the German name for this small Polish town (Oswiecim) as early as 1945 in order to refer to the biggest death factory ever known. Just after the war, when anti-fascist culture seemed completely hegemonic in France and several other Western European countries, the symbol of Nazi crimes tended rather to be drawn from the most important centres of political deportation, such as the concentration camps at Dachau and Buchenwald. The centrality of Auschwitz in the literature on the Nazi concentration camps only began to emerge as the West came to realise the historical uniqueness of the extermination of the Jews.

This slow realisation gave rise to neologisms that have since become part of every language: ‘Holocaust’, a word of Latin origin meaning a human sacrifice bringing purification through fire, and ‘Shoah’, the Hebrew word for destruction. The word ‘Holocaust’, though an everyday expression thanks to its massive adoption by the media (one need only think of the television series of this name) and even in library catalogues (above all in English-speaking countries), has been the subject of heated debates, in my view quite legitimately, because of its religious connotation, which implicitly tends to confer a theological justification on the Jewish tragedy. The word ‘Shoah’ has the advantage of defining the essence of the event, which has to do with the specificity of the extermination

camps. But it is also impregnated with ideological interpretations, if not with outright political speculations, because of the instrumental use that some sectors of the Israeli establishment make of the Jewish genocide in order to legitimise themselves.

The best-known image of Auschwitz – the tracks leading into the camp’s darkness-shrouded interior – is bound to evoke the memory of convoys coming from the four corners of Europe loaded with deported Jews destined to be sent to the gas chambers. We can no longer think of Auschwitz without imagining the smoke of the crematoria. There is an ineradicable link that will always join this name with the destruction of the European Jews. At the same time Auschwitz has today taken on the status of a concept which, apart from its emotional flavour of grief and memory, historically synthesises the *whole* of Nazi crimes. On the ethical level, at least since the publication of Karl Jaspers’ and Hannah Arendt’s writings, it alludes to the ‘guilt’, certainly neither universal nor indistinct but none the less very real and impossible to forget, of *part* of Germany and Europe for Nazism’s crimes.¹

‘Auschwitz’ is a more appropriate term than either ‘Holocaust’ or ‘Shoah’ for referring to Hitler’s murderous system. It recognises the specificity of the Jewish genocide without isolating it, since it refers at the same time to the broader context of the world of the Nazi concentration camps. So these are the reasons that make this place a symbol, a metaphor and a synthesis: Auschwitz was at one and the same time the biggest concentration camp and biggest extermination camp operating under the Third Reich; among the multitude of Nazi camps, it is the one where the greatest number of victims died, not only Jews, but also Gypsies, Russians, Poles and people of other nationalities; and it was the main centre for racial extermination (about a million Jews were killed in the Birkenau gas chambers) and for experiments with extermination through work (261,000 deaths out of 405,000 deported).

In other words, Auschwitz was a complex of camps which can be characterised as much as a forced labour centre as a killing centre. Every category of the Nazis’ obsessive classification of enemies and *Untermenschen* was represented there, from Jews to Gypsies, from Jehovah’s Witnesses to gays, from

'anti-socials' to political prisoners, from prisoners of war to those simply 'requisitioned for labour' from German-occupied countries. In this sense Auschwitz constitutes an authentic problematic crux. It links the concentration and extermination camps to the whole of German society and to Nazi rule in Europe. It makes it possible to grasp the connections between political power and deportation and between industry and extermination. It even makes it possible to grasp the contradictions that arose from military and productive requirements on the one hand, and the objective of destruction on the other, and between the system's 'administrative' rationality and its total irrationality on the social and human level. Finally, since it was a gigantic complex of camps, Auschwitz left behind not only the greatest number of victims but also the greatest number of testimonies, from Primo Levi to Charlotte Delbo, from Tadeusz Borowski to Jean Améry.²

Auschwitz and the Final Solution

The camp at Auschwitz was created in 1940 and put into operation as a *Konzentrationszentrum* the following year. It was one of the first extermination camps to adopt the system of execution in gas chambers, in the spring of 1942, and the last to put an end to this macabre ritual, in November 1944. The extermination camp strictly speaking, Birkenau, was the largest of six centres where the Jewish genocide was carried out. (The others were Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Lublin-Majdanek and Treblinka.)

The creation of Auschwitz-Birkenau was preceded by the establishment of concentration camps, at first reserved for German political opponents. These first appeared in Germany in 1933 (Dachau), spread from 1938 on (Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Neuengamme, Flossenbürg, etc.) and were ultimately extended to all the territories occupied by the German Reich during the war. Qualitatively distinct from the concentration camps, the extermination camps were their continuation and extension, a 'higher' stage in the deployment of the Nazi death machine, genetically linked to the various forms that had preceded it within the world of the camps. This qual-

itative leap implied a change in the concentration camps' function: their immediate goal now became the production of death. The leap was determined by the adaptation of concentration camp structures to the Nazi ideological imperative of eliminating 'inferior races'. Auschwitz is in this sense a symbol of the imbrication, which is at the origin of the extermination camps, between racial biology and the development of the technology of mass extermination. Studying Auschwitz's genesis thus means going back over the various stages of the process whose outcome was the Final Solution of the 'Jewish question' in Europe.

In Hitler's case anti-Semitism was an obsession going back to his youth in Austria, marked by the influence of the petty-bourgeois demagogic of Vienna's Christian Socialist mayor, Karl Lueger, and by the Pan-Germanic nationalism of Georg von Schönerer. These two currents impregnated the whole Austro-German cultural milieu at the turn of the century. Drawing on this racist and anti-Semitic tradition, Hitler projected his frustrations as a young artist without a future, as ambitious as he was mediocre, onto the Jews, in an intellectual context largely characterised if not dominated by the Jewish presence. In this there is nothing astonishing: psychological mechanisms of this kind were extremely widespread at the time in many European countries. But in post-First World War Germany, *völkisch* nationalism and racial anti-Semitism became the basis of a mass political movement. At first confused and heterogeneous, it would later be more and more solidly welded together around the Nazi Party, particularly after the Nazis' astonishing electoral breakthrough in 1930.

From the moment when Hitler took power, Nazi anti-Semitism was progressively radicalised. Aside from the wave of repression that inexorably struck left-wing activists and intellectuals, two categories in which Jews were notably prominent, the first discriminatory measures against Jews were adopted as early as the spring of 1933, directed essentially at civil servants and some of the liberal professions. They were extended two years later with the Nuremberg laws, which completely wiped out the gains of a century of emancipation. Ultimately, they gave way to a true policy of persecution following the wave of pogroms unleashed in November 1938

during the infamous *Kristallnacht*. Begun several months earlier, measures ‘Aryanising’ the German economy – in other words, intensively expropriating Jewish capital and wealth – were drastically accelerated with this event, a real turning point in Nazi anti-Semitism. In hindsight the 1938 pogroms seem like a major test on the road to the Final Solution. They confirmed for the first time on a large scale the general passivity of German society, ‘marching in step’ from this time on, in the face of the persecution of the Jews. Hitler and the Nazi elite could thus feel that radicalisation was possible and would not encounter any insurmountable obstacles.

In 1939, with the outbreak of the war and the invasion of Poland, the National Socialist regime began deporting Jews to ghettos and concentration camps (at the same time as it began planning a massive transfer of native German populations towards eastern territories). After the attack on the Soviet Union, beginning in August 1941, the Nazis moved on to extermination. This took place in two phases. In the first phase, extermination was entrusted to the *Einsatzgruppen*, special SS units in charge of eliminating Jews and Red Army political commissars from territories occupied by the Wehrmacht. In the second phase, beginning in the spring of 1942, the extermination camps were put in operation. Now Auschwitz began to play an essential role in the process of bureaucratic and industrial destruction of an entire people for reasons of ‘racial hygiene’.

The overall result of this *Vernichtungskampf* (‘extermination struggle’) was between five and six million deaths. As Raul Hilberg, the chief historian of the Final Solution, reminds us, the extermination was a *process* marked by a series of quite distinct stages. First, the Jews had to be *defined* as enemies of the ‘Aryan race’ through new anti-Semitic legislation (1935). Then they were *expropriated* and reduced to the condition of pariahs (1938). In the third phase they were *concentrated* in the ghettos and camps of Eastern Europe, thanks to a policy of *deportation* carried out in all the countries under the Nazi yoke (1940–44). Finally, they were *eliminated* (1941–44). The extermination was itself carried out in two stages: first, through the ‘mobile killing operations’ of the *Einsatzgruppen*, then by specialised killing centres.³

This was not a planned process, but a series of measures linked to one another like the different links of a chain, engendered by the steady radicalisation of Nazi policies and the Nazi system of rule. If the linearity and coherence of the process seem clear in hindsight, they were not always clear at the time to its victims, but also and above all not always clear to those who conceived and implemented them. While the deportation and concentration machine was being set in motion, the Nazi regime's official policy still inclined towards the option of Jewish emigration. That option was only abandoned in 1941. Even then a vague perspective was retained of creating an immense Jewish ghetto in Madagascar, a French colony at the time, where Hitler wanted to settle four million Jews.

The Jewish genocide remains absolutely incomprehensible without the history of modern anti-Semitism, with its specificities in Central Europe and notably in the Germanic zone. This comes down to saying that the extermination of the Jews was, in the last analysis, the consequence of an *intention*. The decision for the *Endlösung* ('Final Solution') was taken by Hitler (doubtless between summer and autumn 1941, when he put the finishing touches on and launched 'Operation Barbarossa' on the eastern front).⁴ It was carried out in subsequent years thanks to a technical and administrative system that could never have been the result of mere improvisation.

A somewhat deeper examination of the Nazi regime's wartime military and political situation reveals that extermination was not the most 'convenient' or least costly way to resolve the Jewish problem in the territories conquered in Poland, Ukraine, Russia and the Baltic States, not to speak of Western Europe and the more marginal territories on the fringes of the German empire such as continental Greece or the island of Corfu. On the one hand, the deportation-concentration-extermination machine presupposed a level of co-ordination and organisation that could absolutely not be improvised or result from empirical, contingent choices. On the other hand, it implied a deployment of structures and means that turned out to be hardly rational at all on a military or economic level. Determined by an *ideological imperative*, this policy manifested, despite the formal rationality (in the Weberian sense) of its various bureaucratic, administrative

and industrial segments, the overall ‘counter-rationality’ of the Nazi system of rule.⁵

None the less, an attempt to explain the Jewish genocide cannot stop here. Pushed to its logical conclusions, such an intentionalist approach would come down to seeing Auschwitz as the simple product of Hitler’s psychopathology. Nazi anti-Semitism went through an evolution, and above all a considerable radicalisation, during the war. It is perhaps not irrelevant to mention that anti-Semitism (which in any case was discriminatory, not genocidal) did not occupy a central place in the NSDAP programme in the early 1920s. We must also add, as many historians have stressed, that unlike Hitler and Alfred Rosenberg, who had always been possessed by anti-Jewish hatred, most prominent Nazis had not shown any signs of virulent anti-Semitism before joining the Nazi movement. We can, for example, rule out the idea that people like Himmler, Goering, Hess, Frank or even Goebbels, all of whom played a major role in the Final Solution, joined the National Socialist movement out of anti-Semitism.⁶ Genocide was thus not a linear process or the implementation of an already proclaimed objective. *Intention* alone cannot explain it, quite apart from the fact that the intention was not equally shared in the Nazi hierarchy. Ideology is not enough to explain the passage from anti-Semitic propaganda to extermination.⁷

We therefore have to take a look at the whole complex machinery of the Nazi state with all its ramifications in occupied Europe. The Jewish genocide was first of all a product of the war. It would have been an absolutely inconceivable event without the social, political, military and even psychological context created by the war on the eastern front. Only the Second World War allowed Hitler’s visceral hatred of Jews and his anti-communism to be welded together into a total war against ‘Jewish Bolshevism’.

Beginning in 1941, this war became qualitatively different in its level of violence and destruction from the one waged against the Western powers. It was, in the words of Arno J. Mayer, a sort of ‘secular crusade’ of modern times. The goal of this ‘total war’ was not only the defeat of the Red Army but above all the conquest of *Lebensraum* in the east and the defence of ‘European civilisation’ against the threat of Jewish

Bolshevism. Genocide was part of a bloody war that claimed several tens of millions of victims. In this war anything became possible, even things that still seemed inconceivable until the late 1930s.⁸

In this perspective the extermination of the Jews was the culmination of a modern Thirty Years War, which began in 1914 with the collapse of the old dynastic balance of power among the major European powers.⁹ ‘Outsiders’ of the modern West, Jews were thus the chosen victims of this long European civil war, unleashed in the trenches of the first global conflict and completed in the ovens of Treblinka and Birkenau.

The Sociology of Auschwitz

The organisation of the Nazi killing machine formed a synthesis of industrial, military and penitentiary structures of modern society, linked together in a project of racial elimination. Death ruled over a world whose building blocks – factory, barracks, prison – were familiar in all Western societies. After all, it was no accident that Auschwitz was both a death camp and a work camp – Buna-Monowitz – where the German chemicals concern IG Farben had set up its production lines.¹⁰ Raul Hilberg endorses an SS doctor’s description of the whole system as a ‘conveyer belt’ (*am laufende Band*).¹¹ These two structures, productive and destructive, were integrated into the Auschwitz camps’ overall set-up. The final outcome was the triumph of *reified death*.

This dual function of the Auschwitz *Lager* synthesised in an emblematic way one of the chief contradictions that marked the whole process of extermination of the Jews: the quasi-permanent conflict inside the SS between the advocates of extermination as the top priority (Himmler and Heydrich) and forces favourable to a more extended exploitation of the Jewish labour force concentrated in the camps (notably O. Pohl of the WVHA, the Central Office of Administration and Economy). The extermination camps were born of the fusion of two pre-existing systems. The gas chambers, introduced during the campaign on the Russian front, were at first mobile. The

concentration camps, on the other hand, were conceived essentially as means of political deportation and then of exploitation of the labour force made up of prisoners of war. Supervised by the SS economic office, these camps became the main field of action for the policy of extermination decided on by the Ministry of Interior, police and organs of racial policy. The passage from exploitation to extermination was neither automatic nor smooth. The whole genocidal policy unfolded in the context of this permanent tension between productivity and annihilation. These contradictions traversed the IG Farben concern itself. On the one hand, IG Farben had an interest in the exploitation of the Jewish labour force in the framework of 'extermination through work' (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*). Yet at the same time it produced the Zyklon B necessary to the functioning of the gas chambers.¹²

If the road that led to Auschwitz was not straight but twisted, characterised by divergent tendencies that were ultimately overcome by subordinating economic interests to the imperative of annihilation, the procedures at work in the extermination camps were perfectly 'rational' and scientific: in other words, *modern*. Auschwitz consummated the marriage, so typical of the twentieth century, between the greatest *rationality of means* (the camp system) and the most complete *irrationality of ends*. Alternatively, one could say that through the use of a destructive technology it made final the divorce between science and ethics.

At bottom there was a remarkable structural homology between the system of production and the system of extermination that coexisted at Auschwitz. The system of extermination functioned like a factory, whose product was death.¹³ Jews were its raw material, and there was nothing primitive about its means of production, at least once the mobile gas trucks were replaced in spring 1942 with incomparably more efficient fixed equipment: the gas chambers. Here death was brought about by streams of Zyklon B, a type of cyanide specially prepared by IG Farben, the most advanced German chemicals company. The victims' bodies were then burned in the camp crematoria, whose chimneys were reminiscent of the most traditional architectural forms of an industrial landscape. Anything that could be recovered from the victims – not only

their possessions but some parts of their *bodies* – were stock-piled in warehouses. When the camps were liberated, the Allies thus discovered mountains of hair, teeth, shoes, eyeglasses, suitcases, etc.

Reified death required an appropriate language, technical and cold, suited to a crime perpetrated without passion, without a reaction of hatred, but rather with the satisfaction of carrying out a task and implementing well a methodical piece of work. Genocide became the *Endlösung* (the ‘Final Solution’), the gassing operations *Sonderbehandlungen* (‘special treatments’), the gas chambers *Spezialeinrichtungen* (‘special installations’), etc. This bureaucratic, coded language aimed at camouflaging the crime; at the same time it revealed one of its chief characteristics: its bureaucratic dimension, the indispensable link between routinised violence and reified death.

The authorities who managed the camps were in most cases bureaucrats, zealous and disciplined implementers of policy. Like Adolf Eichmann, they incarnated ‘the banality of evil’. In his will, written in a cell in Krakow in February 1947, Auschwitz commandant Rudolf Hess, the macabre accountant of a giant death factory, sketched his self-portrait in these words: ‘I was an unconscious cog in the immense extermination machine of the Third Reich.’¹⁴

Auschwitz and Modernity

Most recent research on the Nazi concentration camp system and the Jewish genocide emphasises Auschwitz’s deep roots in twentieth-century society, seeing in it a sign of the hidden possibilities of modern society. According to Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Auschwitz calls in question our culture because it was conceived and realised in the framework of our civilisation, not at its borders but in one of its most developed sections.’¹⁵ Auschwitz’s modernity does not have to do only with the death factories but also with its cultural backdrop, shaped by a bureaucratic rationality that presupposes an administrative management free of any interference of an ethical nature. To state monopolisation and rationalisation of violence were added a sufficient production of moral indiffer-

ence. For example, there were civil servants who managed the Reich's rail transport meticulously without ever asking themselves what the trains routed to Auschwitz, Treblinka and Sobibor were carrying, or what became of their passengers. Wolfgang Sofsky too has commented that the death camps showed the destructive power of modern organisation.¹⁶

According to Ernest Mandel, who included his analysis of the Jewish genocide in an overall interpretation of the Second World War,

When we say that the *germ* of the Holocaust is to be found in colonialism's and imperialism's extreme racism, we do not mean that the germ inevitably and automatically produces the disease in its worst form. For that eventuality, racist madness has to be combined with the deadly partial rationality of the modern industrial system.¹⁷

The historical uniqueness of the Jewish genocide does not consist in the concentration camp system, however, but rather in racial extermination: Auschwitz was the product of the fusion of racial biology with modern technology.¹⁸ This was a genuine *civilisational break*, which tore up the fabric of elementary human solidarity which human existence on the planet had until then been based on.¹⁹

Moreover, we could say that the Jewish genocide was born of the fatal encounter between modern anti-Semitism and fascism. These two dark and sinister poles of modernity were synthesised in Germany, but taken separately they were both widespread in Europe between the wars. In this sense, much more than something specifically German, Auschwitz constitutes a tragedy whose roots lie deep in the situation of twentieth-century Europe.

Anti-Semitism has often taken the form of a conservative reaction against modern society. This was the case in Tsarist Russia and also in many respects in Hitler's Germany, whose *Weltanschauung* aimed openly at erasing at least one aspect of the modern world born of the French revolution: the heritage of the Enlightenment and of humanist rationalism. But this battle was waged in the name and with the weapons of the most advanced technological and industrial modernity.

National Socialism had inherited from the ‘conservative revolution’ an original mélange of archaisms and modernity, Teutonic mythology and the cult of technology, to which it had added a biologically inspired racism, which traced its roots back to Social Darwinism and claimed the status of science. Auschwitz has often been interpreted, starting from a naive and positive if not positivist vision of history (dominated for the last two centuries by the idea of Progress), as society’s backsliding into barbarism. But such a vision turns out to be incapable of grasping the modern dimension of this form of barbarism, a product of the development of science and technology as instruments of death. The extermination camps do not constitute a social regression towards former barbarism, but a radically new historical phenomenon.²⁰ Even if they were not the natural and inevitable result of modernity, they were certainly one of its possible outcomes in the framework of existing social relations.

While the Jewish genocide must be seen on an historical level as the culmination of a long chain of persecutions, it would however be too simplistic to interpret it as the predestined result of an eternal Judeophobia. For one thing, modern anti-Semitism is qualitatively different from traditional Christian hostility towards Jews; for another, the Final Solution constituted a qualitative leap and break in the history of anti-Semitism itself. Anti-Semitism fulfilled a quite clear function by making Jews the scapegoats for social tensions and conflicts. In order to play this role, Jews had to exist. The extermination camps, by contrast, broke with any form of social or economic rationality, and marked an anthropological hiatus relative to the traditional anti-Semitic perception of Jews as an alien, dangerous and hostile minority. They expressed another form of ‘rationality’. Auschwitz appears to make concrete what Horkheimer and Adorno, following Max Weber, called the ‘instrumental reason’ (*instrumentelle Vernunft*) of modern capitalism: a calculating rationality, oblivious of human beings and oriented exclusively towards domination.

Auschwitz must not only provide an occasion to commemorate a past sorrow, which the passage of ‘homogeneous and empty’ time (in Walter Benjamin’s words) will swallow up, which humanity will consign to its archives and perhaps one

day forget. Auschwitz must hover as a permanent question mark over our civilisation and the world in which we live, which are the same ones that produced the horror of the gas chambers. ‘Never again Auschwitz’: this, in the spirit of Adorno, is the *categorical imperative* to which postwar generations must be bound.²¹ Translated into concrete action, this imperative today means never again Sarajevo, never again Kigali.

Rereading Marx after Auschwitz

Rereading Marx after the catastrophe, in the shadow of Auschwitz, is not a pointless task, because the gas chambers raise questions about the intellectual tradition of which he was the founder. Auschwitz puts in question certain paradigms of socialist thought, some of them contained in Marx’s own texts, some constructed and developed starting from gaps in his work. Auschwitz raises questions for Marxism and its various currents because, for many decades, Marxism was unable to see Auschwitz for the ‘black hole’ it was (in Primo Levi’s words), to appreciate its full meaning, or to grasp its character as a turning point and civilisational break in history. The Marxist vulgate presented the extermination camps as one manifestation among others, without any qualitative distinction, of ‘monopoly capitalism’ and ‘imperialist decadence’. The vision of the Jewish genocide as an extreme expression of modern racism has been a rhetorical formula much more often than a fruitful, innovative enquiry into the status of racist mentalities and ideologies in the history of the Western world.

No Marxist since the war, at least until quite recently, devoted a work to these issues as profound or illuminating as the first two parts of Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*. This silence was not the most worthy or fruitful way to pay tribute to the Marxist activists and intellectuals – thousands of them – who lost their lives in the concentration and extermination camps of Hitler’s Reich.

The world of Nazi concentration camps has often been cited as a confirmation of the classic alternative that Europe faced,

according to Rosa Luxemburg, at the beginning of the First World War: ‘socialism or barbarism’.²² While Luxemburg’s intuition was striking, the ritual repetition of this slogan has turned it into a sort of evasive, disorienting smokescreen. It has summoned up the spectre of a decline of civilisation without acknowledging that Auschwitz *was* barbarism. With few exceptions – above all Walter Benjamin – Marxists had conceived of the decline of humanity as a *regression*, a *return* to pre-modern, even primitive social forms. This left them disarmed, disoriented and sometimes blind in the face of the unexpected emergence of a new, *modern* ‘barbarism’, which fitted in with the fundamental tendencies of historical development instead of deviating from or reversing them: in other words, a technological, industrial barbarism, organised and directed by its own instrumental rationality.

The only parallel that we can legitimately draw between the Jewish genocide and the Middle Ages resides in the ‘crusading’ spirit, remarkably analysed by Arno Mayer, which inspired the inventors of the Final Solution.²³ The medieval ‘barbarians’ (foreigners) who let themselves be converted to Christianity in a few generations had nothing in common with the National Socialist *Weltanschauung*.

True, one could see the extermination camps as the culmination of a long process of the ‘destruction of reason’ – of the humanist reason inherited from the Enlightenment – to use Georg Lukács’ phrase. But their structure, at the intersection of several modern experiences and institutions (barracks, penitentiary, slaughterhouse, factory and bureaucratically rational administration), and their ideology (racial biology) remained the product of a European historical trajectory spread over several centuries, whose general line had been traditionally interpreted as humanity’s forward march towards Progress. This trajectory now proved to be the antechamber to hell. Without it Auschwitz would be absolutely inconceivable, except in the intellectually unacceptable form of a sudden, inexplicable historical derailing (the position defended in 1945 by Benedetto Croce and Friedrich Meinecke).

‘Scientific’ Marxism – the Marxism canonised as an official ideology of the Second and Third Internationals and codified on a theoretical level by Kautsky and Plekhanov, Lenin and

Bukharin – had never conceived of socialism as a deep, radical break with bourgeois civilisation. The suppression of capitalism was seen by representatives of this tradition as the end of exploitation, made possible by socialisation of the economy, but certainly not as a radical challenge to the type of development experienced by Europe and the Western world since the industrial revolution. The idea of putting an end to this evolution had never entered the minds of pre-First World War socialists like Jean Jaurès, August Bebel, Filippo Turati or Victor Adler. Replacing the law of profit with the needs of humanity (a ‘humanity’ often reduced to the male working class) did not at all mean for them overturning the foundations of a society identified with industry, technology, science and Progress.

Plekhanov attributed to socialism the task of completing the work of modernising Russia begun by Peter the Great. The Bolsheviks hardly distanced themselves from this conception. For Lenin, intrepid foe of the Populists’ ‘economic romanticism’, socialism equalled ‘the soviets plus electrification’. True, one cannot saddle him with the responsibility for Stalin’s crimes; but it is not difficult to detect in his writings a vision of the transition to socialism as a process of industrialisation, in which priority must be given in the plan to developing the forces of production. Along the same lines Preobrazhensky forged the concept of ‘primitive socialist accumulation’. This was doubtless a response to a literally catastrophic concrete situation, which gave revolutionaries the task of rebuilding the economy of a country in ruins, ravaged by world war and civil war. The fact remains that this imperious necessity completely overshadowed the utopian dimension of the socialist project.

In short, it was obvious to them all that, far from overturning bourgeois civilisation, socialism would complete its work by going ‘beyond’ it, and thus realising all its potentialities. They thus forgot Marx, in whose eyes the Russian socialists should have drawn inspiration from the Slav peasant commune (*obshchina*) rather than from English industry.²⁴

Since the days of Rousseau, Fourier and Marx, the critique of civilisation had been shunted aside. From now on the proletariat was supposed to carry on the revolutionary role of the

bourgeoisie, taking up the banner that the bourgeoisie had betrayed or let fall. The ‘heretical’ representatives of classical Marxism, from Luxemburg to Gramsci to Trotsky, distanced themselves from this paradigm without ever managing to abandon it completely. They criticised Kautsky’s optimistic fatalism and evolutionism, but their theoretical approach was still marked by a strong productivist tendency. Their break was incomplete. While Luxemburg’s and Trotsky’s cosmopolitanism was very often related to their Jewishness, the price they paid for pulling up their Russian and Polish roots was an extreme Westernism, which led them to see the whole non-Western world (starting with Europe east of Berlin) exclusively through the category of backwardness.²⁵

More and more impregnated with positivism and evolutionism, Marxist thought conceded a monopoly of critique of civilisation to the romantic, conservative right. This romantic right found its propagandist in Oswald Spengler and its most profound philosopher in Martin Heidegger (some of the most original postwar Marxists were among Heidegger’s students).

Along with the idea of Progress, Auschwitz disposed once and for all of the conception of socialism as the natural, automatic and ineluctable outcome of history. Auschwitz’s challenge to Marxism is thus twofold. First, history must be rethought through the category of catastrophe, from the standpoint of the defeated. Second, socialism must be rethought as a radically *different* civilisation, no longer founded on the paradigm of the blind development of the forces of production and the domination of nature by technology. Socialism must be based on a new quality of life; a new hierarchy of values; a different relationship with nature; egalitarian relations among sexes, nations and ‘races’; and social relations of sisterhood and solidarity among peoples and continents. This means reversing the line of march followed by the Western world for several centuries. It means jettisoning the naive optimism of a way of thinking that claimed to be the conscious expression of the ‘movement of history’, and of a movement that believed it was ‘swimming with the tide’. It also means restoring socialism’s utopian dimension.

This attempt to rethink Marxism after Auschwitz was undertaken, in a limited and incomplete way, by Adorno and

Horkheimer towards the end of the war in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. It would be taken up again from the 1950s on in the multiform work of Herbert Marcuse, particularly in his *Eros and Civilisation* (1954) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1960), and by Günther Anders, author of *The Obsolescence of Man* (1956/1980), the only Marxist intellectual to put Auschwitz and Hiroshima at the centre of his philosophical reflections.²⁶ But it was above all *anticipated* as early as the 1930s by Walter Benjamin, who took on himself the task of constructing ‘an historical materialism that has annihilated within itself the idea of progress’.²⁷ Instead of playing the role of the ‘locomotive of history’, according to the canonical imagery, the revolution had, according to Benjamin, to function as an ‘emergency brake’ that would stop the train’s headlong rush towards catastrophe.²⁸

During the interwar period, Benjamin was one of the first to grasp the social regression involved in the economic and technical progress achieved under capitalism, and to conceive of socialism not as a paradise of abundance but rather as the re-creation, in opposition to bourgeois civilisation (though on the basis of its material achievements), of certain past communitarian forms, founded on humans’ harmonious social relations with each other and with nature. Much more than realising a dreamed-of future, socialism had to reclaim the past, satisfy an as yet unappeased hunger for redemption, redress an injustice and save the defeated from oblivion.²⁹

These two visions of history and socialism, in short these two interpretations of Marxism represented respectively by Karl Kautsky and Walter Benjamin, which are today antagonistic, *coexist* in an embryonic fashion in Marx’s works.³⁰ They are contained in the contradictions of an extremely rich body of work, which bears witness to a living, creative, open-minded, undogmatic and often groping spirit. Retracing Marxism’s history in Auschwitz’s wake thus means detecting the different roads opened up by Marx’s pioneering writings, in order to distinguish (and separate) two tendencies within them: on the one hand, the dazzling intuition of the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ (interpret the world in order to transform it) and other writings such as the *Manifesto* (self-emancipation of the oppressed) and *Capital* (the theory of reification and of

surplus-value); on the other hand, the positivist approach contained in the Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and in many writings of Engels, from the *Anti-Dühring* to the *Dialectics of Nature* (economic determinism and the evolutionist and normative vision of stages of historical development).

The gaps and contradictions in this critique of bourgeois society are already visible in the first pages of the *Communist Manifesto*. Here Marx and Engels are not afraid to sound like apologists of capitalism as they exalt the ‘most revolutionary part’ played by the bourgeoisie in history: ‘It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former Exodus of nations and crusades.’ But this analysis, not without a certain affinity with certain writings of Max Weber, suddenly in Marx’s hands undergoes a genuine dialectical reversal. Once in power, the bourgeoisie ‘has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation’ by destroying all the old values that had for centuries constituted the cultural and spiritual patrimony of the human community.³¹

For Marx the ‘disenchanted’, rationalised and mechanised world of bourgeois civilisation is a soulless one, where humanity has lost its place and its rights. This new system of values, founded on universal reification and the transformation of every human relation into a market relation – a central theme of the first volume of *Capital* – was engendered by capitalism and shaped the whole of bourgeois society.

The *Communist Manifesto* opens with a description of an apocalyptic scenario that capitalism has landed humanity in, which must end ‘either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.’ In the pages that follow, by contrast, Marx and Engels use the positivist metaphor of the ‘wheel of history’ and present socialism as the natural culmination of human evolution, whose achievement supposedly corresponds to a sort of historical law. With the development of large-scale industry, the bourgeoisie produces ‘its own gravediggers’. Consequently ‘its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable’.³²

In Marx's work admiration (verging sometimes on enthusiasm) for capitalism, as a mode of production that generates enormous economic growth and a constant overturning of traditional social forms, goes together with a pitiless critique of all the forms of oppression and exploitation flowing from its extension and development. The pages of volume I of *Capital* devoted to the impact of the industrial revolution on workers' lives, above all on children's lives, bear eloquent witness to this. While he does not hesitate to credit nineteenth-century capitalism and thus colonialism with a 'civilising mission', he presents it at the same time as a system that 'turns every economic progress into a social calamity'.³³ In a famous article on the results of British rule in India, he compares 'progress' to 'that hideous, pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain'.³⁴

Marx conceived the development of capitalism as a dialectical process, in which the 'civilising mission' (the growth of productive forces) and 'social regression' (class, national, etc. oppression) were inextricably linked. This dichotomy was destined in his eyes to deepen until it ushered in a revolutionary break. The twentieth century would show, by contrast, that this dialectic could also have a *negative* character: instead of breaking the iron cage of capitalist social relations, the growth of productive forces and technological progress could become the basis of modern, totalitarian Behemoths like fascism, National Socialism or, in another form, Stalinism. Today, after Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Kolyma, the choice is no longer between socialism and humanity's *decline*, but rather between a socialism conceived as a *new civilisation* and humanity's *destruction*.

I propose therefore to adopt Auschwitz as a paradigm. Auschwitz requires us to reread Marx critically, and to make a qualitative distinction between the different theoretical traditions that his founding work engendered. At the same time, Marxism will not be able to renew itself if it turns out to be incapable of understanding Auschwitz, the modern barbarism. From now on we will have to learn to consider not only just Marx, to use Sartre's famous formula, but also Auschwitz as the unsurpassable horizon of our time.

CHAPTER 2

The Blindness of the Intellectuals: Historicising Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew*

What is most striking – or at least, what is most striking to me – about reading Sartre's *Anti-Semite and Jew* today is his almost total silence about Auschwitz. The central place occupied by the extermination of the European Jews in our representations of twentieth-century history contrasts sharply with the way this event was perceived in the Western world during the 1940s and 1950s. More than anything else, Sartre's essay seems emblematic of the silence about the Shoah in postwar culture and, at the same time, it reveals the radical transformation of perspective that has occurred over the course of the last fifty years.

Written for the most part during the autumn of 1944, excerpts of which were published one year later in *Les Temps Modernes*, Sartre's work appeared in full in 1946, eighteen months after the liberation of the death camps. It is true that the fact of the extermination is mentioned in the book, but only once, and very discreetly, in the following words: 'Do we say anything about the Jews? Do we salute the survivors' return? Do we give a thought to those who died in the gas chambers at Lublin? Not a word.'¹ This lucid and sobering statement remains undeveloped.

Not only does Sartre never place the genocide at the centre of his reflections, he elaborates his arguments as if it had never taken place. Many passages in his book indicate quite clearly that, although he knew what had happened, he was absolutely incapable of conceiving it, let alone of grasping its significance. His phenomenology of anti-Semitism stops at the pogrom,

perceived as the extreme form of hatred of the Jews. ‘An anti-Semitic mob’, he writes, ‘will consider it has done enough when it has massacred some Jews and burned a few synagogues’ (pp. 44; 51). He sometimes makes allusions to the ‘symbolic murders’ perpetrated by the anti-Semite (pp. 49; 58), even as he specifies that although he is an ‘enemy of the Jews, the anti-Semite has need of them’ (pp. 33; 38).

Sartre’s blindness when confronting the Shoah must be explained, contextualised and historicised. Sartre is not at all indifferent to the fate of the Jews. But he is not in a position to pose for himself the simple question which, in 1940, haunts the correspondence of Gershom Scholem: ‘What will become of Europe after the elimination of the Jews?’²

Sartre’s blindness must not be regarded as unusual. It is, rather, Scholem who, with astonishing clairvoyance, escapes the commonplaces of the *Zeitgeist*. Sartre’s blindness is a function of the culture and period in which he wrote. It is apparent because, in 1946, he was one of the few to have written about the subject. In this regard, it is not inappropriate to remember that his silence about Auschwitz was not remarked on by any of the book’s critics, either in France or in the United States.³ It would therefore be absurd and profoundly anachronistic – and probably also unfair – to single out the author of *Anti-Semite and Jew* for not having seen what no one, or almost no one, was able to see at the time. That would amount to reproaching him for not perceiving Auschwitz as we do: as an historical rupture. A critique of his text, on the other hand, might clarify the ambiguities of a particular cultural formation.

The real problem would be to risk occulting the issue by turning Sartre into a scapegoat. Needless to say, we read his work today in the present and, as a result, our reactions are shaped by an historical consciousness of the Shoah and its place in the twentieth century which did not exist when Sartre was writing. This distance allows us better to grasp the limitations of his work, but we must also respect it. If we were to eliminate this distance, we would expose ourselves to the risk of a completely anachronistic reading. A critical perspective should avoid two opposed, but complementary, traps: on the one hand, an apologetic historicisation and, on the other, a

summary denunciation pronounced from the pulpit of a retrospective ‘wisdom’ as arrogant as it is belated.

I am not able here to elaborate upon the description of the historical context that produced this invisibility of the Jewish genocide. It is enough to remember that a witness such as Primo Levi encountered difficulties publishing *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This is a Man?*) and that it went almost unnoticed when it appeared in 1947.⁴ One need only add that the distinction between concentration camps and extermination camps was explicitly rejected by David Rousset in *L’Univers concentrationnaire*,⁵ barely mentioned by Robert Antelme in *L’Espèce humaine*,⁶ and that a good twenty years was needed until the difference became a secure historiographical concept. One would need also to evoke the intellectual and political climate of the period, at the apogee of anti-fascist culture, which was much more inclined to celebrate the latest triumph of Enlightenment than to rethink history from the point of view of the vanquished.⁷

For those in the Resistance, the symbol of Nazi barbarism was not Auschwitz, the largest death factory, but Buchenwald, the principal camp for political deportees. Moreover, in a Europe in ruins, in a France that witnessed the return of more than one and a half million prisoners of war, forced labourers, and political deportees, few were able to perceive the return of the 2500 Jewish survivors among the 75,000 who were deported. In such a climate of anti-fascist national unity, it was almost impossible to perceive the singularity of the Jewish tragedy. As the official phrasing of the period puts it, the French state should avoid every ‘form of discrimination among Frenchmen arrested for their political, philosophical, or racial affiliations’.⁸ The Jews themselves experienced too strong a need to reintegrate into a national community from which they had been so cruelly excluded to proclaim such a singularity. Many, Sartre tells us, wrote to thank him for not having forgotten them (pp. 72; 87–8).

It is in such a context, therefore, that one must place *Anti-Semite and Jew*. It goes against the tide in so far as it raises a question ignored by the vast majority of his contemporaries, but its limitations reflect the way it remains hostage to a conceptual horizon in which the genocide is still absent. If the

anti-Semitism which is the object of Sartre's investigation is very French, it concerns a France that had experienced neither the Vichy regime nor the death camps. It is the anti-Semitism of the Third Republic and the Dreyfus Affair. Read today, the book produces a strange impression, a little like reading a work on the German Democratic Republic published in 1992 whose author does not take into account that, in the meantime, the Berlin Wall had fallen and the East German state had ceased to exist. But one must understand that this is our impression and not that of readers in 1946.

A first misunderstanding to be avoided concerns the phrase used in the title: the 'Jewish question'. The book's contents indicate that Sartre's intention was not to pose an ontological problem arising from the existence of Jews. Interpretations that detect traces of anti-Semitism in this title by evoking its chronological proximity to the unfortunately notorious 'Commissariat for Jewish Questions' of the Vichy regime do not seem very convincing.⁹ They forget, for example, that in 1946, the year of the first edition of Sartre's essay, Abram Leon's posthumous *The Jewish Question* was published.¹⁰ Leon was a Polish Jew who had emigrated to Belgium where he directed the Trotskyist resistance before being deported to Auschwitz and murdered. The expression 'Jewish question' (*Judenfrage, jüdische Frage* in German, *yidische frage* in Yiddish) belongs to the history of debates in the workers movement and in Marxism, where it always designated the oppression of the Jews.¹¹ It was considered to be an aspect of a much larger 'national question' by which socialists categorised peoples struggling for their national emancipation. (It was in these terms that one spoke about an Irish question or a Polish question and even, in the nineteenth century, of an Italian or German question.)

Sartre's book did not wish to be a contribution to this debate of which, moreover, he was in large part unaware, but the phrase was so widespread that he could very naturally reuse it for his own purposes. His text incontestably reveals a strong attraction to Marxism, notably when he writes that 'the socialist revolution is necessary to and sufficient for the suppression of the anti-Semite. It is for the Jews also that we shall make the Revolution' (pp. 151; 182). (He unwittingly

reproduces here a dangerous illusion already held by the Russian Bolsheviks in 1917.) Sartre was not directly acquainted with the Marxist literature on the nation and nationalism, but he could ‘sing along’.

In his analysis of anti-Semitism, Sartre once more took up several themes that he had already addressed in a short story of 1939, ‘The Childhood of a Leader’, included in *The Wall*. In it, he described the formation of a young bourgeois nationalist, Lucien Fleurier, an incarnation of a typical militant in the Leagues of the 1930s, tainted by a violent hatred of Jews that found its natural release in a pogrom.¹² *Anti-Semite and Jew* immediately presents anti-Semitism as a passion and as a system of belief, more precisely, as the choice of hate over reason.

Rejection of the Jew thus becomes the expression of an archaic and obscurantist mentality in reaction to, or in flight from, modernity. By an implicit allusion to the Durkheimian dichotomy between the ‘mechanical solidarity’ endemic to traditional societies and the ‘organic solidarity’ typical of modern industrial societies, Sartre interprets hostility toward the Jews as the sign of a quest for community.¹³ But, he goes on to specify, it is a matter of a ‘primitive’ community, one that is homogeneous and inarticulate, in which equality is ‘the product of the non-differentiation of functions’ (pp. 30; 34).

Viscerally attached to an ancestral patrimony – existing as much in his mind as in the material world – transmitted from one generation to the next, the anti-Semite sees in the Jew the incarnation of the abstract rationality of the modern world, a rationality that frightens and threatens him. Confronting the Jew, the representative of ‘abstract intelligence’ and universality, the anti-Semite sets himself up as ‘the poet of real property’ (pp. 24; 27). From this derives the binary oppositions from which, Sartre believes, the anti-Semite’s imaginary is constructed: tradition versus modernity, the land as opposed to property, material riches as opposed to money, the soil versus the anonymous city, the national as opposed to the cosmopolitan, the particular versus the universal, concrete versus abstract.

In a passage that closely rehearses the portrait of the literary critic Marcel Schwob sketched by Léon Daudet in his

Memoirs,¹⁴ Sartre probes the mentality of the anti-Semite who despises the Jewish philologist able to gloss, to dissect Racine's work scientifically, while he, a Frenchman of old stock, 'possesses' it. 'Perhaps the Jew speaks a purer French than I do', says Sartre's anti-Semite, 'perhaps he knows syntax and grammar better, perhaps he is even a writer. No matter; he has spoken this language for only twenty years and I for a thousand. The correctness of his style is abstract, acquired; my mistakes are in conformity with the genius of the French language' (pp. 24–5; 28).

In other words, anti-Semitism is a variant of that nationalism of 'the soil and the dead', the romantic and conservative attitude that rejects modernity. It is a cultural code – according to Shulamit Volkov's illuminating definition – that transforms the Jew into a catalyst of a negative identity.¹⁵ In a world without reference points in which he no longer occupies an inherited place legitimated by tradition and secured through the self-reproduction of an immobile society, the deracinated individual can, thanks to anti-Semitism, construct a negative identity by demarcating himself from the Jew, the foreign bearer of all the values he detests. It is the ideology of Drumont, Barrès and Maurras who, along with Céline and Drieu la Rochelle, are the only anti-Semitic writers explicitly cited by Sartre. It is the anti-Semitism of the anti-Dreyfusards, the Action Française and the campaigns against the 'Jewish Republic'.¹⁶

Applied to the France of the Third Republic, Sartre's analysis is quite apt. With a style and an elegance lacking in the majority of sociologists and historians, it formulates, when all is said and done, a classic diagnosis. Such a formulation – anti-Semitism as a passion – cannot, however, integrate Auschwitz. Without undertaking an examination of his writings, Sartre cites Céline only in order to say that he was 'paid off' by the Nazis (pp. 41; 47–8). Hitler, Goebbels or Rosenberg do not enter his purview any more than do Xavier Vallat or Louis Darquier de Pellepoix or the architects of the Jewish statute of October 1940 or the organisers of the roundups in the following year. Anti-Semitism as an emotional syndrome may explain the anti-Jewish events in France between 1898 and 1934, but certainly not the death

camps, that is, extermination as a system and no longer as a spontaneous eruption of violence.

Sartre is incapable of seeing in Auschwitz a sinister triumph of modernity, a genocide presupposing, undoubtedly, racial hatred as an ultimate motivation for those who conceived it, but implying in its functioning an administrative, bureaucratic, technical and industrial machine whose operation depends not on hatred but on routine, on an instrumental rationality severed from all ethical considerations. The ‘banality of evil’ escapes Sartre’s phenomenology of anti-Semitism. Eugenics, racial biology, *völkisch* nationalism and Social Darwinism do not constitute for Sartre the ideological premises of a plan to exterminate the Jews. He sees in them only ‘the slender scientific coating of this primitive conviction’ which is the anti-Semitic ‘passion’ (pp. 38; 44).

Nevertheless, we know that French culture from Gobineau to Vacher de Lapouge and Gustave Le Bon was no stranger to developments within a European intellectual climate in which the National Socialist vision of the world took shape. Maurras was no Hitler, and Vichy was not the Third Reich, but the areas of overlap that exist are hardly insignificant. By demonstrating such a lack of comprehension of modern anti-Semitism in 1946, Sartre appears to express the conviction, today long superseded, but for a long time dominant in French historiography, according to which fascism in France was an imported product, as exotic as it had been marginal.¹⁷

Sartre’s argument does not lack interest or relevance for the analysis of traditional anti-Semitism; what is stunning is the gap, the abyss – an abyss opened up by the extermination – that henceforth separates it from the reality. And yet, this invisibility of the Shoah was not ineluctable. In a study written at the end of 1944 and published one year later under the title ‘Organized Guilt’, Hannah Arendt described the Nazis’ crimes as the product of a ‘vast machine of administrative mass murder’, in which she perceived ‘the true consequence of all the race theories and other modern ideologies that preach that might is right’. According to her, the systematic extermination perpetrated by the Nazis exceeded ‘not only the imagination of human beings, but also the framework and categories of our political thought and action’.¹⁸ I do not want

to develop at this point a comparative analysis of the writings about anti-Semitism by two writers as different as Sartre and Arendt. Nevertheless, the quotation indicates the abyssal distance which, even at this early moment, separated the French intellectual's comprehension of the event from that of the Jewish-German philosopher in exile.¹⁹

The reception of Sartre's essay essentially focused on his definition of the Jew as the anti-Semite's creation: 'The Jew', Sartre writes, 'is one whom other men consider a Jew' (pp. 69; 83–4). He adds that if anti-Semitism had not existed, the Jews would have been completely assimilated a long time ago (pp. 67; 83). In his eyes – as has often been noted – the Jew constitutes only a purely negative and derivative category deprived of any independent existence: a Jew is a Jew by virtue of someone else's gaze. Certain French Jews, such as Raymond Aron, were easily encompassed by this definition, while others criticised or rejected it, irritably or with disdain.²⁰

How can this absence of subjectivity, the merely reflected existence of the Jew, be explained? Sartre draws on a notion, Hegelian in origin (pp. 66; 81), whose future Friedrich Engels had assured within Marxist thought: the idea of 'peoples without history' (*geschichtslose Völker*).²¹ The history of the Jews, Sartre explains, is 'one of wandering over the course of twenty centuries' (pp. 132; 161), marked by the absence of 'any collective work that is specifically Jewish' as well as of a 'common mysticism'. According to Sartre, a 'civilisation that is properly Jewish' never existed (pp. 85; 103). At the end of his book, he summarises his thinking in a lapidary formula: 'The Jewish community is neither national nor international, neither religious, nor ethnic, nor political: it is a quasi-historical community' (pp. 145; 176).

Once it is conceived as the simple reflection of anti-Semitism, that is, of 'a regressive social force and a conception deriving from the prelogical world' (pp. 143; 173), Jewish history can only bear all the stigmata of its derivative and unfortunate nature. Sartre thereby clearly demonstrates a near-total ignorance of the history, culture and philosophy of the Jews, an ignorance, moreover, which he much later acknowledged, honourably and ingenuously, during his interviews with Benny Lévy.²² It is obvious that Jewish philosophy

from Maimonides to Mendelssohn, from Hermann Cohen to Martin Buber, remained an unexplored continent for him. His allusion to the lack of a ‘shared mysticism’ in the Jewish tradition indicates that he had never heard of Hasidism.²³ It is not astonishing that during his stay in Germany at the beginning of the Nazi regime he did not become aware of the *haskalah* or of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, but he also certainly did not know about its French counterparts, nor had he heard of the work of Sylvain Lévi or James Darmesteter. In her introduction to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt alludes ironically to Sartre’s thesis that the Jew is an effect of anti-Semitism and notes that this ‘myth’ is fashionable in French ‘existentialist’ circles.²⁴

The essence of Sartre’s thesis descends directly from a philosophical culture, dating back to the Enlightenment, which he wishes to criticise but whose prisoner he also remains. It consists in perceiving Judaism as a defect which the Jews could overcome thanks to Enlightenment. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this thesis would be elaborated upon, without being questioned, as much by liberals as by socialists. Sartre’s characterisation of the Jews as a people ‘without a history’ claims to take its inspiration from Hegel, but it seems to have been drawn from the *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* by Ernest Renan, in which one can read that ‘the Semitic race is recognisable almost uniquely by its negative characteristics: it neither possesses a mythology, nor epic, nor science, nor philosophy, nor fiction, nor plastic arts, nor a civic life; in sum, it lacks complexity, nuances, and a distinctive sense of itself as a unified whole.’²⁵

On the basis of this assertion about the non-historical character of a community whose sole memory is that of ‘a long martyrdom, that is, of a long passivity’ (pp. 67; 81), Sartre paints a double portrait of the Jew: on the one hand, the most perfect incarnation of this martyrdom, the ghetto Jew; and on the other, the assimilated but deracinated Jew, in essence cosmopolitan and anti-nationalist, the ‘inauthentic’ Jew. The first is depicted with striking traits that are astutely and tenderly observed, but which are uncomfortably close to a stereotype:

Here is a Jew seated on his doorstep in the rue des Rosiers. I recognise him immediately as a Jew: he has a black and curly beard, a slightly hooked nose, protruding ears, steel-rimmed glasses, a derby pulled down over his eyes, black clothes, quick and nervous gestures, and a smile of strange and dolorous goodness. (pp. 63; 76)

This is the only allusion in Sartre's essay to Eastern European Judaism.

The 'inauthentic' Western Jew, on the other hand, is a rather more complex figure. Sartre borrows from Heidegger the notion of inauthenticity and extends its meaning. In essence, for Heidegger, inauthenticity is modernity, the alienated world dominated by the impersonal 'one' (*das man*).²⁶ Sartre was not contaminated by the poison of the conservative revolution and began to distance himself from the author of *Sein und Zeit* in the same year in which his *Anti-Semite and Jew* appeared, but his language remains Heideggerian.²⁷ A man without qualities, without, properly speaking, a culture and tradition, the Jew perfectly incarnates, according to Sartre, modernity in its pure form. The identity of the modern Jew is rooted in abstract rationality. 'The rationalism of Jews', Sartre writes, 'is a passion – the passion for the universal' (pp. 111; 134).

Once again, Jewishness, defined by notions of intelligence, rationality, abstraction and calculation, is only a projection of the anti-Semite's imagination. If the anti-Semite is, as we have seen, 'the poet of landed property', the Jew – as 'a missionary of the universal' who practises philosophy as an 'exercise in asceticism and of purification' (pp. 112; 136), one who is animated by 'a sort of impassioned imperialism of reason' (pp. 112; 137) – is his opposite. Such a definition of the Jew calls to mind that of the intellectual depicted by Julien Benda twenty years or so earlier: a member of a caste of adepts of pure metaphysical speculation, the official interpreters of reason and abstract justice who 'do not abase themselves by a passion for an earthly object'.²⁸ In this group, Sartre includes not only Spinoza and Husserl, but also – contradicting Benda's opinion – Bergson, whose philosophy, when compared with Sorel's irrationalism, seemed to Sartre a form of 'rationalism that has undergone a change of name' (pp. 116; 141). It is 'an anti-intellectualist

doctrine constructed entirely by the most rational and critical of intelligences' (pp. 115; 140).

When Sartre published his essay, conceiving the Jewish intellectual to be the incarnation of abstract rationalism had been a mainstay of European culture for a century.²⁹ Its most original interpreter was certainly the German economist Werner Sombart, whose work, *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben*, Sartre would have read in French translation.³⁰ It is more likely, however, that he derived elements of his thought from an abundant French anti-Semitic literature that flourished after the Dreyfus Affair and which he does not fail to mention, moreover, in the first part of his book: Edouard Drumont, who, in *La France Juive*, contrasts the Israelite merchant, cerebral and calculating, with the 'Aryan' farmer, heroic and creative;³¹ or Drieu la Rochelle, who in 1939 devotes his novel *Gilles* to this subject. In it, one can read a passage that has remained famous: 'A Jew is horrible as a *polytechnicien* or a *normalien*'.³²

Sartre was formed in French culture between the two world wars that was permeated by a far from superficial anti-Semitism. He constructs his argument on the basis of materials at his disposal and it is from them that he borrows the image of the Jewish intellectual. His sources may not even come from texts he read, but simply from contemporary ideas which floated freely in the air and which he quite naturally assimilated. If the materials he used derive from this tradition, however, one must also observe that he does not agree with it; he transforms its codes and reaches rather different conclusions. For example, Sartre stigmatises as an 'absurd accusation' the anti-Semitic commonplace about the intrinsic aesthetic and cultural sterility of the Jews, who are by nature foreign to every creative impulse. He needs only to recall the names of Spinoza, Proust, Kafka, Darius Milhaud, Einstein and Bergson (pp. 113; 137). In other words, Sartre borrows from the anti-Semite's imagination the premise of his discussion – that of the cerebral Jew, sickly and neurotic – but only in order to stand the anti-Semite's conclusions on their head.

Not that the identification of Jewishness and rationalism was the exclusive possession of anti-Semitic literature – far from it. Sartre's argument would seem to indicate, however,

that he was inspired even more by Barrès and Drumont and a widespread stereotype in French culture at the turn of the century than by the work of the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen. What results, of course, is Sartre's and not Maurras' or Drumont's. It would therefore be false to interpret his intellectual 'indebtedness' as a sign of anti-Semitism. Sartre wants to combat anti-Semitism, but he could only do so with the tools at his disposal, and these he borrowed from the anti-Semites themselves.

Such a definition of the Jew, nevertheless, does not fail to disconcert the reader, because Sartre's essay opens with a critique of democrats' approach to the 'Jewish question'. He once again radically puts in question an assimilationist paradigm well rooted in France since the revolution, one enthusiastically supported by Jews. (The 'politics of assimilation' were, until Vichy, in fact, one of the pillars of French Judaism.³³) Just as Hannah Arendt did during the period, Sartre relies on certain aspects of the counter-revolutionary criticism of the Rights of Man. For the democrat, he insists, there is only Man, an abstract and universal entity, while humanity is composed of singular, concrete individuals. Paraphrasing De Maistre, who knew of the existence of Frenchmen, Italians and, thanks to Montesquieu, Persians, but who had never encountered Man in the flesh,³⁴ Sartre reminds the reader that the democrat 'recognises neither Jew, nor Arab, nor Negro, nor bourgeois, nor worker, but only man – man always the same in all times and places' (pp. 55; 65). He even seizes upon 'a nuance of anti-Semitism' in such an attitude, in that the democrat wishes to annihilate the Jew in order to save the man in him (pp. 56; 68). Sartre pleads for a recognition of the Jewish man, that is, of a Jew not as an abstract human being, but as a concrete, singular individual, and thus as a Jew with his Jewishness.

The contradiction arises from the fact that, as we have seen, for Sartre, the Jew is precisely nothing else but the incarnation of abstract rationality, of a universality without specificity. Over and above this general definition, the phenomenology of the Jew he proposes oscillates between two caricatural poles: at one end, the dialectical double of anti-Semitism, that is, as a community 'disgraced, uprooted, destined from the start to either inau-

thenticity or martyrdom' (pp. 136; 165) and, at the other, the reproduction of a crude racial stereotype which attributes to Jews certain typical traits – 'hooked nose, protruding ears' – which appear to be 'ethnic characteristics', incontestably valid, inherited biological givens (pp. 102; 123).³⁵

The presence of clichés like these in a work published in 1946 indicates very well just how difficult it is to get rid of prejudices and how much time it takes to cleanse language still permeated by the heritage of a long, anti-Semitic past. This does not justify making Sartre into a good pupil of Drumont any more, for example, than were Zionists like Felix Weltsch or Max Nordau, whose stigmatisation of the diasporic 'degenerate' Jew rested on similar commonplaces in order to establish another, opposed cliché: that of a *Muskeljude* strengthened by the return to the soil.³⁶ In 1946, Sartre was not a Zionist, and even less of a Maurrasian, but his language does not escape the contaminations of an ancient *Zeitgeist*.

Criticism of the assimilationist paradigm which wanted to combat anti-Semitic prejudice even while ignoring the existence of actual Jews is necessary to Sartre's argument in order to introduce his plea for 'Jewish authenticity'. This latter concept does not consist in recuperating and taking responsibility for a past, a tradition, a cultural heritage which, according to him, did not exist. Sartre did not recommend a return to the religious sources of Judaism, nor did he wish to exhume an 'organic' Jewish community constituted by daily practices, the Yiddish language and literature, after the manner of the mythical *Ostjudentum* idealised by Kafka and Buber. Nor did he wish to fabricate a Jewish nation after the model of the nation-states of the Western world.

In other words, for Sartre, Jewish authenticity has nothing to do either with neo-orthodoxy or with a certain Jewish romanticism then unknown in France. Nor did it have any more to do with a political Zionism of Herzelian cast whose legitimacy he admitted without supporting it. These different options are never taken into account in his analysis. In his view, Jewish authenticity is reduced to the Jew's recognition of his condition as someone oppressed and persecuted. The authentic Jew is one who assumes his existence as a pariah, who recognises with a formula Sartre once again borrows from

Heidegger, his ‘situation’, his ‘being-in-the-world’.³⁷ ‘To be a Jew is to be thrown into – to be abandoned to – the situation of a Jew’ (pp. 89; 108). ‘Jewish authenticity’, Sartre clarifies,

consists of choosing as Jew, that is, in realising one’s Jewish condition. The authentic Jew abandons the myth of the universal man; he knows himself and wills himself into history as a historic and damned creature; he ceases to run away from himself and to be ashamed of his own kind ... he knows that he is one who stands apart, untouchable, scorned, proscribed – and it is as such that he asserts his being. (pp. 136–7; 166)

This conclusion does not fail to recall the portrait of the Jewish pariah painted by Bernard Lazare in *Le Fumier de Job*, a text probably unknown to Sartre, in which Lazare describes ‘the pride in being a pariah and above all the pariah who is a Jew’.³⁸ Such pride is also the hallmark of the attitude of many Jews during and after the persecutions. Hannah Arendt has written that, at the time of Nazism, the only response that she could give to the question ‘Who are you?’ was very simply: ‘A Jew’. The answer given to the same question by Nathan the Wise in Lessing’s famous play – ‘I am a man’ – appeared to Hannah Arendt at the time only as ‘a grotesque and dangerous evasion of reality’.³⁹

But Sartre – though one would certainly not want to hold it against him – had the good fortune never to know the split identities of a Bernard Lazare or a Hannah Arendt. His situation during the war years – shared by many French intellectuals, who got through the period by adapting to conditions and thus by adopting a manner of conduct neither despicable nor heroic – is a thousand miles away from that of the exiled Jew.⁴⁰ Sartre’s plea for ‘Jewish authenticity’ is not based on evidence of how Jews became aware of themselves and acted under the impact of Nazi persecution; it should therefore be understood for what it is – as an appeal from within French culture to comprehend the sufferings of the Jews and to accord them the status of victims at the very moment when they had been forgotten and their tragedy entirely marginalised. To demand of the Jews that they recognise themselves as victims

of persecution means, in the last analysis, to exhort the French not to ignore them.

In effect, for Sartre, this ‘Jewish authenticity’ must be accompanied by the recognition on the part of non-Jews that ‘anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem: it is our problem’ (pp. 152; 184). Jewish authenticity is a facet of anti-Semitism and this concerns society in its entirety. Sartre does not hesitate to recognise his own responsibility – what Karl Jaspers during the same period called ‘metaphysical guilt’ – which derived from belonging to Western Christian civilisation. ‘The Jewish blood that the Nazis shed’, he writes, ‘falls on all our heads’ (pp. 136; 165). In the context of the period, and taking into account the itinerary of its author, this reading of Sartre’s text seems to me, if not the only possible reading, at least the most plausible one.

Such a definition of Jewish authenticity is certainly debatable from many points of view. As we have seen, on the historical level, it is arguable because of the extent to which it ignores practically everything – the past, tradition and Jewish culture – that might have anchored it. But it is equally suspect on the political level. Sidney Hook, a thoroughgoing liberal, considers Sartre’s distinction between authentic and inauthentic Jews to be completely meaningless because, he emphasises, from the perspective of a legally constituted state, only citizens, individuals equal before the law, exist, and they are free to determine for themselves who they are and therefore to choose their own identity: Jewish or Christian, American or Italian, etc.⁴¹ The rigour of such an argument is unimpeachable except for the way that it abstracts from an historical context in which the Jew, independently of his choice of identity and self-awareness, is perceived as a Jew in a political and social reality that persecutes him; in other words, in a context in which a Jew is, for better or worse, whether he wants to be or not, a ‘Jew because others consider him as such’. It was simply impossible for the Jews of Europe in 1945 to abstract from the massacre that had just been conducted against them. Failing to recognise – which Sartre denounces – the ‘authenticity’, historically determined, of the Jewish condition could only take the form of an ‘avenue of flight’ (pp. 93; 112).

It is only an intuition that Sartre expresses with the conceptual baggage of his existentialism. It is a simple intuition, because he is incapable of seeing the genocide and still less of placing it at the centre of his thought. From this point of view, his observations are certainly not the most lucid or most profound at the time. We need only recall a work like *Dialectic of Enlightenment* written during the same years, in which Horkheimer and Adorno designate Auschwitz as the symbol of a ‘self-destruction of reason’ which completes the course of Western civilisation.⁴² Or consider the writings of an intellectual like Dwight MacDonald, neither a Jew nor an exile, who in 1945 singled out the ‘death factories’ as a radical break in Western history.⁴³

One could say that, instead of writing his brilliant plea for ‘Jewish authenticity’, Sartre would have done better to follow the example of Karl Jaspers and compose a more austere pamphlet about French guilt.⁴⁴ But in 1945 no guilty feelings haunted liberated France, and Vichy would remain a taboo subject for the next thirty years. Sartre’s study is inscribed in an intellectual and political climate, but introduces into it a dissonant voice which calls attention to a ‘Jewish problem’ ignored by the vast majority. That ‘problem’ is the extermination of the European Jews, which, although he knew about it, he did not succeed in naming or in thinking through. It is for this intuition that he was thanked by Jews who, touched, wrote to him. It is to this intuition that Georges Bataille rendered homage in his critique of Sartre’s essay when he wrote that, after Auschwitz, ‘the image of man is henceforth inseparable from that of a gas chamber’.⁴⁵

Translated by Stuart Liebman

CHAPTER 3

On the Edge of Understanding: From the Frankfurt School to Ernest Mandel

The Marxist discussion on the ‘Jewish question’ extended over a century of history, from Karl Marx to the Belgian Trotskyist Abram Leon, from emancipation to Auschwitz. It resulted from a close interconnection between a Jewish minority in the diaspora and a universalist, revolutionary current of thought. Their interaction was marked by crises and breaks: here we need only mention an essay like the young Karl Marx’s ‘On the Jewish Question’ (1843) – the subject of polemics, ideological speculations and misunderstandings – or the tragic fate of so many revolutionaries of Yiddish culture in the Stalinist Russia of the 1930s and 1940s. But one cannot help being extremely struck by the scope of this phenomenon. Between the late nineteenth century, as early as the founding of the Second International, until the Second World War, Jews had a profound impact through their presence, thought and action on the whole history of Marxism.

Analysing this pre-war discussion leads to a fundamental question about the fruitfulness and (sometimes narrow) limits of the Marxist approach to Jewish history. The Jewish encounter with Marxism was accompanied by illusions and repressions whose cost was sometimes high. With few exceptions, Marxist thought was afflicted with a genuine blindness in the face of the emergence of modern anti-Semitism, from its first manifestations in Europe towards the end of the nineteenth century to the horror of Auschwitz. It would nevertheless be false to consider these limits as the result of Marxism’s lack of connection to Jewish history. On the contrary, Marxism was one of Jewish history’s political and cultural

dimensions at a time when, thanks to emancipation, Jews had become full citizens of most European societies.

It would be more useful to understand this debate as one of the manifestations of Yiddish and German Jewish culture, which had deep connections with the ideas and history of the workers' movement. The Jewish genocide was a radical break which, in a very short period of time (1941–45), put an end to a Marxist debate on the 'Jewish question' that had begun a century earlier. The long view of the Jewish–Marxist encounter gave way to the frenzied pace of extermination. While emancipation had laid the basis for this convergence, Auschwitz destroyed it (at least in the geographical and cultural space where it had taken place). Hitler had taken it on himself to eliminate the Jews; after the war in Europe – in the Soviet Union as early as the late 1920s – Stalinism had taken it on itself to annihilate living Marxism, partly by transforming it into a state ideology, partly by suppressing its most original and authentic representatives.

The 'classical' Marxist debate on the Jewish question thus ended with Auschwitz: not exhausted, out of breath or out of date, but wiped out along with those who had created and conducted it. Postwar Marxism would be much 'less Jewish' than nineteenth- or early twentieth-century Marxism. For a good thirty years its epicentre was displaced from Central and Eastern Europe to the Latin countries (notably Italy and France, with some very significant extensions in Latin America). Then, at the end of the 1970s, it took root in English-speaking countries, particularly in US universities.¹ Meanwhile, most survivors of pre-war 'Jewish Marxism' strictly speaking, Labour Zionists and Bundists, moved to Israel at the end of the war, where they faced a radically new reality and radically new problems.

This major dislocation in the relationship between Jews and the workers' movement after 1945 explains to a great extent the lack of a Marxist debate on the causes, forms and consequences of the destruction of the European Jews. The genocide showed the limits of pre-war theoretical and political disputes, and at the same time brutally put an end to them by destroying the people who had been at issue. The postwar cultural and political context contributed neither to examining this break nor to

filling this theoretical void. During the 1940s and 1950s Marxism became an essential component of anti-fascist culture, in which the Jewish tragedy was reduced to a marginal aspect of the gigantic conflict that had ravaged Europe.

The defeat of Nazism, the Red Army's advance into Central Europe and the impressive growth of Communist parties in countries where they had played a leading role in the Resistance all encouraged a return in the immediate postwar period to a philosophy of progress. This left hardly any room for thinking through the catastrophe. Marxism was thus characterised by its *silence* on the subject of Auschwitz. How could one pay attention to the 'little difference' at a moment when history, having cleared away a mountain of corpses, seemed to have reached its happy ending? When its spirit seemed to be incarnated by a 'liberator' advancing triumphally, no longer on a white horse as Napoleon appeared to Hegel at Jena, but in command of a Soviet tank?²

This silence has lasted up until our own times. The great British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm, to give only one example, opens his balance sheet of the twentieth century by noting the striking 'regression' in this century from the level of civilisation considered as permanently attained in the Western world during the century from the Congress of Vienna in 1815 to the eve of 1914. He reminds us that torture and killing of civilian populations in wartime were thought to have been definitively abolished; but he devotes only a few marginal lines to the Nazi extermination camps.³ In short, Marxism has been no exception to the blindness of European culture in face of the civilisational break represented by Auschwitz.

Two exceptional figures, Leon Trotsky and Walter Benjamin, managed to break with the general tendency and showed great clear-sightedness about the consequences that the war could have for the fate of European Jewry. In 1938, Trotsky predicted that a new conflict would lead to 'physical extermination' of the Jews. In 1940, in famous 'Theses' miraculously saved despite their author's flight and suicide, Benjamin sketched the outlines of a new vision of history in which the idea of catastrophe replaced the myth of progress. The two approaches were radically different – Trotsky was an atheist revolutionary and rigorously rationalist, while Benjamin

was a Jewish thinker in search of a synthesis between historical materialism and messianic redemption – but their conclusions were entirely convergent. Trotsky forcefully announced the gravity of the imminent danger; Benjamin developed the philosophical categories capable of recognising and thinking through the laceration of Auschwitz. The Russian exile seemed almost to translate into political terms the idea preached by the German Jewish critic, of no longer conceiving of revolution as the ‘locomotive’ of history but rather as the ‘emergency brake’ capable of halting the rush towards catastrophe. Both would be carried off by the barbarism of the century, victims respectively of Stalinism and of National Socialism.⁴

It is the heirs of these two figures who would carry on with their ideas after the war. In reality this did not mean that the Marxist debate came back to life, but only that a few isolated analyses, which remained practically unknown at the time, were developed by intellectuals who were marginalised, in exile or escapees from the great Hitlerite massacre.

The attempt to think through Auschwitz within the field of Marxism (sometimes transforming it in the process) would be the work, starting from different but parallel approaches, of the Frankfurt School and of Ernest Mandel. Horkheimer and Adorno developed in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* certain themes that were present in Benjamin’s ‘Theses’. Shortly after the war other philosophers affiliated with the Institute for Social Research or situated at its periphery, such as Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse and Günther Anders, made Auschwitz the starting point for their critique of modern civilisation. Ernest Mandel, a Belgian Marxist of German Jewish origin, was the friend and comrade of the Trotskyist Abram Leon, like Leon had been arrested, but unlike Leon had succeeded in escaping from a work camp in Germany. Mandel’s work undoubtedly contains the most coherent attempt to interpret the Jewish genocide starting from the categories of classical Marxism, in this way developing further Trotsky’s approach.

We must none the less take note of a gap of roughly four decades between the Frankfurt School’s works, written at the end of the war, and Mandel’s, which date essentially from the late 1980s. Once again, as with Trotsky and Benjamin, these two currents of thought followed separate roads without ever

meeting up. There is no doubt that the impossibility of their meeting had largely to do with what Perry Anderson pointed out as one of the trademarks of Western Marxism – its withdrawal into philosophy and aesthetics – and what Martin Jay presented as one of the essential characteristics of Frankfurt School Marxism: its radical separation from the organised workers' movement.⁵ This isolation enabled it, on the one hand, to preserve its autonomy and originality, but condemned it, on the other hand, to a gradual loss of any social anchorage.

With the remarkable exception of Herbert Marcuse, Frankfurt School Marxism (and notably its radical version represented by Günther Anders, the most interesting of its 'fellow travellers') seemed to take on a more and more anti-utopian dimension. Ultimately, it based itself on a paradigm that we could call, at the antipodes from Ernst Bloch, the 'principle of despair' (*das Prinzip Verzweiflung*).⁶ Its radical critique of civilisation went together from that time on with an attitude of despair, scepticism and a tragic feeling of impotence (to the point of opposing student protest movements, as Adorno and Horkheimer would do in 1968).

Mandel, by contrast, developed a critical theory of society that was indissociable from a political project that located its subject in the exploited classes. His Marxism was utopian, generous and constantly on the lookout for turning points or 'bifurcations' in history that might be transformed into revolutionary breaks. Mandel reached his zenith as a political thinker in the period after May 1968. The neo-liberal outcome of the 1989–91 crisis of the Soviet bloc failed to break his spirit. His trajectory was thus very much distinct from that of Adorno and Anders. The only element that they shared despite everything was a rejection of Stalinism.

The Frankfurt School

Walter Benjamin had already cleared the way for Frankfurt School intellectuals to think about the Jewish genocide, by affirming the necessity of developing a new form of historical materialism 'that has annihilated within itself the idea of progress'.⁷ Following in Benjamin's footsteps, the effort to

rethink history in the wake of Auschwitz was undertaken by Adorno and Horkheimer towards the end of the war in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. A chapter of this work, drafted with the help of Leo Löwenthal in 1943–44, is devoted to analysing anti-Semitism. The Final Solution is presented there as the paradigm of a barbarism towards which the whole trajectory of Western civilisation, characterised as a process of ‘self-destruction of enlightenment’ (*Selbstzerstörung der Aufklärung*), has converged.⁸ The emancipatory potentialities of Enlightenment humanist rationalism, Adorno and Horkheimer explain, have gradually but inexorably given way to an instrumental, blind and power-hungry rationality. Like Benjamin in his allegory of the angel of history, they seem to turn upside down the positivist vision of a long, linear, automatic human development towards progress, seeing in National Socialism the terminus of the Western world’s voyage. Auschwitz unveils the destructive dimension of *Aufklärung*, which has now revealed itself in place of Hegel’s Absolute Spirit to be the true content of history.⁹

This break with the philosophy of progress is still incomplete – and in this sense less radical than Benjamin’s – in as much as Horkheimer and Adorno present Nazism as ‘civilised society’s relapse into barbarism’ (*Rückkehr der aufgeklärte Zivilisation zur Barbarei*).¹⁰ This could be interpreted literally as a regression towards the past, rather than as the emergence of a modern ‘barbarism’ founded on the material structures, ideologies and mentalities of industrial civilisation.¹¹ Formulas common in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s work, such as ‘progress becomes regress’,¹² only make more dialectical a vision of history incapable of breaking with the idea that history moves – alternately forwards and backwards – along a diachronic, linear axis.

Resting on the foundation of Hegel’s and Marx’s work, Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critical approach was enriched by contributions from Weber, Benjamin and Freud, thus arriving for the first time at a coherent synthesis. The power of a work like *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, conceived and published in exile, would only be perceived much later, when it was republished in Germany towards the end of the 1960s; but its influence would then be lasting. Their approach was radicalised by Herbert Marcuse in his *Eros and Civilisation* (1954), whose introduction

no longer presents ‘concentration camps, mass exterminations, world wars, and atomic bombs’ as a “‘relapse into barbarism’”, but rather as ‘the unrepressed implementation of the achievements of modern science, technology, and domination’.¹³

For Günther Anders, author of *The Obsolescence of Man* (1956 and 1980), far from plunging humanity back into ancestral barbarism, Auschwitz and Hiroshima herald the arrival of a new era for the human species, which has now become ‘obsolete’ in a world dominated by technology and thus susceptible to being totally wiped out.¹⁴ In the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Treblinka, Jews and Gypsies were eliminated by industrial methods, in the same way that a machine can ‘treat’ its raw material (*Rohstoff*). In Hiroshima, Anders emphasises, the demonstration was made that all of humanity can be annihilated, that the Apocalypse has stopped being a prophetic vision and become a wholly concrete threat. In this era in which the Jewish tragedy and the atomic bomb have revealed a danger for our existence on earth, any distinction between ontology and ethics seems out of date. The liberatory task that has formed the horizon of socialism since Marx’s time is now coming to coincide with a ‘conservative’ task, aiming at preserving the planet and the human species.

Anders thus defines his political commitment as that of an ‘ontological conservative’.¹⁵ His work doubtless expresses the most consistent effort to rethink Marxism under the black light of Auschwitz. He claims less to ‘explain’ the gas chambers than to make them the starting point for a radical critique of the existing social order and for a project of human and social liberation.

This approach runs counter to those who tried to see National Socialism as the culmination of a centuries-old attempt (begun just after and in reaction to the French revolution) at the ‘destruction of Reason’ (in Georg Lukács’ phrase).¹⁶ As we have seen, Marxism after Marx had largely renounced the critique of civilisation begun by Rousseau and Fourier, in order to celebrate ‘progress’. But Auschwitz showed that many institutions common to modern society, traditionally interpreted as fruits of ‘progress’, could be the antechamber to hell.¹⁷ The emergence of modern science and the strengthening of the state monopoly on violence – seen by

the European cultural tradition from Thomas Hobbes to Norbert Elias as two hallmarks of the civilising process – were essential conditions for the Final Solution, for its ideology (biological racism) as well as its industrial and bureaucratic-rational structures. Unveiling this paradox of civilisation has been one of the Frankfurt School's most important contributions. In taking up Marx's radical critique of bourgeois civilisation once more, it carried out a *break* within Marxist thought. A work such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* shows that at the origins of this theoretical break lay the laceration of history that took place in the Nazi extermination camps.¹⁸

This break took place within the Frankfurt School itself as well, even though those who made it did not draw its full consequences. At the beginning of the war its members (Friedrich Pollock, for example) were still analysing National Socialism as a form of 'monopoly capitalism' and defending an entirely traditional Marxist vision of anti-Semitism. This was the case of Horkheimer's article 'The Jews and Europe' (1939) and of a work like *Behemoth* (1942), in which Franz Neumann explicitly ruled out the possibility of the Nazi genocide:

The internal political value of Anti-Semitism will, therefore, never allow a complete extermination of the Jews. The foe cannot and must not disappear; he must always be held in readiness as a scapegoat for all the evils originating in the socio-political system.¹⁹

Anti-Semitic bigotry would lose its *raison d'être* if it ever destroyed the object of its hatred, he thought. After the Final Solution, these analyses were clearly inadequate and no longer valid (though this by no means eliminates the value of a work like *Behemoth*, whose analysis of the Nazi system of rule would provide the starting point for one of the main historians of the destruction of the European Jews, Raul Hilberg).²⁰

Dialectic of Enlightenment marked a turning point in this respect. Horkheimer and Adorno's starting point in 1944 was that total extermination is possible. By contrast, it is the Utopia of an emancipated world that seems after Auschwitz to have been banished or everlasting tarnished for the Frankfurt School. Having recognised the fracture of civilisation that took

place at Auschwitz, the Frankfurt School's members from that time on seemed to see it as irreversible. Auschwitz had in their eyes put an end to the historical dialectic based on class struggle, and brought to light a negative dialectic of domination that had no room left in it for an emancipatory Utopia. Marxism, they seemed to conclude, could recognise Auschwitz only at the price of self-mutilation.²¹

Ernest Mandel

The idea that the categories of classical Marxism might be incapable of providing an explanation of the Jewish genocide never troubled Ernest Mandel's mind. He was 22 years old at the Liberation, and his faith in the revolutionary potential of the industrial working class was unshakable. He had not lived through the war in exile like Adorno and Anders, but in Belgium and Germany. In Antwerp he was active in Trotskyist groups that had helped clandestinely to organise the Resistance. He was arrested twice, and managed to escape each time. Interned in a work camp in Germany, he came in contact with guards who had been members of the Social Democratic and Communist parties and succeeded in convincing them to help him escape.²² His audacity saved him from being deported to Auschwitz. This was the first time he showed his irrepressible calling as an 'enlightener'. Germany remained in his eyes, as for all communists educated politically between the wars, much less the country of executioners than the country of Rosa Luxemburg and the heartland of European revolution.

In 1946, in an afterword to the first edition of Abram Leon's work *The Jewish Question*, the young Mandel tried to analyse the Jewish genocide. He did not use the word, which had just been coined and was not yet in current use, but he did cite the figure of five million victims. 'The human imagination can hardly conceive concretely the meaning of this number', he wrote.²³ In his opinion the absurdity of the tragedy was only a surface appearance, since it was the product of 'a world in torment'. Although any explanation seemed 'to fall short of the full horror of the reality' in face of the ghettos, mass execu-

tions, gas chambers and ovens, he warned against the temptation of seeing it as ‘a sudden, unique catastrophe’ in history. True, the Jews had been ‘hit harder than any other people’, but it must not be forgotten that their destruction took place at a time when the whole human race had nearly fallen into a bottomless pit. The war had threatened to carry off ‘everything that twenty centuries of civilisation had slowly accumulated’, as its 60 million victims bore witness.²⁴ The genocide of the Jews, he said, only ‘pushed to the point of paroxysm the barbarism of imperialism’s customary methods in our time’, above all the methods of colonial massacre.²⁵ The atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed that Nazism had no monopoly on violence directed at innocent victims; and Mandel did not fail to express concern – rightly, but using rather unfortunate, excessive expressions – about the fate in store for Germans expelled from territories occupied by the Red Army.²⁶ Mandel’s text ends by reaffirming the classic dichotomy between pessimism of the intellect – ‘humanity has travelled a long road since it was up in arms over the fate of the victims of the Crimean war’²⁷ – and an unshakable optimism of the will: ‘We have no reason to despair of the human race’s destiny.’²⁸

At the time the young Mandel saw the Jewish genocide as an *imperialist crime*, doubtless one of the most terrible ones in the context of a war that had surpassed all the horrors known previously to the human race, but certainly not as a *unique* event. He did not see it as *qualitatively different* from colonial massacres and the traditional violence of the capitalist system of domination.

Mandel would wait forty years after the publication of this text before writing once more on the subject. The occasion was provided in 1986 by the publication of his book on the Second World War; then again in 1988 by a colloquium in Brussels on Nazi totalitarianism; and finally by the enormous impact of the German ‘historians’ debate’ (*Historikerstreit*). During the decades that separated his first, 1946 text from the rest he devoted several studies to the problem of fascism, but without paying any particular attention to its anti-Semitic dimension.²⁹ Far from being exceptional, this silence was characteristic of all the writers who analysed Marxist theories

of fascism between the 1960s and early 1980s. Postwar historians shared with Marxists of the 1930s a model of European fascism in which National Socialism was only a German variant and its anti-Semitic dimension occupied only a marginal place.³⁰ The discussion on the specificity of Nazism would result later from the development of historical research into German society and the Jewish genocide. This would all at once make earlier Marxist debates seem hopelessly dated.³¹

So it was in a context marked by the entrance of Jewish memory onto the public stage – along with numerous media events, from ‘Holocaust denial’ to the German historians’ debate by way of Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* – that Mandel felt the need to revisit the issue of Auschwitz. In the intervening years his point of view had changed and his analyses had become much more nuanced.

In his writings in this last period, Mandel did not hesitate to recognise the uniqueness of the Jewish genocide. The ‘deliberate and systematic killing of six million men, women and children simply because of their ethnic origin’, he wrote, can only be understood as a ‘unique’ event in history – though this does not mean that we cannot explain it, still less that we cannot compare it with others.³² The extermination of the European Jews was the culmination of a long series of eruptions of violence that have flared up throughout the history of imperialism, and which had already led to other mass murders and even fully-fledged genocides, as with the indigenous inhabitants of the Americas. The Jews’ dehumanisation by Nazism was not without historical precedent: something similar had occurred on a vast scale as early as the Middle Ages with the persecutions of midwives, heretics and witches, and then in the modern world of blacks and colonised peoples. The uniqueness of the Jewish genocide, therefore, did not consist in the Nazis’ greater inhumanity when compared with their European forbears, nor in the specific nature of their anti-Semitism.³³ At the foundations of Hitlerite ideology lay a form of biological racism which, systematised as early as the nineteenth century by Social Darwinism, was widespread in all Western countries, beginning with France (from Gobineau to Vacher de Lapouge). One of the basic texts of Nazi anti-Semitic politics, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which

vulgarised the myth of an international Jewish conspiracy, was of Russian origin, Mandel recalled.³⁴

Parallel to his critique of Eurocentric approaches that isolate Auschwitz from racism and colonial oppression, Mandel rejected the mystical cult of the Holocaust. The Jewish genocide must be treated historically; its specificity can only be seen clearly on the basis of an analytical approach of a comparative type. In this perspective, this crime seems much less like the outcome of age-old Judeophobia than as a paroxysm resulting from the modern violence deployed by imperialism against peoples judged to be ‘inferior’, ‘subhuman’ or inassimilable. In *The Meaning of the Second World War* Mandel wrote,

Traditional semi-feudal and petty-bourgeois anti-semitism ... led to pogroms, which were to the Nazi murderers what knives are to the atom bomb. The seeds of the gas chambers resided in the mass enslavement and killing of Blacks via the slave trade, in the wholesale extermination of the Central and South American Indians by the *conquistadors*. In such cases, the term genocide is fully justified ...³⁵

The unique character of the destruction of the Jews was not linked to the nature of the Nazis’ anti-Semitic hatred, which was not qualitatively different from other forms of racism that were very widespread at the time inside as well as outside Germany. The Gypsies, for example, were victims of a genocide comparable to that of the Jews. Furthermore, Nazi policies reduced Slavic peoples to the status of slaves. This means for Mandel that other forms of extermination on a mass scale make the Final Solution much more a *paradigmatic* crime than an absolutely unique one.

The uniqueness of this genocide does not have to do with the nature of the executioners, Mandel added. On the one hand, responsibility for this crime was shared quite widely in Hitlerite Europe. The – direct and indirect – German ‘implementers’ accounted for only 50–60 per cent of an army of functionaries, bureaucrats, policemen, soldiers, ideologues and industrialists, which represented practically every sector of society and operated both inside and outside the Third

Reich.³⁶ On the other hand, the great majority of them did not have the mentality of sadistic criminals or racist fanatics. True, this motive was present, but it was relevant only to a small minority of enthusiastic Nazis. The psychology of the great mass of those complicit in the Final Solution was that of ‘accessories’ to the crime, who carried out tasks sometimes out of cowardice, sometimes out of calculation and more often out of habit, preferring not to ask questions about the consequences of their actions. This was the mentality of the traditional dominant classes in Germany, founded on values such as ‘honour’, ‘loyalty’, ‘patriotism’ and ‘fulfilment of duty’.³⁷ The top civil servants, diplomats, industrialists and engineers who made their contribution to the work of extermination by carrying out organisational, planning and management tasks identified more with these traditional values than with the murderous slogans of Nazi propaganda.

In other words, Nazism was not an inexplicable eruption of fierce, irrational hatred which suddenly sent the normal course of history off the rails. Hitler’s Germany simply pushed to an extreme the violence inherent in capitalist society and imperialism. For Mandel, ‘*this* tendency, which fashioned the extermination of Europe’s Jews as its end result, is in no way unique’ (*ist keinesweg einmalig*).³⁸ Seen from this perspective, the Jewish genocide was not incomparable, still less ‘unique’. Postulating the paradigmatic character of this crime is the only responsible way, on an ethical and political level, to interpret it, since the social, economic and psychological conditions that made it possible did not disappear with the Third Reich. Modern society is not immune to the danger of a repetition, perhaps in other forms and with other targets, of a horror comparable to the death camps.

Auschwitz’s uniqueness consisted, according to Mandel, in the fusion realised in Nazi Germany between modern racism (*völkisch* ideology founded no longer on religious prejudice but on racial biology) and the destructive technology of a developed industrial society. If the unique character of the Jewish genocide was due to this tragic constellation, then its explanation carries with it a warning for the future. Until now this fatal intersection of racist hatred and industrial modernity has taken place only in Germany in the exceptional circumstances

of Nazism and war, but nothing guarantees that it could not recur one day elsewhere.

The Final Solution thus seemed to Mandel to confirm one of the major traits of contemporary Western economies – a hybrid of organisation with anarchy, of extremely detailed planning of each segment with an overall chaos completely out of control. He had analysed this paradox in his most ambitious theoretical work, *Late Capitalism*, by developing a concept of rationality which he acknowledged as the brainchild of Max Weber and Georg Lukács. Seen from this angle, Auschwitz was a deadly example of the combination of ‘partial rationality’ (*Teilrationalität*) and ‘global irrationality’ (*Gesamtirrationalität*) typical of advanced capitalism.³⁹

Here Mandel’s analysis paralleled that of Herbert Marcuse, who had earlier described the ‘one-dimensional’ society of neo-capitalism as one whose ‘sweeping rationality ... is itself irrational’.⁴⁰ This perception of the Jewish genocide as a synthesis of partial rationality (the administrative and industrial system of the death camps) and ‘global irrationality pushed to its logical conclusion’ (the murderous madness of destroying a people) also resembled Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s approach, in which the ‘self-destruction of reason’ completed by Nazism was made possible by an extreme radicalisation of the instrumental rationality of the modern world.

But this affinity should not be interpreted as a causal relationship; Mandel and the Frankfurt School philosophers did not belong to the same intellectual current. It was rather a convergence starting from two different methodological approaches. The diagnosis is the same, but the analyses diverge. For Mandel the instrumental rationality of capitalism explains the *form* but not the *causes* of the genocide. In his book on *Late Capitalism* he reproached Adorno with failing to see that technology cannot be applied independently of human will and a more general historical context.

Auschwitz and Hiroshima were not products of technology but of *relationships of social forces* – in other words, they were the (provisional) terminus of the great historical defeats of the international proletariat after 1917.⁴¹

How could Germany become the site of this murderous synthesis between racism and industry? The idea of a ‘guilt’ inscribed in national history, even in the German ‘soul’, was so foreign to his way of thinking that Mandel never even took the trouble of refuting it, either in its more noble versions (as in Karl Jaspers) or in its more vulgarly anti-German forms (particularly common in Europe in the 1950s and resurrected today by Daniel Goldhagen).⁴² The explanation that Mandel proposed was at bottom no more than a Marxist version of the classical theory of a *deutsche Sonderweg* (exceptional German road).⁴³ Interpreting German history as an *exception* is not unproblematic, in as much as it implies a *norm* of transition to modernity that is quite difficult to define (the French revolution is not such a norm).⁴⁴ It does, however, emphasise the contradictions of a modernisation process that, without being unique – similar processes took place in several countries, from Italy to Japan – none the less remains distinct. The weakness of the liberal tradition, the delayed national unification, the weight of militarism and of old Prussian elites of feudal pedigree, and finally the lack of a colonial empire: all these elements contributed to giving German imperialism a particularly aggressive and expansionist character. This tendency, already manifest under the Wilhelmine empire, would be accentuated by the Nazi regime. From Bismarck to Hitler, German expansionism was the product of a specific interconnection between the backwardness of the nation’s political forms and the dynamism of its economic development. The historic defeat of the bourgeois revolution in Germany – from the crushing of the Peasant War during the Reformation until the defeat of the 1848 revolution – combined with impressive industrial growth, which made Germany after its unification in 1871 Europe’s main economic power.⁴⁵

German militarism was the fruit of this specific linkage between an upsurge of irrepressible productive forces inside the country’s borders and the preservation in its society of pre-capitalist-type mentalities. National Socialism thus carried out a unique fusion between the most advanced industrial modernity and the most reactionary obscurantism. During a colloquium held in Salzburg in 1990, Mandel cited Ernst Bloch in

order to explain the ‘asynchronicity’ (*Ungleichzeitigkeit*) of ideology and society under the Third Reich, a regime characterised by ‘13th-century survivals in the middle of the 20th century’. This vision was entirely consistent with Trotsky’s approach, in which Nazism represented a form (to use Norman Geras’ particularly illuminating definition) of ‘undigested barbarism’.⁴⁶

This combination furnishes a rigorous explanation of one of Nazism’s constituent elements – its singular mixture of the archaic and the modern – which has led many historians to present it as the heir of the ‘conservative revolution’, if not as the expression of a particular variant of ‘reactionary modernism’.⁴⁷ Anti-Semitism was exactly the right link that made a connection possible in the Nazi worldview between past and future: an integration of technology and industry at the heart of a reactionary ideology that set out to erase the heritage of the Enlightenment and resuscitate the values of an ancestral, Teutonic Germany. Once the Jews were eliminated (the fantasy went), capitalism would be productive (German industry) rather than parasitic (‘Judaised’ finance); cities would regain the splendour of classical antiquity by becoming monuments to eternal Germany rather than breeding places of (Jewish) cosmopolitanism; and technology could regain its creative function after being put in service of the (Aryan) community and reclaimed from the impersonal, corrupting mechanisms of (Jewish) society.⁴⁸ In other words, this form of anti-Semitism enabled a revolt against modernity to have recourse to the resources of *Zivilisation*. A comparable vision can be found in the studies of the Frankfurt School which characterise Nazism as a ‘revolt of nature’ channelled by technology.⁴⁹

The vision of Nazi anti-Semitism as ‘undigested barbarism’ tends, however, to present Nazi violence – and in the final analysis the Jewish genocide – as the result of a fatal combination in which it was the archaic element (ancestral savagery) that unleashed an uncontrollable, murderous violence in the middle of the twentieth century. We could conclude from this that a completely modern, secularised society would have nothing to fear from such eruptions of violence.⁵⁰ The thesis of Nazi Germany’s incomplete, contradictory modernisation (*deutsche Sonderweg*) would thus appear to be a simple variant of

the traditional conception of the Jewish genocide as the expression of society's lapse into pre-modern barbarism. The Nazis could be seen as obscurantist fanatics worthy of Torquemada who suddenly came to power in an industrial society.

There is doubtless a kernel of truth in this thesis, recently taken up again by Arno J. Mayer in a work that describes the Final Solution as a 'secular crusade' of modern times.⁵¹ But it has the major disadvantage of neglecting the modern dimension of Nazi ideology, anchored in racial biology and Social Darwinism and elaborated and systematised by an army of doctors, criminologists, psychologists, geneticists, physicists, ethnologists and anthropologists, who had very little to do with Luther's or the Catholic Inquisitors' worldview.⁵² It also neglects the mentality and practices of the 'accessories'. Mandel had already stressed that these 'accessories' were neither obscurantist nor fanatical but very banally 'modern', that is, typical of any society subjected to bureaucratic administration and 'legal-rational' government in the Weberian sense.⁵³

In a footnote to his essay on the historians' debate, Mandel criticised the thesis of the German historian Ulrich Herbert, who emphasised the primacy of a racist worldview over any consideration of an economic kind in the Nazi policy of extermination. Mandel argued by contrast that as the deepening conflict made the mass of prisoners of war, while growing in number, no longer overabundant but wholly inadequate, racial elimination was subordinated to 'extermination through work' (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*).⁵⁴ In fact, while it is true that the whole process of destruction of the Jews was marked by a constant tension between extermination and exploitation, each advocated by a different sector of the SS and Nazi regime, it seems difficult to deny that the conflict was resolved in the end in favour of extermination. The historian Raul Hilberg has emphasised the fundamentally anti-economic character of the genocide. He points out that the industrialist Krupp had asked Himmler not to deport the Jewish workforce employed in industry. In the General Government of Poland, 300,000 workers out of one million were Jews; in the textile sector, restructured in order to produce German shoes and uniforms for Germany, 22,000 out of 22,700 were Jews. The

decision to eliminate the ghettos in the spring of 1942 had catastrophic economic consequences, which Governor General Frank did not fail to report to Berlin. ‘The Polish Jews were annihilated in a process in which economic factors were truly secondary’, Hilberg concludes.⁵⁵ The economic and military irrationality of the deportation of the Hungarian Jews in the spring of 1944, not to mention that of the Jews of Corfu, needs no emphasis.

Mandel’s approach led him to ignore a distinction in all his writings that has become almost universally recognised by historians, between Nazi *concentration camps* and *extermination camps*. Concentration camps were set aside for prisoners of war, political prisoners and ‘anti-socials’, while extermination camps were reserved for the Jews and, to a lesser extent, the Gypsies. Auschwitz – which was not only a deportation centre (Auschwitz I) and a killing centre (Birkenau), but also a centre of industrial production (Buna-Monowitz) – combined the two, as did Majdanek. But other camps, like Treblinka, Chelmno and Sobibor, were devoted exclusively to annihilating the European Jews. In other words, the racist worldview was not one aspect among others, but a genuine ‘fixed point of the system’.⁵⁶ It was impossible for the classical Marxism that Mandel identified with to acknowledge this primacy of ideology over economics in the destruction of the Jews. This confirms the lag and limits that have held back the Marxist tradition and constrained its capacity to take account of *non-class* forms of oppression: national, racial, religious or sexual.⁵⁷

Mandel grasped a fatal interconnection at the heart of the Final Solution between racism and industrial modernity, between capitalism’s partial rationality and overall irrationality, but he had difficulty in admitting that this genocide was determined ‘in the final analysis’ by ideology, despite the material interests (and military priorities) of German imperialism. For him this meant making too big a concession to the idea of the ‘primacy of politics’ in the history of the Third Reich (an idea for which he had already criticised the historian Tim Mason⁵⁸) and stretching the axioms of historical materialism to an excessive degree.

In fact the ‘counter-rationality’ of the extermination of the Jews and, to a less radical degree, of the Gypsies constitutes a

challenge for any rigorous historical account of Nazism, not just for the categories of classical Marxism.⁵⁹ The Jewish genocide cannot be understood in depth as a function of the class interests of big German capital – this is, in truth, the interpretive criterion ‘in the final analysis’ of all Marxist theories of fascism – it can only be caricatured. Trapped in this dead end, East German historians – not always ideologues, sometimes genuine historians – failed to escape from the constraints of an approach that sought at all costs to enclose a complex reality inside pre-established categories. This approach was bound to end up both making the Jewish genocide banal and discrediting Marxism itself by reducing it to a form of economic determinism.⁶⁰

Although Mandel’s work always – or almost always – steers clear of these dogmatic wrong turnings, it does not avoid a certain oversimplification of reality and sometimes a certain epistemological arrogance. The survivors, even the most stubbornly rationalist survivors like Jean Améry and Primo Levi, were suspicious of this kind of reductionist analysis. In Améry’s eyes, ‘all the attempts at economic explanations, all the one-dimensional interpretations that claim that German industrial capital, fearing for its privileges, financed Hitler, are absolutely meaningless for an eyewitness’. Despite his desire to ‘make clear’ (*erklären*) his experience, Auschwitz remains for him ‘a dark riddle’ (*ein finsternes Rätsel*).⁶¹ Primo Levi’s opinion is very much the same: Auschwitz remains for him ‘a black hole’ (*un buco nero*). Current interpretations of anti-Semitism did not satisfy him. Not that they seemed false, but they were ‘limited, incommensurable with and out of proportion to the events they were supposed to clarify’.⁶²

As the last great figure of postwar classical Marxism, Mandel was an heir of the Enlightenment. His internationalism was rooted as much in the tradition of Jewish cosmopolitanism as in a universalism that was almost naturally transmitted to Marxism by Enlightenment culture. In the face of Nazi barbarism, his response was that of a rationalist humanist. Socialism for him meant ‘more and not less reason’; in other words, ‘an increase in conscious control over human destiny and over history’.⁶³ The questions posed by critical theory about the tragic fate and inner paradoxes of Western

rationalism – questions whose roots go back to Max Weber, which would be taken up again by Adorno and Horkheimer and finally radicalised by Günther Anders – were never considered seriously by the Fourth International's theorist.

The philosophy of progress that had inspired classical Marxism – not only in its most vulgarly positivist versions (as in Kautsky) but in its more dialectical and problematised forms (as in Trotsky) – would be replaced in Mandel's work by an *anthropological optimism* of humanist and rationalist pedigree.⁶⁴ He would always emphasise the fusion in Marxism between its 'scientific' dimension and its ethical tension, held from Marx's time on in unsteady balance on a tightrope between the temptation of scientism and radical humanism.⁶⁵ He wrote, for example, that the struggle against oppression is justified on the ethical level, apart from any rational consideration. The fight against domination and injustice is an elementary ethical duty, binding on Marxists as a Kantian categorical imperative: 'Resistance against inhuman relations', he wrote evoking the Warsaw ghetto uprising, 'is a human right and a human duty.'⁶⁶

This ethical impulse and revolutionary humanism were at the origins of Mandel's commitment to the Resistance during the war and to all the battles of his activist life. While this generosity demands our admiration, it cannot resolve Marxism's paradoxes faced with the 'black hole' of Auschwitz. Recognising the theory's inadequacy in doing justice to reality should lead us neither to a stoical resignation to the mind's defeat nor to a metaphysical flight towards conceptions assuming the supra-historical character of the 'Holocaust'. A view of the Jewish genocide as by definition an incomprehensible, inexplicable and indescribable event was rightly dismissed by Mandel as obscurantist. But even if the attitude of someone like Elie Wiesel seems in this respect intellectually unacceptable, that does not make Mandel's explanation any more satisfactory. Marxism's contradictions and gaps in dealing with the extermination of the Jews are at bottom shared by all of contemporary historiography, philosophy and, in a more general way, culture.

A greater historical distance, a changed relationship between history and memory, a clearer vision of Auschwitz in

the context of all the violence of the twentieth century: these are the elements that may one day make it possible to penetrate this dark region, and bridge the gulf that separates our knowledge that this event took place from an ‘understanding’ of it. There are no ‘definitive’ interpretations in history. It returns incessantly to question today what it said yesterday. Future generations will continue to raise questions about Auschwitz and its ‘dark enigma’. We can hope that they will escape from our current perplexities. We can hope: but nothing is less certain. In a fragment published after his death, Isaac Deutscher, like Mandel a Jewish Marxist educated in Trotsky’s school, wrote:

To a historian trying to comprehend the Jewish holocaust the greatest obstacle will be the absolute uniqueness of the catastrophe. This will be not just a matter of time and historical perspective. I doubt whether even in a thousand years people will understand Hitler, Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka better than we do now. Will they have a better historical perspective? On the contrary, posterity may understand it all even less than we do ... Perhaps a modern Aeschylus and Sophocles could cope with this theme: but they would do so on a level different from that of historical interpretation and explanation.⁶⁷

CHAPTER 4

The Uniqueness of Auschwitz: Hypotheses, Problems and Wrong Turns in Historical Research

In his balance sheet of the ‘short twentieth century’ (1914–91) which we have now left behind us, Eric Hobsbawm cites a statistical fact that suffices to classify this epoch – ‘the age of extremes’ – as one of barbarism. Between the First World War and the end of the 1980s, wars, genocides and various kinds of political violence claimed at least 187 million lives: double the mid-eighteenth-century population of Europe.¹ Since this accounting ends in 1990, it does not include the deaths in the Gulf War or ex-Yugoslavia or from the Rwandan genocide. To give a somewhat less abstract idea of what this figure means: imagine a map of Europe with France, Italy and Germany erased. Replace it in your mind with a huge empty space, or a desert, or rather, an immense cemetery. That gives a clearer idea of the violence of the modern world.

Hobsbawm points out that barbarism is one of the major characteristics of the ‘short’ twentieth century. He emphasises the undeniable social regression that has taken place in our time from the levels of ‘civility’ reached after the French revolution. If the human race has not yet fallen definitively and irreversibly into the abyss of a dark age, he adds, this is due essentially to the persistence of values inherited from the Enlightenment.² Citing Clausewitz, he reminds us that after Napoleon’s fall the principle that victors did not have the right either to massacre prisoners of war or to treat civilian populations as military targets seemed to have been established for good among European nations. To get some idea of the

change that had occurred a century and a half later, we need only remember that the *civilian* victims of the Second World War – not the total number of deaths (roughly 55 million) but only the civilian ones – exceeded 20 million people.³ Judging by Clausewitz's chivalrous – one is almost tempted to say 'humanist' – ideals, the project of the neutron bomb – a weapon capable of exterminating human beings without damaging property – seems to symbolise a more or less complete reversal of values.

It is important to recall the total number of victims, because the violence and genocides of our time must be situated and can only be explained in the context of a century of barbarism. But historians cannot content themselves with this way of putting things in perspective. Their task consists in reconstructing the events – including factually, positively, *wie eigentlich gewesen* ('as they really were', in the words of Leopold von Ranke) – and in trying to interpret them. Historians cannot avoid making distinctions, comparisons, schemata and classifications, sometimes at the risk of turning themselves into cold, apparently imperturbable accountants of horrible crimes.

Let us try to list briefly the twentieth century's horrors. There were two world worlds. There were several regional wars, of which the Vietnam war was doubtless more terrible of its kind than those that preceded it. There was a series of genocides, from the Armenian genocide on the eve of the fall of the Ottoman empire to the Rwandan genocide 80 years later, with Ukraine in 1930 and Auschwitz during the Second World War among those in between. The twentieth century saw with the Stalinist and Nazi concentration camps a new form of domination, oppression and annihilation which affected millions of human beings and went well beyond the colonial massacres of the nineteenth century. But above all the twentieth century witnessed historically new and unprecedented forms of violence that were unimaginable for those, like my grandparents, who were born at the end of the nineteenth century. I mention only the three essential ones, symbolically linked to the names Auschwitz, Kolyma and Hiroshima: in other words, racial genocide, the concentration camp system and the atomic bomb. I will now try to describe them, albeit in a very schematic way.⁴

Auschwitz was an extermination conceived on ideological bases and planned, bureaucratically managed and carried out by industrial methods. Its victims were designated as belonging to a group defined as a ‘noxious race’, in the framework of a project for biological reshaping of humanity. This racial genocide was preceded by Operation T4 (euthanasia) directed at people with disabilities, whose lives were ‘not worth living’, according to the Nazi formula. Protests from churches obliged Hitler to put a stop to this massacre in 1941. That same year, amidst general indifference in Germany and the Western world, the Nazis began exterminating the Jews and on a smaller scale the Gypsies.

Kolyma was a form of destruction that was not theorised by Stalin’s regime, and in fact was in contradiction with the principles proclaimed by the USSR. It was managed bureaucratically with paranoid methods, which generalised repression on a very vast scale and targeted real or imaginary enemies, defined both socially and politically: ‘criminals’, kulaks, Trotskyists, etc. At the height of Stalinism any Soviet citizen was a potential victim of the concentration camp system.

Hiroshima, finally, was a form of extermination with no ideological motivations, carried out by a non-totalitarian state, without deportations or concentration camps. It was made possible by the most powerful means of destruction created by modern technology. Its target was the civilian population of an enemy country in wartime.

The Second World War was the moment when these three forms of extermination met. There was certainly no lack of historical precedents for them. Auschwitz was not the first genocide in history. The concentration camp system was already foreshadowed in primitive forms by nineteenth-century prisons and workhouses, as well as by the combination of administration and massacres characteristic of colonial conquest.⁵ But compared with the English workhouses and first Algerian war, Auschwitz and Kolyma undoubtedly marked a qualitatively new stage. As for the atomic bomb, it quite simply pulverised the means of destruction of earlier centuries, establishing a new threshold of terror next to which the difference between a cannon ball and an arrow fades into insignificance.

The Uniqueness of Auschwitz: Definition and Comparisons

These forms of violence sometimes made for true historic breaks. This was the case with the First World War, studied by historians as a laboratory of modernity in which human beings experienced technological destruction and anonymous mass death for the first time.⁶ The Second World War transformed Europe from 1939 to 1945 into a landscape of rubble, and had its epilogue at Hiroshima; Günther Anders considered it a sort of ‘Day One’ (*Tag Null*), the starting point of a new era in which humanity is now and permanently capable of embarking on its own self-destruction.⁷

In the consciousness of the Western world one historic break, Auschwitz, stands apart from the others, to the point of constituting a *paradigm* of this century’s barbarism. This recognition of the historical uniqueness of the ‘Final Solution’ has been a question in dispute for some time now. Not all of the controversies have been fruitful; some of them have even been completely sterile, capable of crystallising conflicts and passions that often tend to go beyond the limits of an exchange of rational ideas. Among the many varieties of discourses around the uniqueness of Auschwitz, we will only discuss here those relevant to the field of history. For example, we will not take up the thesis that the Shoah’s uniqueness stems from the ‘chosenness’ of the Jewish people; or the thesis that gives it a suprahistorical dimension, treating it, in Elie Wiesel’s words, as an event transcending history. It is impossible *a priori* for historians to respond to such assertions, even if they are not without influence on the context in which the historical narrative is developed.

The most negative aftermath of this debate was analysed by Jean-Michel Chaumont in a recent book on ‘competition among the victims’: Jews against political prisoners, Jews against Gypsies, blacks against gays, and so forth. We are tempted to consign all those polemics, following Chaumont, ‘to a house of horrors like the ones at old-time travelling circuses. Just like the monstrosities exhibited at those circuses, they are macabre, useless and in poor taste. So store them away in glass jars in formaldehyde.’⁸ The temptation to follow

Chaumont's advice is great but dangerous, because Chaumont's response throws out the baby with the bathwater. The problem cannot be ignored or simply declared nonexistent. We must not respond to the disturbing turns this discussion takes with equally sterile forms of methodological nihilism. We must rather try to pose the problem of the historical uniqueness of this event in a clear, rigorous way.

Here we will not either *lay claim* to the uniqueness of Auschwitz (which would be absurd) or deny it (which by contrast would be dubious). We will acknowledge it and define it. We must also ask ourselves what the causes and conditions for this debate are, since there simply was no such debate around other major historical turning points.

Even if they are not unanimous, most contemporary historians do agree in recognising Auschwitz as unique. Their thesis can be briefly summarised as follows: The Jewish genocide was the only one in history to have been carried out with the goal of biologically remodelling the human race. It was also the only one lacking any instrumental character, that is, in which the extermination of the victims was not a means but an end in itself. George Steiner has defined it as an 'ontological massacre', in which the victims were eliminated not because of their acts but only because they existed.⁹ This thesis has been defended in dozens of books. I will restrict myself here to citing two passages, the first from the pen of an Israeli, the second from a German historian.

Starting from an intuition touched on by Hannah Arendt in her essay *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, where she writes that the Nazis wanted 'to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world',¹⁰ Saul Friedländer adds the following comment:

This, in fact, is something no other regime, whatever its criminality, has attempted to do. In that sense, the Nazi regime attained what is, in my view, some sort of theoretical outer limit: one may envision an even larger number of victims and a technologically more efficient way of killing, but once a regime decides that groups, whatever the criteria may be, should be annihilated there and then and never be allowed to live on Earth, the ultimate has been achieved.

This limit, from my perspective, was reached only once in modern history: by the Nazis.¹¹

This thesis has been defended with great polemical force by Eberhard Jäckel, during the German ‘historians’ debate’:

The killing of the Jews by the Nazis had something unique (*einzigartig*) about it, because never before had a state decided and announced under the authority of its highest leader that a particular human group should be exterminated, to the extent possible in its entirety, including old people, women, children and infants; a decision that this state subsequently applied with all the means at its disposal.¹²

This genealogical definition of Auschwitz’s uniqueness is often backed up with typological comparisons with other genocides and outbreaks of violence in the twentieth century. The Nazi extermination camps have thus become the symbols of this uniqueness, distinguishing the Jewish genocide both from other Nazi crimes and from the violence of Stalinism. Stalinism was in fact terribly murderous during the collectivisation of agriculture in 1929–32: it led to a famine in which about six million peasants perished in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and the Northern Caucasus.¹³ In roughly twenty years, from 1934 to 1953, Soviet concentration camps housed about 15 million deportees, of whom at least two million did not leave them alive.¹⁴ The Nazi camp organisation had a shorter period of existence (between seven and eight years on average, with the exception of certain camps like Dachau which were established as early as 1933) and affected a much smaller number of deportees, but its murderous impact was more intense. Wolfgang Sofsky has given the figure of 1,100,000 deaths at the ten main Nazi concentration camps (Dachau, Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Neuengamme, Flossenbürg, Gross-Rosen, Auschwitz I, Majdanek, Mittelbau, Bergen-Belsen) out of 1,650,000 people interned there.¹⁵ In the death camps established during the war (Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz-Birkenau), none of which existed longer than four years, up to 2.7 million Jews were eliminated, not

counting 300,000 Jews killed in other camps.¹⁶ The Nazi camps were also inhabited by prisoners coming from many European countries, most of them non-Germans; the overwhelming majority of the prisoners in the gulag consisted by contrast of Soviet citizens.

The gulag was a form of terror that took root over a long period, deeply shaping Soviet society and weighing as a permanent threat on the whole of the population. Auschwitz was a terribly murderous but short-term form of violence: it was inconceivable outside the context of the war on the Eastern Front and the conquest of German *Lebensraum*. It took place in a very brief period of time, in a way that seems almost to contradict Braudel's vision of the 'long view' (*longue durée*) of history.¹⁷

In other words, Auschwitz and Kolyma were both gigantic worlds of death, but that in no way diminishes the difference in the nature of the two crimes, related as much to their objectives as to their methods. In one case, terror, deportations and mass executions aimed – with sometimes unforeseen consequences – at reaching certain social and political goals: carrying out an economic transformation by collectivising agriculture, then consolidating an established regime by eliminating its real or potential adversaries. In the other case, assembly-line extermination of the Jews – and of the Gypsies as well – had lost any instrumental character, had itself become the regime's objective, and was carried out despite its military and economic irrationality in wartime conditions.¹⁸ Contrary to the hasty parallels made by most theoreticians of totalitarianism, an historian like Ian Kershaw has concluded that a comparison of Stalinism's and Nazism's crimes is 'legitimate, but has limited potential', revealing above all that 'National Socialism was truly unique'.¹⁹

Sonia Combe has recently emphasised this difference by carrying out, in an entirely original way, a comparative analysis of the role of two camp commanders: S.K. Yevstigney, the head of Ozerlag, the 'lake camp' near Lake Baikal, 1000 km to the north of Irkutsk, and the better-known Rudolf Hess, the man in charge of Auschwitz. Without a doubt they had many things in common: bureaucratic mediocrity, an authoritarian personality, poverty of spirit, in short the 'banality of evil' that

made a mob of anonymous civil servants and bureaucrats into the implacable implementers of a planned massacre. But the analogy stops there. Yevstignev's goal was to build a railway, 'the track', a goal that had to be reached no matter at what cost, even if it meant death for thousands of prisoners (*zeks*). This means that Ozerlag remained a labour camp, not an extermination camp. By contrast, Hess was in charge of a system whose main aim was the elimination of the Jews. Ozerlag's 'productivity' was measured in kilometres of railway track, Auschwitz's 'productivity' by adding up the dead. Yevstignev could either 'waste' his 'human resources' or 'use them sparingly' in order to achieve his tasks; Hess was ordered to organise and rationalise Birkenau's material resources in order to kill Jews.²⁰

Stalin's goal was not the creation of a racial order, but a deep transformation, carried out with authoritarian and violent methods, of Soviet society. In other words, Stalinism had its own rationality, albeit a totalitarian one. By contrast, the extermination of the Jews contradicted all criteria of economic or military rationality.

This definition of the Shoah's historical uniqueness – that of a genocide conceived on an exclusively 'racial' basis – can be fruitful on a methodological level, as a research hypothesis. But it must not be postulated as a normative category or imposed as a dogma. Despite its specific traits, Auschwitz is not an *incomparable* historical event. Moreover comparing, distinguishing and ordering do not mean setting up a hierarchy. Auschwitz's uniqueness cannot be the basis for any scale of greater and lesser violence and evil. No genocide is 'worse' or 'lesser' than another; and Auschwitz's *distinctiveness* does not confer any particular aura on its victims or any privilege on its martyrdom. Consequently it gives no privileged status to this collective memory. Defined in this way, Auschwitz's uniqueness does not exclude other kinds of uniqueness – the uniqueness of the gulag and of Hiroshima, for example. Auschwitz fits into a context in which other forms of violence and genocide also have a place. Instead of an argument for a single-minded concentration, Auschwitz's uniqueness becomes a tool with which to develop a hermeneutics of twentieth-century barbarism.

Yet a uniqueness of this kind cannot be pinned down by traditional procedures of historicisation. The discussion to which it gives rise is not of the same order as academic debates about the specificities of the Italian Renaissance, German Reformation or French revolution. Historical awareness cannot integrate Auschwitz into its schemata as a founding act or a stage in the process of civilisation, but only as a rending of the fabric of humanity. In this perspective, emphasising Auschwitz's uniqueness is only one more way of highlighting the paradoxes of an incomplete historicisation. Few other twentieth-century events have attracted so many historians and generated such an impressive amount of research; scholars have studied the Final Solution's origins, ideology, structures, stages and overall dynamic; but studying is not the same as understanding. The Jewish genocide still remains a 'no man's land of comprehension'.²¹

We must keep in mind the underlying problematics of this debate on the uniqueness of the Shoah. First, there is the issue of the relationship of memory to history (each of which is unique in its own way). Second, there is the issue of Auschwitz's relationship to the history of the West, which puts in question our civilisation's special claim to rationality. Finally, there is the most controversial issue, which has to do with what Jürgen Habermas calls 'the public use of history': historical awareness as one of the foundations of our ethical-political responsibility in the present.

Uniqueness of Memory and Uniqueness in History

The way in which the problem of the Shoah's uniqueness erupted onto historians' desks has to do with the development of Jewish memory: with the way Jewish memory has emerged onto the public scene in recent years and interfered with traditional research practices. This is due notably to the flourishing of oral history, audiovisual archives, and so on. Memory *makes* history unique. It is by definition subjective, selective, often unrespecting of chronological sequences, overall reconstructions and global explanations. It elaborates on lived experience, and as a result its perception of the past is necessarily

and irreducibly singular. Where historians see only one step in a process or one detail in a complex, shifting picture, a witness can seize on a crucial event that irrevocably changed a life. Historians can decode, analyse and explain photos that have survived from the Auschwitz camp; they know that the people getting off the train are Jews, that the SSers watching them are making a selection and that the great majority of the people have only a few hours to live. To a witness the photo says much more: it summons up sensations, emotions, noises, voices, smells, the fear and disorientation of arriving in the camp, weariness from a long voyage made in horrible conditions. In other words, the photo calls up a wholly unique set of images and recollections that are completely inaccessible to historians except on the basis of a later recital, which in any case would evoke the kind of empathy experienced by someone watching a film, not the experience relived by the witness. A prisoner's photograph portrays in an historian's eyes an anonymous victim; for a parent, friend or campmate it evokes a whole, absolutely unique world. For an outside observer, as Siegfried Kracauer would say, this photo represents only an 'unredeemed' (*unerlöst*) reality.²²

All these recollections together make up Jewish memory. Historians cannot ignore this memory. They must respect it; they must even, to the extent possible, explore and understand it. But they must not submit to it. They do not have the right to transform the undeniable, legitimate uniqueness of this memory into a normative prism through which history is written. Their task consists, rather, in incorporating the uniqueness of this lived experience into its overall historical context, and in trying to clarify its causes, conditions, structures and overall dynamic. This means learning from memory, but also sifting it through the sieve of objective, empirical, documentary and factual verification, if necessary running to earth its contradictions and traps. In memory something can be *absolutely* unique; in history uniqueness is always *relative*.²³ For a Polish Jew Auschwitz means something terribly unique: the disappearance of the human, social and cultural universe in which he or she was born. No historian who fails to understand this can ever write a good book on the Jewish genocide. But the results of a historian's research would scarcely be

improved if they led to the conclusion that the Jewish genocide was the first and last in history.²⁴

In an epoch of discrimination and persecution, Jews could not help asking the question, 'Is it good or bad for the Jews?'. In a way, the answer determined a norm of conduct. But this attitude cannot guide historians. According to Eric Hobsbawm, historians cannot escape from their duty to be universalists: 'A history which is designed *only* for Jews (or African-Americans, or Greeks, or women, or proletarians, or homosexuals) cannot be good history, though it may be comforting history to those who practise it.'²⁵

Obviously we cannot counterpose a 'mythic' memory in a mechanical way to historians' scientific and rational approach, given the vast literature on the subject.²⁶ Historians are far from working enclosed in their proverbial ivory towers. They are conditioned by their social, cultural and national context. They cannot escape the influence of their own memories or of memories encapsulated in knowledge handed down to them. They can try to free themselves from the conditioning and influence of these memories, but not by denying them; only through the effort involved in taking a critical distance.²⁷ From this point of view, their task consists not in trying to push aside memory, personal, individual and collective, but in incorporating it into a greater historical whole.

Auschwitz and the Uniqueness of the West

There is also a *cultural* perception of Auschwitz's uniqueness. Far from arising immediately, it took shape gradually over the course of decades. But today it is solidly established in public opinion. In brief, we can say that the debate over the Shoah's uniqueness is essentially if not exclusively *Western*, one that is unknown or absolutely marginal outside Europe, North America and some Latin American countries with large Jewish minorities such as Argentina and Brazil. If the Jewish genocide is understood as a major historical break, it is because it took place in the heart of Europe; because it was conceived and carried out by a regime that came to power inside the Western world, as an heir to its civilisation, in a country that was one

of its centres from the Reformation until the Weimar republic; and also because Judaism was itself at the origin of this civilisation and accompanied it in its trajectory for millennia. The Shoah thus appears as a sort of self-mutilation of the West.

Thanks to Auschwitz, the notion of genocide has taken root in the West's consciousness and even its vocabulary. And Auschwitz remains an implacable condemnation of the West. The process of the destruction of the European Jews analysed by Raul Hilberg in its different stages – definition, expropriation, deportation, concentration and extermination – has made Auschwitz a privileged laboratory for studying the immense potential for violence which the modern world bears within it. While a definite *intention* to annihilate was at the origin of this crime, it also involved certain fundamental *structures* of industrial society. As we have discussed earlier in this book, Auschwitz achieved a fusion between anti-Semitism and racism on the one hand, and the prison, the capitalist factory and bureaucratic-rational administration on the other. Studying such an event can mean drawing on Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Karl Marx and Max Weber. In this sense the Jewish genocide constitutes a *paradigm* of modern barbarism.

Several characteristics of the Shoah are also to be found in other forms of violence or massacres. Deportation preceded and accompanied the Armenian genocide and the destruction of the kulaks. The ‘mobile killing units’ described by Raul Hilberg had precursors in the Ottoman empire and epigones in Rwanda and Bosnia. The system of camps conceived as sites for extermination through work was paralleled in the gulag and duplicated in Pol Pot’s Cambodia. Marking the victims, as a sign of their demotion from the status of individuals to that of anonymous, depersonalised creatures, was tried out at first among African slaves deported to the Americas. The modern, industrial character of the gas chambers seems quite rudimentary if we compare them to atomic extermination. The biological racism at the origin of the Jewish genocide, finally, had its first targets among the mentally ill, of whom 70,000 were eliminated by the Nazis.

These examples are not aimed at attempting systematic comparisons among events that often belong to completely different historical, social, cultural and political contexts. They

only indicate that Auschwitz fits into a much greater whole made up of many forms of violence. They suffice to show that at least on a morphological level Auschwitz was much less an *unprecedented* event than a *unique synthesis* of different elements that are also to be found in other crimes or genocides. The synthesis was made possible by being anchored in the social, technical, industrial system: in short, in the instrumental rationality of the modern world.

In many ways the debate on the uniqueness of the Jewish genocide only raises again in tragic form the questions about the roots and universal character of Western rationalism formulated by Max Weber at the beginning of the twentieth century and developed after Auschwitz by Adorno and Horkheimer.²⁸ A Marxian–Weberian approach would lead us to see Auschwitz as one example of Western rationalism's tendency to transform itself dialectically into an apparatus of domination and then into a source of destruction of humanity. Shortly before his death Weber foresaw the advent of a 'a polar night of icy darkness and hardness'.²⁹ Today we can give a face to this funereal precognition.

Recognising Auschwitz's uniqueness in Western culture leads to a major corollary. It is entirely evident that the Jewish genocide cannot appear as an event of the same magnitude to an African or Asian as to a European.³⁰ This does not mean that a Japanese is justified in ignoring Auschwitz, or that a European can remain calmly indifferent to the genocide against the people of East Timor (the West has had its dirty fingers in so many pies). But those who refuse to accept this commonplace observation have fallen into the trap of an old Eurocentric prejudice. In China, Cambodia or Rwanda the 'upright carriage' of humanity, in Ernst Bloch's words, could appeal to other examples that are more concrete and closer to those countries' own historical experience.

The Uniqueness of Auschwitz and the 'Public Use of History'

Considering Auschwitz as a paradigm of twentieth-century barbarism means making it an approach route to its different

aspects, rather than the object of a single-minded focus. A single-minded focus seems unacceptable to me on an *ethical* level – since it contributes to creating a hierarchy and marginalising and forgetting the victims of other forms of violence (not to mention the non-Jewish victims of Nazism) – as well as on an *epistemological* level, since the Jewish genocide itself becomes completely incomprehensible if taken out of its historical context, that is, out of the context of all the violence of the twentieth century.

There are many examples of the errors to which such a single-minded focus leads. It suffices to mention the US historian Bernard Lewis, who considers the uniqueness of the Shoah beyond discussion but who questions the reality of the Armenian genocide perpetrated in the Ottoman empire in 1915.³¹ But we could also mention the discussion provoked by the war in former Yugoslavia. During this conflict there were some people who considered that the major scandal was not the ‘ethnic cleansing’ but the presumptuousness of those who dared – wrongly – to compare it with Nazi crimes. A poor choice of comparisons thus revealed a very disturbing fetishisation of the uniqueness of the Shoah. Arno J. Mayer has strongly criticised this tendency to erect a private cult of memory, transforming Auschwitz into a source of a perverse sort of pride and narrow-minded interpretation which evades all critical and rational analysis.³² Marek Edelman, one of the last survivors of the Warsaw ghetto uprising, showed a much more worthy attitude in presenting these recent massacres as a posthumous victory for Hitler.³³

At the other extreme from single-minded concentration is apologetic relativisation. Auschwitz’s uniqueness has been contested with the aim of normalising or even rehabilitating the German past and re legitimising the ideological and political tradition that prepared the ground for Hitler’s coming to power. This is a pernicious tendency, whose best-known spokesperson – though he has a whole school of thought and part of the media behind him³⁴ – is the conservative historian Ernst Nolte. For Nolte Nazi crimes were nothing more than a response to the extermination carried out by the Bolsheviks, which was the ultimate, decisive matrix for all the twentieth century’s horrors. Hitler was thus guilty of a deplorable excess

in his historically justified effort to defend Germany and the West from the Communist threat. This is why Nolte's 'European civil war' begins not in 1914, with the collapse of the old imperial order and outbreak of the First World War, but in 1917 at the moment of the October revolution. This view reduces Auschwitz to a byproduct of a clumsy attempt to imitate the 'Asiatic' tortures practised by the Russian Cheka.³⁵

Nolte's case illustrates the consequences of a wrong, ideologically insidious comparison. We could formulate the problem in the following way: on the one hand, historical research and historical consciousness need analogies; on the other hand, analogies lend themselves to the uses and abuses of political instrumentalisation. Once Auschwitz has been turned into a paragon of twentieth-century violence, any comparison can seem to be an attempt to diminish its meaning or amplify the importance of other deadly events. When the co-editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Joachim Fest, insists that there was no qualitative difference between the Nazi gas chambers and the NKVD's 'mass liquidations with bullets in the back of the neck',³⁶ the message is clear: stop picking on the Germans, look instead at what those Russian Communists did. When an Institute of Ukrainian Studies publishes a book in which the 1930–32 famine is described as 'a deliberate act of genocide' comparable to the Shoah,³⁷ the goal of the argument is just as clear: to draw attention to a genocide that has not received the same recognition from public opinion as 'the Holocaust'. We obviously cannot put these two kinds of relativism on the same level. One aims to minimise a genocide; the other aims to draw attention to a genocide that has too often been forgotten.

In the Italian context, where another virulent dispute has been raging among historians for roughly twenty years over how to interpret fascism, the roles seem to be exactly reversed. Here the supposedly incomparable character of Nazi crimes has been used as a weapon to rehabilitate fascism. For Renzo de Felice, who has waged a long battle in order to rule out of court any approach 'vitiated by anti-fascism', the Mussolini regime remains 'outside the shadow of the Holocaust', and the Shoah's uniqueness rules out beyond a doubt any kinship between Nazism and Italian fascism.³⁸ For the anti-fascist

historian Nicola Tranfaglia, by contrast, too much emphasis on the singularity of the Jewish genocide risks casting in shadow the essential affinities that exist between fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, both of which belonged, despite their undeniable specificities, to the ‘model of European fascism’.³⁹ He adds that such an underestimation would risk neglecting the crimes of Italian fascism, which, even if it did not match the extremes reached by Nazism, ‘bordered on genocide in Africa, was the active accomplice of Hitler’s regime in deporting Jews, and was like the German dictatorship an anti-liberal, undemocratic, imperialist and warmongering regime shot through with racist tendencies’.⁴⁰

Putting these two historians’ disputes, German and Italian, side by side shows in a rather striking way to what extent Auschwitz’s uniqueness can be at issue in the public use of history, in which historians are called on to contribute, by interpreting the past, to forging a national identity and a historical consciousness in the present. Although the arguments differ, denying or minimising this uniqueness serves in one case to rehabilitate the Nazi past, and in the other to avoid rendering the fascist past commonplace. All these examples show that ‘historical relativism’ can take profoundly different forms. Those who deny Auschwitz’s uniqueness are not all revisionists. Those who lay claim to it sometimes turn out to be terribly blind to other forms of violence.⁴¹ Either side can make use of this event for its own dubious ends.

The conclusion that we can draw from this debate is not very original, but it seems to me the only possible one. The best way to keep the memory of a genocide alive is clearly not to deny the existence of others, nor to create a religious cult around it, dismissing any comparison as a dangerous attempt at profanation. The Shoah today has both its dogmas – its incomparability and inexplicability elevated to normative principles – and its fearsome guardians of the temple. Acknowledging Auschwitz’s historical uniqueness can have a meaning only if it helps to promote a fruitful dialectic between the memory of the past and the criticism of the present. The goal must be to illuminate the many threads that bind our world to the very recent world in which this crime was born.

CHAPTER 5

The Debt: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising

The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between major and minor takes account, in doing so, of the following truth: of all that happens, nothing should be considered as lost for history. Doubtless only a redeemed humanity will take full possession of its past.

Walter Benjamin

Over fifty years ago, on 19 April 1943, the Warsaw ghetto rose in revolt. While the war was raging on the eastern front, a few hundred fighters began a struggle that they would carry for a month, amidst the indifference of the rest of the world, until the ghetto's total and final destruction by SS and Wehrmacht units. Their struggle was not aimed at freeing themselves: they knew that was impossible, that there was no longer any way to stop the Nazi killing machine. Compared with the German forces that controlled the Polish capital, their numbers and weapons were completely laughable. There were between 500 and 700 fighters, armed with pistols and about ten bullets apiece, plus a few thousand handgrenades and some Molotov cocktails made in the ghetto. Their most powerful weapon against enemy tanks consisted of one or perhaps two old machine guns.

They held out for a month, their numbers diminishing day by day. In the words of Marek Edelman, one of their leaders, it was only a question of not dying 'on our knees', not in the Treblinka gas chambers, but guns in hand.¹ This was not a national liberation struggle. The ghetto was neither the Vietnamese jungle nor the Cuban mountains. It was a struggle to assert Jewish dignity, or more simply human dignity, in the face of extermination.

Poland's Jews between Passivity and Resistance

The heroic nature of this fight has led some to idealise it. They have attributed a disproportionate historic role to it, as if its symbolic value – so important for us today, but almost non-existent during the war – could somehow have changed the relationship of forces on the ground in the slightest. The martyrs of the ghetto were not fighting for glory. They were not thinking about the monuments that would be erected in their memory, but about the best way to economise on the few bullets they had. They were not Rambo's but young people who were often at the end of their tether, exhausted by two and a half years of hunger, and still traumatised by the deportations that had virtually emptied the ghetto in a few months. They were surviving in the midst of a crowd of spectres who looked like skeletons. Yes, they were heroes. But people forget too often, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet has written, that heroes are also and first of all human beings.²

The completely desperate nature of this fight has led many other observers to deny the very fact of Jewish resistance. This is the judgement of a major historian like Raul Hilberg, who says that the Jews' behaviour was characterised 'by almost complete lack of resistance'.³ Can we accept this peremptory assertion? True, there was no Jewish equivalent to the armed struggle that arose in Poland, France or Italy. But could there be?

We should remember that Eastern European Jewish immigrants played a prominent role in the French Resistance, particularly among the Communists.⁴ In Poland, where there were many Jews who formed a kind of nation within the nation, marked by Poland's language and literature and by an extremely rich intellectual and political life, could the Jews revolt? Could they create resistance movements? We must not forget when we ask this question that Jews and Poles did not live in the same conditions. The Poles had been defeated; they were subjected to very severe repression (much more severe than, for example, the repression imposed in France by the Nazi authorities); they were an oppressed nation that risked having its political and intellectual elite cut off from its shoulders; but they were not threatened with genocide. The Jews

were not an oppressed nation: they were the victims of a process of total annihilation. Not only had they never had an army, not only could they not rely on the support of a government in exile – hypotheses which seemed, except to a minority of Zionists, completely preposterous to the great majority of Jews in the diaspora. They were also immediately robbed of their possessions, herded into ghettos and reduced to slavery. For two years, before the deportations to the death camps began, they were subjected to a process of ‘slow extermination’ by hunger, cold and the epidemics that laid waste to the ghettos. This is the context in which the manifestations and forms of their resistance must be understood.⁵

We could give another example. In March 1943, a month before the Warsaw ghetto uprising, the Fiat workers in Turin launched a strike that paralysed the city and marked the beginning of armed resistance throughout occupied Italy. Jewish textile workers’ strikes in the Lodz and Warsaw ghettos could not have the same impact, however. They would hardly have been perceptible outside the ghetto walls, in the ‘Aryan’ sectors of Polish cities. The Jews resisted in the ways they could.⁶

In September 1941 Emmanuel Ringelblum, the chronicler of the Warsaw ghetto, wrote:

The English communiqés have recently been full of descriptions of sabotage in various countries occupied by the German army. There is no large [munitions] industry in the Ghetto, but the Jewish tailors working in the German commissary shops, wishing to do their part for the sab[otage], have sent off a transport of military uniforms with trousers sewn together, buttons on backwards, pockets upside down, sleeves reversed (the left sleeve where the right should be). The transport was returned from Berlin, and now the Production Department is all agog. There are threats of drastic punishment.⁷

Until recently the Turin strikers embodied the tradition and pride of the Italian workers’ movement; by contrast, the Jewish tailors of Warsaw have been forgotten.

The Ghetto

In order to understand the nature and forms of the uprising, we have to understood what the Warsaw ghetto was. When the German occupation began in September 1939 there were 350,000 Jews in the Polish capital, or about 30 per cent of its population. This mass of people was not concentrated all at once in a *jüdische Wohnbezirk* ('Jewish quarter' – the Germans never used the word 'ghetto'); it was the result of a year of gradual measures of segregation. In November 1941 the city was divided into three sectors: German, Polish and Jewish. The Jewish sector was surrounded by a wall 18 km long and 3 metres high. The ghetto included 73 streets out of the 1800 in Warsaw; it concentrated 30 per cent of the city's population in a space amounting to 2.4 per cent of its total surface area. According to contemporary German sources, its population density was 128,000 inhabitants per square kilometre, or 9.2 people per room.⁸

Between the end of 1940 and the summer of 1942, due to the arrival of Jews from various regions of Poland as well as many cities in Germany, the ghetto's population reached 450,000. We must add that in this same period about 83,000 Jews perished in the ghetto from poverty, cold and the diseases – above all typhus – that were endemic there. Although there were 65,000 workers in the ghetto, including 55,000 who were paid wages determined by the Nazi-imposed system (a maximum wage of 500 zlotys in German-confiscated companies such as the Többens textile factories), 80 per cent of the ghetto's food came from tolerated petty trade and contraband trade with the city's 'Aryan' sector.

Over the months, death invaded this urban landscape, as many photographs of the ghetto streets show.⁹ In January 1940 Ringelblum still noted with horror that mortality among the Warsaw Jews was 'dreadful. There are fifty to seventy deaths daily.' In August 1941 he noted 'a marked, remarkable indifference to death, which no longer impresses. One walks past corpses with indifference.'¹⁰ Adam Czerniakow, president of the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) established by the Nazi authorities, wrote in his diary that as he sat at his desk he could hear the lamentations of famished beggars in the street.¹¹ Jan Karski, the

Polish government in exile's courier who visited the ghetto in 1942, described it using the image of *hell*: 'It wasn't a world. It wasn't human. It was a kind ... a kind ... of hell.'¹²

From December 1941 on, all communication with the outside world was cut off. Mail service abroad was ended for good. There remained only one tram line connecting the ghetto to the rest of the city, where Jews were not allowed to go without permission. From this time on the isolation was total. The Polish press forbade citizens to make contact with the Jews because of the typhus that was rampant in the ghetto.

Nevertheless, in this world that was not a world, life continued in the streets littered with corpses. The testimonies that have reached us describe intense cultural activity, a political life no less animated than before the war, and a frenetic night life. Two thousand of the Bund's activists met to commemorate the anniversary of their party's founding, while religious circles created a Talmudic school attended by 700 pupils. There were dozens of underground papers in Yiddish and Polish. While libraries were emptied of their books, burned in order to heat the icy rooms, 93 lectures were organised to commemorate Mendele Moker Sforim, the father of Yiddish literature. Those who did not faint in the streets went to plays and concerts, went dancing in the many night clubs and visited brothels.

This abundant activity was a way of reacting to the catastrophe that had descended on Warsaw's Jews.¹³ In order to organise collective resistance, let alone armed resistance, it was necessary to overcome the shock of defeat and re-establish intellectual, political and military leaderships, which had been completely dislocated by repression, expropriations and the beginning of segregation. During the autumn of 1939 many leaders of the Jewish workers' movement had left Warsaw and taken refuge abroad. Some of them, like Shmuel Zygielbojm, would return several times to the capital to organise the resistance there.

The formation of the 'Jewish Council' (*Judenrat*), charged with administering the ghetto and carrying out the German authorities' orders, had carved out deep divisions among its inhabitants. The appearance of a Jewish police force imposing and maintaining the Nazi order had a demoralising, disori-

enting effect. Not only was a Jewish police force an absolutely new phenomenon in the history of the diaspora, the Jews perceived the presence of the enemy from this moment on even inside the ghetto walls. Despite Adam Czerniakow's moral integrity – very different in this respect from the madness of Chaim Rumkowski, who ruled the Lodz ghetto like a real despot – the *Judenrat* faced unanimous hostility from the ghetto's political currents. Czerniakow's suicide in late July 1942 was not enough to change the institution's image as a reliable instrument of the Nazis' will.¹⁴

The Uprising

The turning point that made it possible to take the step of preparing the revolt was the *Aktion* begun by the German troops in July 1942, which emptied the ghetto of 75 per cent of its inhabitants in a few weeks. Each day the SS sent thousands of Jews to the 'trans-shipment point' (*Umschlagplatz*) near the ghetto, where the convoys to Treblinka were formed. In this way, as the German statistics relate, 253,741 Jews were deported to this extermination camp between 22 July and 21 September 1942. Their numbers could vary between a low of 1600 and a high of 13,000 each day. At the end of 1942 no more than 50,000 Jews were left in the ghetto, of whom almost half were living there illegally. Their state of mind had undergone a change: they had become aware that the deportations would continue to the last Jew.

The initiative to fight back was taken by the youngest remaining inhabitants, who no longer accepted the passivity of the community's leaders. Zysha Frydman, the representative of the religious movement Agudat Israel, was waiting for divine deliverance; the Zionist leader Ignacy Schipper was afraid of the reprisals that an armed action would inevitably provoke. The Jews were horrified by reports of organised massacres at Treblinka, but for the most part they remained sceptical. Rumours circulated insistently and spread terror, but they were not enough to break the psychological barriers that the ghetto's inhabitants had built up in order to protect themselves and survive. Emmanuel Ringelblum wrote in October 1942:

The Jews from Western Europe have no idea what Treblinka is. They believe it to be a work colony ... They arrive carrying brand-new suitcases.¹⁵

The Polish Jews' attitude was at bottom not very different. In his report to the Bund Central Committee, Marek Edelman wrote that they 'stubbornly refuse to believe. They close their eyes, they cover their ears and they defend themselves "tooth and nail" against the terrible truth.'¹⁶

Breaking this attitude of passivity was not easy. It was the work of the most conscious, the boldest, the most radical and the least exhausted, who were also the youngest. The initial nucleus of the Jewish Fighting Organisation (JFO) was formed on 28 July 1942, a week after the round-ups began, by the representatives of three Zionist youth movements (Hashomir Hatzair, Hekhalutz and Akiva). During the month of August the Polish Communists supplied them with their first weapons: five pistols and eight handgrenades. At the end of October the JFO was reorganised by the entry of forces from the workers' movement. Its leadership consisted of five members: Mordekhai Anielewicz of Hashomir Hatzair, Marek Edelman from the Bund, Michal Rejzenfeld of the PPR (Communists), Itsak Cukiermann of the Pioneers' Movement (Hekhalutz) and Herz Berlinski of Left Poale Tsion. The right-wing Revisionist Zionist followers of Wladimir Jabotinski refused to join the JFO and created their own insurrectional centre. At the end of 1942 the Jewish Fighting Organisation included 500 fighters, while the Revisionists had about half as many.¹⁷

Leaving aside a few sporadic actions, such as the execution of the Jewish police chief Jacob Leijkin on 29 October 1942, the JFO first showed itself in public on 18 January 1943, when Heinrich Himmler ordered a second wave of deportations. The Jewish fighters attacked the units accompanying the Jews to the 'trans-shipment point' and killed several German soldiers, who had been caught unawares. The round-ups were interrupted. In the days that followed, the Jewish workers of the Többens factories and the brush workshops who had been called up by the Nazi authorities for a new deportation did not respond to the call. Inside the ghetto the JFO's authority replaced the *Judenrat*'s from that time on. The inhabitants

prepared to resist by building shelters and bunkers. Informers and collaborators were killed. The defence forces took up posts at strategic points, in a phantom city where most of the buildings were vacant.

The uprising began on 19 April 1943, when the ghetto was surrounded by SS units and the German police. As soon as the SS and police tried to enter the ghetto, the Jewish fighters responded by firing on them. At the end of three days of fighting, the first German attack was beaten off. SS General Jürgen Stroop, who recorded the course of the fighting day by day in his diary, then decided to destroy the ghetto piece by piece. Jewish resistance was broken on 8 May, when the JFO leadership found itself surrounded and gave the fighters the order to commit suicide. The uprising's main leader, Mordekhai Anielewicz, met his death in this way, refusing to give himself up alive to the enemy. He was 22 years old.

A handful of fighters managed to save their lives by escaping through the sewers into the city's 'Aryan' sector. The following year a small JFO nucleus took part in the Warsaw uprising. Among them was Marek Edelman, who described the ghetto's struggle at the end of the war in a report to the Bund Central Committee. We cannot read this 'military' account today without feeling great emotion.

On 16 May, after having ordered the demolition of the Great Synagogue of Warsaw, located outside the ghetto, General Stroop announced the end of the 'Jewish quarter'. The operation had cost the German troops 16 dead and 85 wounded. To break the Jewish resistance Stroop had had to mobilise 2054 heavily armed soldiers and 36 officers, equipped not only with machine guns but with tanks, cannons and flame-throwers.

A Revolt Left to its Fate

The Warsaw ghetto insurgents were abandoned to their fate. They received virtually no help. They fought and died in isolation. Their tragic end only raises once again the more general issue of the Jews' abandonment, the indifference and silence with which the world stood by as they were massacred.¹⁸

During the summer of 1943, just after the crushing of the Warsaw ghetto, the Polish national resistance – the Home Army linked to the government in exile in London – already had 25,000 rifles, 6000 pistols and several tens of thousands of handgrenades at its disposal. It supplied the JFO with only ten pistols.¹⁹ The Polish partisans never tried to interfere with the deportations or sabotage the railway line on which the convoys to Treblinka travelled. Their perception of the Jews as foreigners, the result of a long history of separation and anti-Semitism, did not encourage solidarity actions either. The Jews were not Poles, and their segregation did not appear as an intolerable discriminatory measure. No initiative was taken in Poland even remotely comparable to the general strike launched in February 1941 by the Amsterdam workers to protest against the persecution of the Jews. While the Warsaw ghetto burned, life went on in the ‘Aryan’ sector of the capital.

In the second half of 1942 the Polish Resistance did organise a ‘Jewish Aid Council’, better known as the Zegota. The Zegota handed over to the Jewish Fighting Organisation modest amounts (about 300,000 zlotys a month) which the Polish government in exile had decided to grant the organisers of the uprising. It also organised the rescue of several thousand Jewish children and put a substantial number of false identity papers into the hands of the ghetto fighters.²⁰ On 29 April, when the ghetto was in flames and the uprising suppressed, the Home Army’s underground bulletin published an appeal that said that ‘helping Jews escape from the burning ghetto is a Christian duty up until the day when Poland is freed’.²¹ These are the acts of solidarity worth remembering, which saved the honour of those who conceived them and especially of those who carried them out. But they came much too late and were much too little to change the outcome of the struggle.

A wound was opened in those days which is very painfully felt today by Polish writers such as Jaroslaw Rymkiewicz, the author of *Umschlagplatz*. He carries this ‘secret wound ... in his heart, as Poland carried in its heart a minority people who were in a way radically foreign to it’.²²

The tragic end of the Warsaw ghetto uprising raises another question as well, this time addressed to the workers’

movement. Except for a few roneotyped Yiddish newspapers, distributed by Jewish immigrants active in the French or Belgian Resistance, the first armed revolt in Nazi-occupied Europe went practically unnoticed by the international workers' movement.²³ Who could pay attention to the agony of a few hundred rebels in a ghetto so soon after the Red Army's counter-offensive in Stalingrad? Ringelblum's most pessimistic predictions were proved right: the Soviet troops arrived too late to prevent the extermination of the Jews.

On 12 May 1943, having received the news of the final crushing of the uprising, the Bund's representative to the Polish government in exile, Shmuel Zygielbojm, committed suicide. In a letter he explained his act as follows:

I can no longer remain silent. I cannot live when the remnant of the Jewish people in Poland, whom I represent, is being steadily annihilated. My comrades in the Warsaw ghetto fell with weapons in their hands, in the last heroic struggle. I was not fortunate enough to die as they did and together with them. But I belong to them and to their mass graves. By my death I wish to express my vigorous protest against the apathy with which the world regards and resigns itself to the slaughter of the Jewish people.²⁴

Today, in a world that is beginning to become aware of the Jewish genocide and the civilisational break that it marks in history, these words continue to haunt us.

The Proper use of Memory

But the legacy of the Warsaw ghetto uprising cannot be reduced to this reminder of our mistakes and our historical responsibility towards Europe's past. The Jewish workers' movement of Eastern Europe disappeared in the ghetto's ruins. For fifty years the Bund and Poale Tsion had given class and national dignity to a people of pariahs. As they exited from the historical stage, the ghetto's fighters left us a universal message of humanism and hope: they taught us that, before it is a question of strategy and relationships of forces, revolt is

above all a question of ethics. People do not revolt only when they have a chance of winning; they revolt because they cannot accept an insult to human dignity.

More than that: the ghetto's fighters left us an incredible lesson in optimism, whose traces can be detected in the last pages of Ringelblum's chronicle. Just before burying his manuscript in the dirt of Warsaw, he expressed his satisfaction at having helped accomplish 'a great historic mission', which gave meaning to his death: 'We have struck the enemy a hard blow. We have revealed his Satanic plan to annihilate Polish Jewry, a plan he wished to complete in silence.'²⁵ He needed great confidence in future generations in order to think that, thanks to the discovery of this manuscript from a vanished world, the revelation of the crime would help prevent its repetition and would make humanity less barbarous.

The historian Emmanuel Ringelblum, archivist of the Warsaw ghetto, was executed by the Nazis on 7 March 1944. His chronicles prove that he believed deeply in the ethical duty of bearing witness. Now it is up to us to put the therapeutic virtues of memory to work.

CHAPTER 6

The Shoah, Historians and the Public Use of History: On the Goldhagen Affair

What we commonly consider the word ‘understand’ to mean is ‘simplify’. Without profound simplification, the world that surrounds us would be an infinite, undefined tangle, which would defy our capacity to orient ourselves and decide what to do ... This *desire* to simplify is justified; but a simplification itself is not always justified. It is a working hypothesis, useful in so far as it is recognised as such and not taken for reality. Most historical phenomena are not simple, however; or in any case not in a way that would please us.

Primo Levi

The appearance in French of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s book was preceded by a year’s worth of polemics following its publication in the US and Britain. Its appearance in German was accompanied by a triumphal author’s tour through Germany’s major cities and an impressive sales success. A young professor of political science at Harvard University, Goldhagen is also the son of a survivor of the genocide to which he has devoted his research. His noisy entry onto the public stage was amplified by a large-scale publicity campaign by his publisher. ‘A work of the utmost originality and importance – as authoritative as it is explosive – *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* radically transforms our understanding of the Holocaust and of Germany during the Nazi period’, the publisher said. The content of the book’s almost 600 pages is perfectly summed up by its title.¹

Goldhagen’s thesis is not in fact an entirely new one. Demonisation of the ‘Huns’ was quite prevalent at the end of

the Second World War. But Goldhagen propagates it now in a language laying claim to scholarly rigour and objectivity. He does not restrict himself to moral stigmatisation, he lays out facts and documents. After presenting his interpretation in the first part of his book, he supports it in the second, most interesting part, which is devoted to an historic reconstruction of the events. This is followed by an imposing apparatus of notes, in which the author settles accounts with other historians. There he attempts, in a generally unconvincing fashion, to answer the objections and defend himself against the criticisms that his most extreme statements were bound to call forth.

The US and German historical communities have almost unanimously declared the book inadmissible as serious historical argument. With the arrogance of a simple shrug of Goldhagen's shoulders, he has dismissed the most elementary conclusions of fifty years of study, analysis and reflection on the Jewish genocide. Yet the country that the book condemns so harshly has embraced its author in its bookshops, lecture halls and television studios. Apart from the thesis that the book puts forward, its impact in Germany is in itself worthy of close attention. Its reception there marks in several respects a new stage in the country's unending, unavoidable confrontation with its own past.

As his imposing bibliographical apparatus shows, Goldhagen has done an enormous amount of research, including in German archives of the Nazi period. What is striking in reading his tome is the obsessional determination with which he has succeeded in putting so much study in the service of such a slight, simplistic position.

The least that we can say is that Goldhagen is swimming against the current. Historians, motivated by the conviction that racial hatred alone is not enough to explain the murder of six million human beings, have spent decades studying a *whole set of causes* that resulted in the extermination of Europe's Jews. They have emphasised in their different works: the nature and functioning of the gigantic bureaucratic machine that organised the carrying out of the Final Solution (Raul Hilberg);² the historical context that transformed a military crusade against Soviet Russia into a genocidal enterprise

(Arno Mayer);³ the relationship between the Jewish genocide and the failure of Nazi plans for German settlement of *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe (Götz Aly);⁴ the social circumstances and psychological factors that changed ‘ordinary men’ into mass killers (Christopher Browning);⁵ and the preconditions for this immense crime within a civilisation, ours, where work has been more and more reduced to carrying out tasks without taking any interest in their purpose, not to mention asking any ethical questions about them (Zygmunt Bauman).⁶

A Monocausal Explanation

To Goldhagen’s mind all these approaches are strictly speaking pointless. His explanation of the Jewish genocide is rigorously monocausal. It consists in what we could describe, in terms of the debates of the past twenty years, as a form of *extensive intentionalism*. In his eyes the unique and sufficient key to understanding Auschwitz is anti-Semitism: not so much Hitler’s anti-Semitism, but above all and essentially the Germans’ anti-Semitism. For Goldhagen the Shoah’s roots lie not in the historical context of modern Europe but in a structural flaw of German history. In other words, he proposes to interpret it as the result of an exclusively German process, and examine it under the microscope as the inevitable result of a German malady whose first symptoms appeared with Bismarck or even Luther. Here we have a new, simplified, radicalised version of the thesis of a *deutsche Sonderweg* (exceptional German road).

In Goldhagen’s mind, the Jewish genocide was conceived as ‘a German national project’ (p. 11). In the last analysis Hitler was only its chief perpetrator. ‘The Holocaust was the defining aspect of Nazism, but not only of Nazism’, he says. ‘It was also the defining feature of German society during its Nazi period’ (p. 8). He estimates ‘the number who became perpetrators of the Holocaust’ at 100,000 – perhaps even 500,000 or more, he adds (p. 167). In any event these direct perpetrators acted with the support of the whole of German society, which had been possessed for several centuries by the belief that ‘the Jews ought to die’ (p. 14). German perpetrators also benefited from

the direct collaboration of a great number of non-German fascists and anti-Semites, recruited in the European countries occupied by the Wehrmacht and acting out of various different motives; but Goldhagen considers non-Germans' participation in the genocide as completely marginal. The overwhelming majority of the executioners were Germans, he maintains.

As for the genesis of the Final Solution, he situates Hitler's decision to proceed to exterminate the Jews between the end of 1940 and the very beginning of 1941 (p. 147), unlike most historians, who go back and forth between June and October 1941. But in any event this decision was supposedly no more than a simple step in the fulfilment of a project that had been developed as early as the end of the First World War and which, far from being distinctively Nazi, expressed the dominant inclination among Germans. The circumstances of the Second World War supposedly gave National Socialism its chance at last to transform an 'eliminationist ideology' deeply rooted throughout Germany into state policy. Genocide thus becomes the tragic epilogue of a very long process begun a century and a half earlier with Jewish emancipation, the first attempt to 'eliminate' the Jews by assimilating them. (In fact, Goldhagen suggests, this was the continuation in a secularised world of Christian efforts to put an end to Judaism through conversion.) Since the strategy of assimilation had not succeeded in suppressing Jewish otherness, 'the eliminationist mind-set tended towards an exterminationist one' (pp. 71, 154, 162). Even if Germany was never completely Nazified, Goldhagen continues, genocidal anti-Semitism, which we tend to consider as distinctively Hitlerite, constituted in reality the dominant trait of the German people's culture, mentality and psychological disposition, from Berlin workers to writer Thomas Mann and from Cologne grocers to pastor Martin Niemöller and theologian Karl Barth (pp. 91, 112–13).⁷ Wartime conditions allowed the Germans to manifest and accomplish their profound vocation.

Thus according to Goldhagen, the Nazis' first anti-Semitic measures in 1933 were acclaimed; the Nuremberg laws two years later were greeted with enthusiasm; the *Kristallnacht* pogroms in 1938 were accompanied by an outbreak of popular

hatred; and the Jews' deportation to death camps during the war met with satisfaction. 'Ordinary Germans spontaneously, without provocation or encouragement, participated in the brutalities' (pp. 100–1), says Goldhagen about *Kristallnacht*. He does not take the trouble to challenge a vast historical literature that shows the opposite. Ian Kershaw, author of an authoritative study on German public opinion under the Nazis, had emphasised, on the basis of copious documentation concerning Bavaria, that the general population neither approved nor took part in the violence on *Kristallnacht*. Kershaw showed, by citing reports of high-ranking civil servants in Lower Bavaria and the Upper Palatinate, that the pogroms even had the opposite effect, of "unnecessarily" allowing in many cases "sympathy for the Jews in town and countryside" to emerge.⁸

The violence in November 1938 was a major step towards genocide, in as much as it showed the Nazis that they could *go beyond* a policy of persecution without encountering obstacles. They saw that murderous radicalisation of their anti-Semitism could enjoy the population's passivity and complicit neutrality. Kershaw concluded, however, that while the road to Auschwitz was certainly 'built by hate', it was above all 'paved with indifference'.⁹ By contrast Goldhagen, carefully pushing aside any evidence that does not corroborate his thesis, presents the *Kristallnacht* pogroms as a spontaneous, savage unleashing of the populace, incited and approved by a whole nation.

In short, Auschwitz no longer appears in this interpretation as either a break in European history or as a qualitative leap forward in the development of anti-Semitism. Rather, it appears as the natural, logical, almost ineluctable product of a distinctively German 'eliminationist ideology'.

Goldhagen's approach consists, therefore, in studying the Jewish genocide by focusing his analysis on its perpetrators. He tries to illustrate his thesis by taking three specific cases into account: the police battalions, made up in large majority of ordinary Germans and not of SS, who played an essential role in mobile extermination operations in Poland; the concentration camps, where Jewish 'labour' no longer served any productive purpose but functioned as a form of annihilation.

tion; and finally the ‘death marches’ (*Todesmärche*), which took place towards the end of the war when the camps were evacuated, whose conditions and completely irrational itineraries reveal once more their destructive intent. This study yields an impressive panoply of violence, atrocities and murders, carried out with sadistic determination. The overwhelming facts that it sets forth are undeniable. But the schematic way in which the facts are presented and analysed is ultimately unconvincing.

The two first panels of this triptych had already been studied by Christopher Browning and Wolfgang Sofsky, who arrived at completely different conclusions. In *Ordinary Men*, Browning gave a much more nuanced and complex picture of the composition, motivations, psychological conditioning and contradictions that characterised the police battalion members who became assembly-line killers.¹⁰ He begins from the same observation as Goldhagen: these police reservists were ‘ordinary people’, in most cases neither Nazi Party members nor fanatical racists. They had come of age under the Weimar republic and often voted for the Social Democrats or even Communists before 1933. Yet they took part in the massacre of several hundreds of thousands of Jews in Poland between the autumn of 1941 and the end of 1943. True, they were obeying orders; but they could have avoided the assignment or asked to be transferred to others. In fact the great majority obeyed without faltering.

Starting from this shared observation, which inevitably raises a major question – how could these ordinary people have turned into killers? – Goldhagen’s and Browning’s conclusions diverge drastically. Goldhagen’s answer is simple: they acted in this way because they were Germans, that is, moved by an ‘eliminationist’ anti-Semitism that naturally inclined them in wartime circumstances to kill Jews. Browning has no stock answer, but he takes a number of factors into account: conformism and psychological pressure from the group, fear of seeming cowardly, the brutality and cruelty that characterised the war against the USSR and had acclimatised the soldiers to massacres, the military (and particularly Nazi) system of stripping perpetrators of their sense of moral responsibility, etc. Anti-Semitic prejudices that were instilled by Nazi

propaganda and widespread in German society facilitated the task of the killer police, true, but they were far from supplying the fundamental motive for their action. Browning reminds us, with testimonies to back him up, of the psychological difficulties (anxiety, depression, the necessity to gorge themselves on massacres) that these police (including their chiefs) had to overcome in order to turn themselves into killers.

His sampling enables him to sketch this picture: a minority (less than a quarter of the members of one police battalion) refused to take part in the killings. Another minority, more or less comparable in numbers, took part willingly, sometimes proudly and with pleasure, as photographs published in Browning's and Goldhagen's works show. The rest obeyed after overcoming psychological and moral inhibitions.

Browning's conclusion in no way aims at exonerating the killers, but at problematising their experience. He draws a lesson from it of universal applicability: we must remain vigilant, because this could happen again, elsewhere and with different victims. Goldhagen's conclusion eliminates the phenomenon's complexity and reduces it to its German national dimension. Germans today, he explains in a footnote to his book, have nothing to do with their pre-1945 forebears ('essentially, after the war, Germans were reeducated' by their US occupiers, he explains (p. 594)). Therefore, we have no reason to be concerned about the rise of racism at the end of the twentieth century. Since the German genocidal syndrome was treated, Europe is safeguarded against any repetition – in other forms, in other circumstances, with other targets – of the catastrophe that occurred during the Second World War.

Goldhagen adopts the same reductionist approach on the subject of Jewish labour in the concentration camps. Wolfgang Sofsky has shown that the victims of 'extermination through work' (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*) were not exclusively Jewish. First, when Goldhagen gives a mortality rate of 100 per cent for Jews at the Mauthausen camp and less than 2 per cent for the other prisoners, he simply forgets that the camp was inhabited in 1938–45 by at least 190,000 deportees, in large majority non-Jewish, of whom only half left the camp alive. In addition, Sofsky emphasises that this labour, not useful but

destructive, can be understood only in the framework of a new experiment in anthropological mutation carried out in the Nazi camps, which were genuine laboratories of totalitarian domination.¹¹ In other words, seeing Nazism through the exclusive prism of anti-Semitism stops Goldhagen from grasping the full complexity and multiplicity of its roots. He ends up with a one-sided, reductionist analysis, which paradoxically limits its criminal dimension. The Jews were not Nazism's only victims.

The third part of Goldhagen's argument – on the 'death marches' that took place during the war's last phase, when the camps were evacuated in face of the Soviet advance – doubtless constitutes the most original and interesting part of his book. His estimate of the number of victims – between a third and a half of the 750,000 prisoners involved – and his study of these marches' irrational routes – which often covered five times the actual distance from one camp to the next – shows that their goal was not really transport but rather destruction (chapters 13–14). Before Goldhagen's, no book had shown so clearly and with so much documentation that the *Todesmärche* constituted the last stage of the Nazi terror and the Jewish genocide.

Minimising the Gas Chambers

We must none the less stress that the whole argument of *Hitler's Willing Executioners* remains limited to one dimension of the Jewish genocide, albeit an impressive and essential one: open-air massacres and face-to-face executions. These 'mobile killing operations' took more than 1.3 million Jewish lives. But we must add to them over 800,000 Jews who died in the ghettos, and above all 3 million who were exterminated in the camps.¹² This means that while the massacres carried out by the *Einsatzgruppen*, police and army constitute a central aspect of the genocide, they are nonetheless only one aspect. Goldhagen never takes into consideration the bureaucratic, administrative, industrial and impersonal side of the Final Solution.

The extermination camps and gas chambers go almost unmentioned in Goldhagen's work, except when he seeks to minimise their role. 'The imbalance of attention devoted to

the gas chambers needs to be corrected' (p. 523), he says, since 'contrary to both scholarly and popular treatments of the Holocaust, gassing was really epiphenomenal to the Germans' slaughter of Jews' (p. 521).¹³ The passive complicity of an army of functionaries and other 'ordinary men' (German and non-German) who kept the Nazi machinery of destruction running, without ever speaking to a single Jew or holding a gun, raises no questions for this Harvard political scientist. In his mind the Jewish catastrophe unfolded like a play whose script was written in advance. Everything is summed up in an aphorism: 'no Germans, no Holocaust' (p. 6).

Raul Hilberg, whose interpretation of the Shoah is at an enormous remove from Goldhagen's, did not mince his words in attacking this Germanophobic, simplistic, reductionist and fundamentally relativising attitude:

[He] has left us the image of a sort of medieval incubus, a latent demon pent up in the German mind, which was waiting for the moment when it could violently gush out. We are asked to believe that it then took the form of a super-pogrom carried out by killers and guards. In this portrayal the Holocaust is given an orgiastic twist, and its main attributes are the degradation and torture of its victims. Everything else, including the gas chambers in which two and a half million Jews died out of sight of the perpetrators, is secondary, a mere 'backdrop' for the open-air massacre. Goldhagen does not concern himself with the countless laws, decisions and decrees adopted by the perpetrators, or the obstacles that they continually encountered. He pays no heed to the standard procedures that were the everyday components of the whole enterprise. This is not his concern. He does not explore the administrative machine or the bureaucratic pulses that kept the wheels turning, which gathered speed as the process reached the peak of its gigantic deployment. He has preferred to cut the Holocaust down to size, replacing its tangled mechanisms with pistols, whips, and brass knuckles.¹⁴

Goldhagen does not agree with Hannah Arendt's thesis about the 'banality of evil', as the title of his work itself indicates. In

his eyes the Nazis were at bottom only the authentic representatives of a ‘genocidal community’ (p. 406). ‘The Germans perpetrators were, after all, the executioners of an entire nation, whom the German State had sentenced to death’ (p. 397). Some critics (notably Moshe Zimmermann, Hans-Ulrich Wehler and Eberhard Jäckel) have seen in this thesis a desire to ‘ethnicise’ the historical discussion: to define Germans as a monolithic entity, which at bottom seems almost to be the mythic image of Jews propagated by anti-Semitism turned inside out.¹⁵ This vision is so striking in the book that Goldhagen’s attempts to clear himself of the suspicion of anti-German prejudice – particularly in two long articles responding to his critics published in the *New Republic* – seem more like retrospective pleading than an explanation of his cognitive model.¹⁶

In order to give an appearance of verisimilitude to this ahistorical portrait of a modern Germany totally impregnated with ‘eliminationist’ anti-Semitism, Goldhagen is obliged to simplify its past and at the same time carefully avoid situating it in a European context. His vision of a nation of pogromists simply ignores the fact that the largest German party at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Social Democrats, opposed anti-Semitism and counted very many Jews among its members. It also forgets the scope of German Jewish culture, which coexisted with the rise of *völkisch* nationalism. This culture bore witness to a socio-economic and intellectual ascent of German-speaking Jews in the Wilhelmine empire and Weimar republic that was probably unmatched elsewhere in Europe. We are not trying here to defend the myth of ‘Jewish-German symbiosis’. But this myth could only be upheld because Jews had succeeded in carving out a space, admittedly a precarious and ill-defined space, in German society.

Simply glancing outside Germany’s frontiers also shows that at the beginning of the century Germany seemed like a happy little island for European Jews. Outside Germany, waves of anti-Semitism were sweeping over Europe: the Dreyfus Affair in France, Tsarist pogroms in Russia, ritual murder trials in Ukraine and Bohemia. Even in Austria, Karl Lueger was elected mayor of Vienna on an openly anti-Jewish programme.

The traumas of the First World War and dislocation of social relations throughout Germany were necessary in order to make anti-Semitism, which represented only 2 per cent of the German electorate at the beginning of the twentieth century, the ideology of the Nazi regime, Robert Wistrich reminds us.¹⁷ This would not have happened without a deep, prolonged economic crisis, a chaotic and divisive social modernisation, and chronic political instability under the Weimar regime. It would not have happened without the rise of aggressive nationalism, fuelled by fear of Bolshevism and of the German revolution rehearsed in 1918–23. Finally, it would not have happened if Germans had not put their hopes in a charismatic saviour, incarnated by a sinister individual whose popularity in other circumstances would never have grown beyond the walls of a few Munich beer halls.

Cooped up in his exclusively German observatory, Goldhagen fails to see that the atrocious, unbearable acts of violence shown in the many photographs illustrating his book were not unique to National Socialism. On the contrary, they show what National Socialism had in common with all the twentieth century's horrible massacres, from the mass execution of Armenians in the Ottoman empire to the 'ethnic cleansing' in ex-Yugoslavia and executions with machetes in Rwanda.

Focusing on the total lack of historical comparisons that characterises *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, Norman G. Finkelstein has shrewdly remarked that it would be easy to criminalise many other nations in the same way using Goldhagen's criteria. Finkelstein recalls for example the ferocity of the US war against Japan, largely backed by public opinion in a country that was not totalitarian but democratic, with a press that was free to challenge the government in office. He cites the historian John Dower's description of the quite common practice among US soldiers of collecting Japanese victims' ears, or exhibiting 'scalps, bones and skulls' as trophies. Far from being condemned, these methods were popularised by mass circulation publications like *Life* magazine. *Life* featured photos of US military vehicles decorated with these lovely objects, or a girl posing by a Japanese skull sent as a gift by her fiancé from the South Pacific, on its covers.¹⁸

We could obviously give many such examples. French imperialism's colonial massacres in the nineteenth century; Italian fascism's conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 thanks to massive use of chemical weapons; and the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were all crimes against humanity that were not massively opposed in France, Italy or the US. Taking these events in isolation, we could portray the French, Italians or Americans as naturally genocidal peoples. But this judgement would undoubtedly be a bit hasty. We must also not forget that almost 300,000 Italians were engaged in the armed anti-fascist Resistance in 1943–45, and that there were powerful movements against the Algerian and Vietnam wars in France and the US throughout the 1960s.

Similarly, Goldhagen pays almost no attention in his book to the 200,000 German anti-fascists interned by the Nazis in concentration camps, or to the tens of thousands of 'ordinary' (non-Jewish) Germans exiled because of their opposition to Hitler's regime. Even during the twelve years of Nazism from 1933 to 1945, Germany was not the nation dominated by monolithic anti-Semitism that Goldhagen claims to describe. The examples just mentioned are none the less enough to prove that atrocities and racist violence perpetrated by Western regimes with the consent of their peoples are not a distinctive feature of German history.

On this level Goldhagen's theses have been demolished by Norman Finkelstein's rigorous, politically impassioned and ethically noble criticism. Finkelstein pushes his criticism too far, however. In his effort to refute the thesis that sees every ordinary German as a 'willing executioner', he exposes himself to the danger of 'normalising' not just the German people but the Jewish genocide. In other words, he risks reducing Auschwitz to an ordinary massacre with nothing special about it.¹⁹ But Auschwitz was not an eruption of bestial, primitive violence; it was a slaughter perpetrated largely 'without hatred', thanks to a planned system of industrial production of death. Its machinery was created by a minority of criminal architects, and kept in motion by a mass of perpetrators who were sometimes zealous, at other times unconscious and stripped of any sense of responsibility. It took place amidst the

silent indifference of the great majority of Germans, with the complicity of a passive Europe and Western world. Here lies the uniqueness of the Jewish genocide, which Goldhagen's book is far from even touching on and which Finkelstein's criticism seems ignorant of.

Goldhagen's German Triumph

There remains the fact of Goldhagen's massive, amazing triumph in Germany. Historians have with almost one voice rejected his new version of the old idea of the German people's 'collective guilt'. His book has been subject to all sorts of criticisms, from the most justified to the basest. He has been accused of being incompetent, of not belonging to the guild of professional historians, and of being manipulated by his Holocaust survivor father. His success has been attributed to his oratorical skills, his sympathetic face and his Hollywood actor charm – advantages which most of his critics sadly lack. The truth is much more complex.

Quite simply, this book has sent Germany back once more to a past that refuses to be left behind. In Edouard Husson's words, it has had the effect 'of a bolt from the blue of recovered German normality'.²⁰ The media has done the rest. The result, taken as a whole, is salutary.

This is doubtless the explanation for Jürgen Habermas' astonishing praise of Goldhagen's work in a speech he gave in Bonn. The Frankfurt philosopher defended *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, rejecting in advance any critical analysis of an historical type, as a useful contribution in the context of the 'public use of history'.²¹

Germany is not Turkey, it is often said, it has not hidden its past. The Jewish genocide has become an academic discipline in Berlin and Frankfurt, just as it is in New York and Chicago. But institutionalising scholarship can also mean 'disinfecting' it: reducing the past to a neutral object of study from which 'positive' knowledge and rigorously codified science are drawn, often impermeable to discussions in the broader society. The functionalism that has dominated 'Holocaust Studies' in both Europe and the US for several years seems to

have obscured a basic truth recalled by Goldhagen, despite his bad arguments: that Nazism would never have been able to conceive or carry out the destruction of 6 million Jews without several prior centuries of anti-Semitism. The Marxist sociologist Helmut Dahmer has written on this subject,

On the trail of Hitler's regime and the Holocaust, German specialists of contemporary history have rationalised their discipline. The subject of study has been neutralised and voided of emotion on an ethical level; its object (the 'events') has been made impersonal; and its portrayals have been emptied of literary content.²²

The gulf that separates this reading from Finkelstein's is very striking. It reflects the radically different receptions that Goldhagen's book has had in left milieux in Germany and in the rest of the world. As a Jewish, anti-Zionist intellectual, Finkelstein perceived in his US colleague's thesis an implicit tendency to absolve the West for its colonial crimes through an exclusive focus on the Shoah. He saw in Goldhagen's work a reaffirmation of the classical Zionist (strictly speaking Herzelian) conception of all non-Jews as tainted by a kind of 'ontological' anti-Semitism.²³ The German Marxist Dahmer, by contrast, has hailed Goldhagen's book as a useful rampart against the threat of growing academicisation and depoliticisation of the study of National Socialism and its crimes. Habermas and Dahmer have used Goldhagen's book to hinder any relativisation of Nazism in Germany's historical awareness; Finkelstein has denounced it as an unacceptable indictment of the whole German nation and an implicit apology for US imperialism and Zionism.

For my part, I do not believe that either of these two goals is incompatible with a rigorous, less subjective criticism of Goldhagen's book. Our criticism must avoid the Scylla of Habermas and Dahmer's complacent reading, which does a disservice to their goal of preserving the memory of the crime. At the same time it must steer clear of the Charybdis of Finkelstein's no-holds-barred demolition, which runs the risk of missing completely the historical uniqueness of the Jewish genocide.

If we can see any ‘merit’ in Goldhagen’s book, it is that it has reminded us, as Pierre Bouretz has stressed, that ‘the destruction of the Jews took place thanks to the war and because of anti-Semitism ... not because of the war or of its difficulties’,²⁴ as some functionalist historians seem to suggest.²⁵ This elementary truth is important to the whole of Western civilisation, despite Goldhagen’s opinion, but also and first of all for Germany, the country where the crime was hatched.

The crowds of young people who have filled the biggest lecture halls of major German cities to applaud this young US academic are thus, in their own way, doing the ‘impossible mourning’ that was left undone by the generations that came before them. We could almost say that the debate surrounding Goldhagen’s book is a peculiar sort of posthumous vindication of Karl Jaspers, whose painful, accusatory reflection on ‘German guilt’ was met in 1946 with almost total indifference.²⁶

Conclusion

At the centre of this short collection lies an attempt to analyse and raise questions about the various aspects of Marxism's relationship to Auschwitz: as much to Auschwitz's genesis and advent as to the memory that is its legacy. This relationship is much more complex and goes much deeper than is usually thought. Not only were the struggle against 'Jewish Bolshevism', the destruction of the Soviet Union and the extermination of the European Jews inextricably interwoven for the Nazi regime, to the point of amounting to one and the same objective, Marxism also experienced a veritable turning point with the Jewish genocide.

The tragic sequel to the defeat of the German workers' movement after 1933, Auschwitz marked a break in the itinerary of Marxist thought. The destruction of Jewish socialism in Central and Eastern Europe, along with the wholesale uprooting of the Marxist theoretical tradition in Germany and Austria, had long-term consequences that are still perceptible today. Marxism was much 'less Jewish' after the Second World War than it had been from the publication of *Capital* to Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. Its central axis was displaced from the Germanic world – Germany and German-speaking Central Europe, which had been its cradle for almost a century – to the Latin world to begin with (French and Italian and to a lesser extent Latin American), then to the English-speaking world, where it shows the most signs of life today.

This allows us to appreciate, with hindsight, both the impressive scope and the irreplaceable value of Jewish intellectuals' contribution to the rise of Marxist thought. But the problem goes much further. It goes far beyond the traces Auschwitz has left in the course of one current of thought.

The ‘rational’, industrial extermination of six million Jews during the Second World War inflicted a deep wound on twentieth-century history. Humanity has paid a price for it: Auschwitz has changed our image of the world and of civilisation. Marxism has also paid a price for the Stalinist night of a murderous, oppressive totalitarianism that decked itself out in the finery of Marx and communism. This simple observation shows that the alternative posed by the German Spartacists in the aftermath of the First World War – socialism or barbarism – must be radically reformulated today. First, the twentieth century has proved that barbarism is not a threat to our future: it is the dominant characteristic of our own time. This century has known modern barbarism. It is not only possible, it is intrinsically linked to the civilisation we are living in.

Second, the twentieth century has put a large question mark over Marx’s forecast about the historical role of the proletariat as the social subject of the liberation of the whole of humanity. The calamitous failure of all the regimes that have attempted a socialist transformation of relations of production is not enough to declare Marx’s project null and void: neither war and totalitarianism, with their train of violence and massacre, nor the tragic experience of ‘actually existing socialism’ has ever put a stop to class struggle, social and political liberation movements, their renewal, their deepening and their extension to realms unimaginable before the First World War. But if Marx’s forecast has not been invalidated, its viability still remains to be demonstrated.

In other words, after two centuries of capitalist predominance, capitalism has deployed both its impressive productive dynamism and its vast potential for human and natural destruction. Socialism by contrast remains a Utopia – a ‘concrete’ Utopia, in Ernst Bloch’s words, that is, a project and a fight rather than a vague chimera – and a moral necessity, a demand for social justice.¹ But it is certainly not a battle won in advance, nor anything ineluctably inscribed in the ‘march of History’ and ‘scientifically’ guaranteed by the force of its ‘laws’. This concrete Utopia now smacks, to use Daniel Bensaïd’s inspired image, of a ‘melancholy wager’.²

This is not a new sentiment. But until now we were not able to recognise it for what it is, although it is now taking shape

very clearly in our historical awareness. The ‘experience of defeat’, as Christopher Hill has described the aftermath of the seventeenth-century English revolution, is as old as revolutionary movements themselves. The thought and action of all the great vanquished revolutionaries in history – Saint-Just, Blanqui, Luxemburg, Benjamin, Trotsky, Guevara – were constantly haunted by an acute sense of the defeat that had been suffered and the catastrophe that always remained possible. This is a true red thread binding history together in a continuity as the history of the oppressed.

Our melancholy is neither helpless nor resigned; it is the foundation of hope and of combat impregnated with memory, conscious of their mission to repair (Benjamin would say ‘redeem’) the world. Our Marxism has survived the ravages of Nazism and Stalinism at the cost of a long march through the wilderness which is continuing today (after the parenthesis of 1968). It is a Marxism – as I suggested briefly in the chapter on the Frankfurt School and Ernest Mandel – that has respected the prohibition of falling into the ruts of positivist historiography, and has been ineluctably condemned to ‘empathize’ with the vanquished.³

The Marxism of social democracy and Stalinism led the way to the terrible defeats of this century. It prepared its own current dissolution into a left joyously subjected to market constraints and neoliberal dogmas, all in the name of realism, responsibility and the supreme imperative of ‘swimming with the current’. Socialism exhausted its forces and paralysed its adepts in this disastrous school of heralds of ‘progress’ and (post-) industrial civilisation, as Benjamin wrote, because the will to fight and the spirit of sacrifice ‘are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren’.⁴

Auschwitz’s legacy is made up of millions of victims, to whom we can often no longer match a name or a face. Marxism’s ‘melancholy wager’ after the catastrophe consists in respecting the tacit understanding that binds us to this lost world of nameless victims who continue to wait for deliverance. They are in a sense the ancestors that keep our anger alive and forbid us to give up.

This melancholy is not incompatible with happiness. Did we not see the recovered dignity of millions of the Conquistadors' victims in the faces full of gaiety that filled the streets of Havana on New Year's Day 1959 and of Managua on 19 July 1979? Could we not see in those faces the expression of a dialectic of happiness (ephemeral, provisional, never definitive but none the less real) that redeemed centuries of suffering and oppression? Rethinking Marxism after Auschwitz means tearing up the mythologies of progress and teleological visions of history so as to grasp the dialectic that joins catastrophe with deliverance – that joins the historical experience of the modern world's violence with the utopian, generous, daring but not irrational wager of a constantly frustrated but always possible liberation.

Notes

Introduction

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5. Detlev Claussen, *Grenzen der Aufklärung: Zur gesellschaftlichen Geschichte des moderne Antisemitismus*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995.
6. Georges Bataille, ‘Réflexions sur la question juive’, *Critique* no. 12 (May 1947), p. 471, reprinted as ‘Sartre’, in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 11, Paris: Gallimard, 1988.

1. Auschwitz, Marx and the Twentieth Century

1. Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Briefwechsel*, Munich: Piper, 1985.
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3. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985.
4. See Philippe Burin, *Hitler et les Juifs*, Paris: Seuil, 1988.
5. See Dan Diner, ‘Historical understanding and counter-rationality’, in Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.

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7. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 154.
8. Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The 'Final Solution' in History*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988, pp. 35, 234, 12.
9. This approach must not be confused with that of the German revisionist historian Ernst Nolte, who popularised the idea of a 'European civil war'. He saw its origin not in the collapse of the old dynastic order, in 1914, but at the moment of the October revolution, in his eyes the source of all the catastrophes of the twentieth century. See Ernst Nolte, *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg*, Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1987.
10. See Peter Hayes, *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben and the Nazi Era*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
11. Hilberg, *Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. 3, p. 968.
12. See T. Sandkühler and H.W. Schmuhl, 'Noch einmal: die I.G. Farben und Auschwitz', *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* vol. 19, no. 2 (1993), pp. 264–5.
13. See Zygmunt Bauman's introduction to his authoritative work *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Oxford: Polity Press, 1989, p. 8.
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15. Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, p. 30.
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17. Ernest Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War*, London: Verso, 1986, p. 91. See also Mandel's essay 'Material, social and ideological preconditions for the Nazi genocide', in Gilbert Achcar, ed., *The Marxism of Ernest Mandel*, London: Verso, 1999 (forthcoming).
18. See Detlev Peukert, 'Alltang und Barbarei: Zur Normalität des dritten Reiches', in Dan Diner, ed., *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte?: Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987, p. 59.

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24. This aspect of Marx's thought is emphasised by Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre in their book *Révolte et mélancolie: Le romantisme à contre-courant de la modernité*, Paris: Payot, 1992.
25. I have developed this point at length in my article 'Le prophète muet: portrait de Trotsky', *Actuel Marx* no. 17 (1995), pp. 175–95.
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28. This passage is in the preparatory notes to Benjamin's 'Theses on the philosophy of history', *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. I, vol. 3, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977, p. 1232.
29. See the studies devoted in Benjamin in Michael Löwy's collection *On Changing the World: Essays in Political Philosophy, from Karl Marx to Walter Benjamin*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1993.

30. This observation seems to me also to inspire the conclusion of Etienne Balibar's study, *La philosophie de Marx*, Paris: La Découverte, 1993.
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 10. Abraham Léon, *La Conception matérialiste de la question juive*, with a preface and postscript by Ernest Germain (Ernest Mandel), Paris: Editions Pionniers, 1946. Léon’s manuscript bears a 1942 date. This book has been republished several times since 1968 under the same title by E.D.I. with a new preface by Maxime Rodinson. Translated as Abram Leon, *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*, introduction by Nathan Weinstock, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970.
 11. See, on this subject, Enzo Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate 1843–1943*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994.
 12. Sartre, ‘L’Enfance d’un chef’, in *Le Mur*, Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1939. See Nicholas Hevitt, “Portrait de l’antisémite”: antisémitisme et judéocide’, *Etudes sartriennes* vol. 1, Paris: Cahiers de sémiologie textuelle 2, Université de Paris X, 1984, pp. 111–22.
 13. The reference is obviously to Emile Durkheim, *De la Division du travail social*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996. As for Durkheim, in two texts written at the time of the Dreyfus Affair, he considered anti-Semitism to be an aspect of the ‘anomie’ of modern soci-

ties. See Pierre Birnbaum, ‘L’Amour de la science: les sociologues entre raison et fidélité’, chapter 4 of his book *Destins juifs: De la Révolution française à Carpentras*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995.

14. Léon Daudet, ‘Au Temps de Judas’ (1920), in *Souvenirs et polémiques*, Paris: Laffont, 1992, pp. 556–7.
15. Shulamit Volkov, ‘Antisemitismus als kultureller Code’, *Jüdisches Leben und Antisemitismus im 19 und 20 Jahrhundert*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 1990, pp. 13–36.
16. See Pierre Birnbaum, *Un Mythe politique: La ‘République juive’: De Léon Blum à Pierre Mendès France*, Paris: Fayard, 1988.
17. At least until the 1970s, when reassuring convictions were usefully shaken by foreign scholars such as Zeev Sternhell and Robert O. Paxton. See Zeev Sternhell, *La Droite révolutionnaire 1885–1914: Les origines françaises du fascisme*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1978; Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order 1940–1944*, New York: Knopf, 1972.
18. Hannah Arendt, ‘Organized guilt and universal responsibility’, *Jewish Frontier* (January 1945), pp. 19–23.
19. About this difference of perspective, see Enzo Traverso, *L’Histoire déchirée: Essai sur Auschwitz et les intellectuels*, Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1997, chapter 1.
20. ‘I belong therefore’, writes Aron, ‘to those Jews whom Sartre, in his essay, believes to be typical. Jews because the exterior world declares them to be such, who assume their Judaism to preserve their dignity, but who do not experience it spontaneously.’ Cited in Jean-Louis Missika, ‘Juif par le regard de l’autre?’, *Commentaires* nos 28–9 (1985), p. 189.
21. On this subject, see Roman Rosdolsky, *Zur nationalen Frage: Friedrich Engels und das Problem der ‘geschichtslosen Völker’*, Berlin: Olle and Wolter, 1979.
22. In 1980, he said to Benny Lévy: ‘I wrote *La question juive* without any documentation, without reading a Jewish book’ (Sartre and Benny Lévy, *Les entretiens de 1980*, Paris: Verdier, 1991, p. 74).
23. Henri Meschonnic has written about this: ‘A tranquil forgetting of a continent: Bible, Talmud, Kabbalah. In a

- word, a very philosophical ignorance. The mark of a tradition. And of an epoch' ('Sartre et la question juive', p. 141).
24. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt Brace, 1976, p. xv. According to Richard Bernstein, Arendt's critique of Sartre is, nevertheless, unjust and excessive, for Sartre's distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic Jew perfectly matches the one Arendt established in *The Hidden Tradition* between the Jew as pariah and as parvenu. See Richard Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996, pp. 195–7.
 25. Ernest Renan, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 8, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1967, p. 155.
 26. Martin Heidegger, *L'Être et le temps*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 160. On this subject, see Rüdiger Safranski, *Heidegger et son temps*, Paris: Grasset, 1996, p. 175.
 27. In 1946–47, *Les Temps Modernes* published articles by Maurice de Gandillac, Karl Löwith and Eric Weil denouncing Heidegger's adherence to Nazism.
 28. Julien Benda, *La Trahison des clercs*, Paris: Grasset, 1975, pp. 131–2, 136.
 29. See on this subject the very pertinent comments by Misscha Brumlik, 'Das verkörperte "Sein für die Anderen": Zu Sartres Theorie des Judentums', *Babylon: Beiträge zur jüdischen Gegenwart* vol. 2 (1987), p. 94.
 30. Werner Sombart, *Die Juden und das Wirtschaftsleben*, Munich and Leipzig: Duncker and Humboldt, 1920. On the stereotype of the abstract intelligence of the Jew, see Sander Gilman, *Smart Jews: The Construction of the Image of Jewish Superior Intelligence*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.
 31. Edouard Drumont, *La France juive*, Paris: Marpon et Flammarion, 1886, p. 251.
 32. Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, *Gilles*, Paris: Gallimard, 1949, p. 100. (A *polytechnicien* is a graduate of the Ecole polytechnique; a *normalien* is a graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure. Trans.)
 33. See Michael R. Marrus, *The Politics of Assimilation: A Study of the French Jewish Community at the Time of the Dreyfus Affair*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

34. Joseph de Maistre, *Ecrits sur la Révolution*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1989, p. 145. For Arendt's rereading of the counter-revolutionary critique of the philosophy of the Rights of Man, see Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, pp. 299–302.
35. This reproduction of an anti-Semitic stereotype in Sartre's essay had earlier been highlighted by Rosenberg in 'Does the Jew exist?', p. 15. Rosenberg nevertheless does not characterise the whole of Sartre's text as anti-Semitic to the extent that these stereotypes are inscribed within an argument aimed at combating anti-Semitism. On the other hand, this is not the opinion of Susan Suleiman. According to her, the presence of these stereotypes is sufficient to defend the thesis of Sartre's anti-Semitism (Sartre as an anti-Semite despite himself). See 'The Jew in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*', pp. 208–15.
36. On the diffusion of physical stereotypes concerning the Jews within European culture at the turn of the century, see Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, New York: Routledge, 1991.
37. For the relation of Sartre's 'Jewish authenticity' to Heidegger's *Eigentlichkeit*, see Misscha Brumlik, 'Das verkörperte "Sein für die Anderen"', p. 95.
38. Bernard Lazare, *Le Fumier de Job*, Paris: Circé, 1990, p. 49.
39. Hannah Arendt, 'On humanity in dark times: Thoughts about Lessing', in *Men in Dark Times*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968, pp. 17–18.
40. Jean-François Sirinelli follows Philippe Burin in classifying Sartre's attitude under the category of 'constrained accommodation'. See *Deux Intellectuels dans le siècle: Sartre et Aron*, Paris: Fayard, 1995, p. 188.
41. Hook, 'Reflections on the Jewish question', pp. 481–2.
42. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Continuum, 1972.
43. Dwight MacDonald, 'The responsibility of peoples', *Politics* vol. 2, no. 3 (March 1945), pp. 82–93, republished in *The Responsibility of Peoples*, London: Victor Gollancz, 1957. I have compared MacDonald and Sartre in *L'Histoire déchirée*, ch. 8.

44. See Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, New York: Dial Press, 1947.
45. Bataille, 'Sartre', p. 226.

3. On the Edge of Understanding

1. See Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, London: Verso, 1983.
2. According to the statements attributed by Roger Callois to Alexandre Kojève, cited in Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Ist die Geschichte zu Ende?*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1989, p. 77.
3. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, London: Michael Joseph, 1994, ch. 1.
4. See on this issue Enzo Traverso, 'Trotzki und Benjamin: Wahlverwandschaften', *Das Argument* no. 222 (1997), pp. 697–705.
5. See Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London: New Left Books, 1976, and the concluding chapters of Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950*, Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973.
6. Anders replaces Ernst Bloch's ontology of the *not yet* (*Noch-Nicht-Sein*) with an anti-Utopia of waiting for annihilation (*noch-nicht-Nichtsein*). See Konrad-Paul Liessman, *Günther Anders*, Hamburg: Junius Verlag, Hamburg, 1993, p. 92. From this point of view, Anders' *Obsolescence of Man* can be seen as the antithesis of Ernst Bloch's *Principle of Hope* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).
7. Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983, Bd. I, p. 574.
8. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M, 1986, p. 1.
9. Paul Connerton, *The Tragedy of Enlightenment: An Essay on the Frankfurt School*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 114.

10. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 6.
11. According to Michael Löwy and Eleni Varikas, Adorno carried out a ‘dialectical problematisation of the notion of progress’, without however ‘clearing it off his conceptual horizon’ (“L'esprit du monde sur les ailes d'une fusée”: la critique du progrès chez Adorno’, *Revue des Sciences Humaines* no. 229 (1993), pp. 53, 59).
12. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, p. 6.
13. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1955, p. 4.
14. Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. I. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 1985.
15. Interview with Günther Anders by Mathias Greffrath (1979), *Das Günther Anders Lesebuch*, Zurich: Diogenes, 1984, p. 319. See also Anders's *Besuch im Hades: Auschwitz und Breslau*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 1979.
16. Georg Lukács, *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft*, Berlin: Afbau-Verlag, 1954.
17. See pp. 20 above. Marxists' abandonment of the critique of industrial modernity is noted and criticised in Ernst Bloch's *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963.
18. Among the writings produced in this period by the Frankfurt School and marked by the Jewish genocide, in addition to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, we can mention here the first fragments in *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1974) written by Adorno in 1944, and Löwenthal's essay ‘Terror’s atomization of man: The crisis of the individual’, *Commentary*, January 1946.
19. Max Horkheimer, ‘Die Juden und Europa’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* vol. 8 (1939); Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933–1944*, London: Frank Cass and Co., 1967, p. 125. For an overall analysis of the Frankfurt School's changing approach to anti-Semitism, see Martin Jay, ‘The Jews and the Frankfurt School: Critical theory's analysis of anti-Semitism’, in *Permanent Exiles: Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, pp. 90–100, and above all Michael Schäfer, *Die Rationalität des Nationalsozialismus: Zur Kritik*

- philosophischer Faschismustheorien am Beispiel der Kritischen Theorie*, Weinheim: Beltz-Athenäum, 1994.
20. See Hilberg's autobiography, in which he fully acknowledges his debt to Franz Neumann, whose student he had been in New York at the end of the war (Raul Hilberg, *Unerbetene Erinnerung: Der Weg eines Holocaust-Forschers*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1994, pp. 54–8).
 21. This resignation would not be shared by Marcuse (nor in his own way by Anders). On that conflict that Marcuse had with Horkheimer and Adorno in 1969, see Rolf Wiggershaus, *L'École de Francfort: Histoire, développement, signification*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993, pp. 612–17. It is worth remembering that when the students of Frankfurt occupied the Institute for Social Research in 1968, they renamed it the 'Walter Benjamin Institute'.
 22. See Tariq Ali's interview with Mandel (1989), 'The luck of a crazy youth', *New Left Review* no. 213 (1995).
 23. Ernest Germain (Mandel), 'Postface: La question juive au lendemain de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale', in Abraham Léon, *La conception matérialiste de la question juive*, Paris, Editions 'Pionniers', 1946, p. i. The English edition – Abram Leon, *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970 – does not include Mandel's afterword.
 24. Mandel, 'Postface', p. i.
 25. Mandel, 'Postface', p. ii.
 26. He even went so far as to write, 'The death trains have set off again, in the opposite direction and with a different human cargo' (Mandel, 'Postface', p. ii). Just in passing and purely as an anecdote, without implying the least intellectual affinity, we mention that a similar analogy was made at the time by Martin Heidegger in his 1947 letters to Marcuse (see Jürgen Habermas, 'Martin Heidegger: L'oeuvre et l'engagement', *Textes et contextes*, Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1994, pp. 193–4).
 27. Mandel, 'Postface', p. ii.
 28. Mandel, 'Postface', p. xii.
 29. See in particular Mandel, *Du fascisme*, Paris: Maspero, 1974. By contrast his book *Trotsky* includes a very short

reference to Trotsky's 1938 prediction of the extermination of the Jews during a new world war (*Trotsky: A Study in the Dynamic of His Thought*, London: Verso, 1979, p. 103). The change of perspective seems obvious in his last book on the Russian revolutionary, in which Mandel devotes a whole chapter to the Jewish question (*Trotsky as Alternative*, London: Verso, 1995, ch. 10).

30. See Enzo Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question: The History of a Debate 1843–1943*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994, ch. 9.
31. For an extremely clear and useful synthesis of the historiographical debate on Nazism, see Ian Kershaw, *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*, London: Edward Arnold, 1989.
32. Mandel, *The Meaning of the Second World War*, London: Verso, 1986, p. 92. See also Mandel's essay 'Material, social and ideological preconditions for the Nazi genocide', in Gilbert Achcar, ed., *The Marxism of Ernest Mandel*, London: Verso, 1999 (forthcoming), and his article 'Zum Historikerstreit: Ursprung, Wesen, Einmaligkeit und Reproduzierbarkeit des Dritten Reiches', *Der zweite Weltkrieg*, Frankfurt: ISP Verlag, 1991, p. 209.
33. Mandel, 'Material, social and ideological preconditions'.
34. Mandel, 'Material, social and ideological preconditions'. This line of argument shows a certain affinity with that developed by Hannah Arendt in her *Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1973), in which she cites Burke, Gobineau and the ideologues of nineteenth-century colonialism (above all French and British) as forerunners of Nazism on a cultural level. But Arendt's name almost never appears in Mandel's writings.
35. Mandel, *Meaning of the Second World War*, p. 90. See also on this aspect of the problem, Domenico Losurdo, *Il revisionismo storico: Problemi e miti*, Bari: Laterza, 1996, particularly ch. 5.
36. Mandel, 'Material, social and ideological preconditions'.
37. Mandel, 'Zum Historikerstreit', p. 223.
38. Mandel, 'Zum Historikerstreit', p. 239.

39. Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, London: Verso, 1978; Mandel, ‘Zum Historikerstreit’, p. 225; Mandel, ‘Material, social and ideological preconditions’.
40. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1964, p. xiii.
41. Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, p. 506.
42. Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, New York: Dial Press, 1947; Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, London: Little, Brown and Co., 1996. These are obviously two very different ways of analysing ‘German guilt’, both because of their different historical contexts and because of their different ways of arguing. On Goldhagen, see ch. 6 below.
43. For a synthesis of this discussion, see Jürgen Kocka, ‘German history before Hitler: The debate about the German *Sonderweg*’, *Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 23 (1988).
44. See David Blackburn and Geoff Ely, *The Peculiarities of German History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.
45. Mandel, ‘Zum Historikerstreit’, pp. 240–1. Mandel particularly stressed this point in his article ‘Trockij e la lotta contro il fascismo’, *Il Ponte* no. 11/12 (1980).
46. Hans Spatzenegger, ed., *Das verspielte ‘Kapital’?: Die marxistische Ideologie nach dem Scheitern des realen Sozialismus*, Salzburg: Verlag Anton Pustet, 1991, p. 219 (cf. E. Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*); Norman Geras, ‘Marxists before the Holocaust: Trotsky, Deutscher, Mandel’, in *The Marxism of Ernest Mandel*. Geras is probably right to criticise my analysis of the development of Trotsky’s thought (*The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, pp. 201–4) for overemphasising the modern dimension of fascism, whereas Trotsky in fact managed to grasp the combination of old and new forms.
47. See Louis Dupeux, ““Révolution conservatrice” et hitlérisme: Essai sur la nature de l’hitlérisme”, in Dupeux, ed., *La ‘Révolution conservatrice’ dans l’Allemagne de Weimar*, Paris: Kimé, 1992, pp. 201–14; Rolf Peter Sieferle, ‘Modernität, Technokratie und Nationalsozialismus’, in *Die konservative Revolution*, Frankfurt:

- Fischer, 1995, pp. 198–221; Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, New York: Cambridge University Press, New York, 1984, particularly ch. 8.
48. See Moishe Postone, ‘Nationalsozialismus und Antisemitismus: Ein theoretische Versuch’, in Dan Diner, ed., *Zivilisationsbruch: Denken nach Auschwitz*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988, pp. 242–54.
49. See above all Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1947, ch. 3. See also Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno*, London: Verso, 1985, pp. 238–41.
50. This is the thesis defended by an historian like Heinrich August Winkler in his essay ‘Deutschland vor Hitler’, in Walter Pehle, ed., *Der historische Ort des Nationalsozialismus*, Frankfurt: Fischer Verlag, 1990, pp. 11–30, and which inspires the work of George L. Mosse, notably in a book that has become a classic, *The Crisis of German Ideology: The Cultural Origins of the Third Reich*, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1968.
51. ‘Without the spiraling and unsuccessful absolute war, which was in essence a crusade, the inconceivable could not have become conceivable, let alone possible and practicable.’ Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The ‘Final Solution’ in History*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988, pp. 35, 12.
52. See Josiane Olff-Nathan, ed., *La science sous le Troisième Reich*, Paris: Seuil, 1993, and Mario Biagioli, ‘Science, modernity and the Final Solution’, in Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
53. See on this subject the authoritative book by Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.
54. Mandel, ‘Zum Historikerstreit’, p. 225. Cf. Ulrich Herbert’s article, ‘Arbeit und Vernichtung: Ökonomisches Interesse und Primat der “Weltanschauung” in Nationalsozialismus’, in Dan Diner, ed., *Ist der*

- Nationalismus Geschichte?: Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit*, Frankfurt: Fischer 1987, pp. 198–236.
55. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985, vol. 2, pp. 527, 529, 542.
56. This is the conclusion of the essay cited above, Herbert, ‘Arbeit und Vernichtung’, p. 236. It is shared by US historian Christopher Browning, *The Path to Genocide*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 76. On the subject of the ‘economic rationality’ of the Jewish genocide, particularly starting from the interpretation given by historians Götz Aly and Susanne Heym, see the critical essays collected in Wolfgang Schneider, ed., *Vernichtungspolitik: Eine Debatte über den Zusammenhang von Sozialpolitik und Genozid im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland*, Hamburg: Junius Verlag, 1991.
57. See Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish Question*, pp. 234–6.
58. Mandel, *Du fascisme*, p. 49. Cf. Tim Mason, ‘Das Prinzip der Politik’, *Das Argument* no. 41 (1966). The thesis of the ‘primacy of the political’ in National Socialism goes back to the Frankfurt School economist Friedrich Pollock, ‘Is National Socialism a new order’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung/Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* no. 9 (1941), pp. 200–25. See on this subject the work cited above, Schäfer, *Die ‘Rationalität’ des Nationalsozialismus*, pp. 61–71.
59. According to Dan Diner (‘Perspektivenwahl und Geschichtserfahrung: Bedarf es eine besonderen Historik des Nationalsozialismus?’, in Pehle, *Das historische Ort des Nationalsozialismus*, p. 112), this counter-rationality of Nazism, culminating in the system of extermination camps – factories whose product was death rather than value – is what makes it problematic to equate the Jewish genocide with the crimes of Stalinism. Though death was one of the essential characteristics of the gulag, it was not its *goal*. See also Dan Diner, ‘Nationalsozialismus und Stalinismus: Über Gedächtnis, Willkür, Arbeit und Tod’, in *Kreisläufe, Nationalsozialismus und Gedächtnis*, Berlin: Berlin Verlag, 1995, p. 72.

60. See Konrad Kwiet, 'Historians of the German Democratic Republic on antisemitism and persecution', *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* vol. 21 (1976). This economic determinism was pushed to an absurd conclusion towards the end of the 1970s in the denial of the Shoah by a French extreme-left sect, created by former followers of Antonio Bordiga, around the bookshop La Vieille Taupe (Old Mole). Their 'theory' was based more or less on the following line of argument: Auschwitz was a work camp following the criteria of capitalist exploitation, so it cannot have been created exclusively in order to kill human beings, without producing profit. In this way denial of the Shoah, one of the most glaring manifestations of modern anti-Semitism, could be defended for a time by people inspired by a particularly caricatural and perverse kind of anti-capitalism. (It was not difficult to detect in them the remains of a left-wing anti-Semitic tradition which has quite old roots in a country like France, from Toussenel to Proudhon and from Blanqui to the early Bernard Lazare.) In light of this extreme error, the weakness of Marxist thinking about the Jewish genocide seems all the more serious. See on this subject Alain Bihr's illuminating essay, 'Les mésaventures du sectarisme révolutionnaire', in Bihr and Didier Daeninckx, eds, *Négationnistes: Les chiffonniers de l'histoire*, Paris: Syllepse/Golias, 1997. The definitive work on denial of the Shoah remains, of course, Pierre Vidal-Naquet's *The Assassins of Memory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.
61. Jean Améry, *Par-delà le crime et le châtiment*, Paris: Actes Sud, 1995, p. 15.
62. Primo Levi, 'Il buco nero di Auschwitz', *La Stampa*, 27 January 1987; Primo Levi, 'Appendice', *Si c'est un homme*, Paris: Julliard-Presses, 1987, p. 211.
63. Mandel, 'Zum Historikerstreit', p. 228.
64. See Michael Löwy, 'Ernest Mandel's revolutionary humanism', in Achcar, *The Marxism of Ernest Mandel*.
65. See on this point the whole first part of Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx l'intempestif: Grandeur et misères d'une aventure critique (XIXe et XXe siècles)*, Paris: Fayard, 1995.

66. Mandel, 'Die zukünftige Funktion des Marxismus', in *Das verspielte 'Kapital'*, p. 173.
67. Isaac Deutscher, *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, London: Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 163–4.

4. The Uniqueness of Auschwitz

1. Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, London: Michael Joseph, 1994, p. 12.
2. Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Barbarism: a user's guide', in *On History*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997, p. 254.
3. See the statistics (which distinguish carefully between military and civilian deaths) given as an appendix to Alan Bullock, *Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives*, London: Fontana Press, 1993.
4. The model I use here was first put forward in Wolfgang Kraushaar, 'Sich aufs Eis wagen: Plädoyer für eine Auseinandersetzung mit der Totalitarismustheorie', *Mittelweg* no. 36 (1993), p. 6.
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1976, p. 186. Citing a passage from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, 'the most illuminating work on actual race experience in Africa', Arendt mentions 'the Boers' extermination of Hottentot tribes' and 'the decimation of the peaceful Congo population (from 20 to 40 million reduced to 8 million people)' as 'the most terrible massacres in recent history' (*ibid.*, p. 185). Italian historian Domenico Losurdo emphasises this point, interpreting the Nazis' violence and genocide during the Second World War as the introduction to Europe of all the exterminationist methods used in the classical colonial wars of the nineteenth century. Citing Hitler's *Table Talk* (conversation of 22 July and 8 August 1942, Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1951, pp. 512–13, 544), he suggests that the *Lebensraum* in Eastern Europe was conceived by National Socialism as the Third Reich's Far West or Africa (Losurdo, *Il revisionismo storico: Problemi e miti*, Bari: Laterza, 1996, pp. 212–18). But Losurdo does

not analyse the consequences of this approach. First, a colonial war carried out in Europe, in the midst of the twentieth century, using the modern tools of destruction of a developed industrial society, generated a new dimension of violence: tens of millions of victims, and a genocide perpetrated not for a century or in several decades but in a few years. Second, the Jews were not, like Africans or Native Americans, a colonial people, but a people at the origins of Western civilisation, who took part in German culture from the Enlightenment onwards and whose members had been German citizens for several decades. Obviously this fact does not introduce a hierarchical scale in the history of genocide, but it indicates a new stage attained by the violence of capitalism: no longer destruction by a conquering imperialism imposing the rule of Western civilisation on the extra-European world, but the beginning of this civilisation's collapse (what Adorno and Horkheimer called 'the self-destruction of Reason' [*die Selbstzerstörung der Vernunft*]).

6. On the barbarisation of social and political life produced by the First World War, see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; and Antonio Gibelli, *L'officina della guerra: La Grande Guerra e le trasformazioni del mondo mentale*, Turin: Bollati-Boringhieri, 1990. For one interesting analysis of the historical relationship between the Great War and the Final Solution, see Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
7. Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, Munich: C.H. Beck, 1985–86, vol. 1, p. 239 and vol. 2, p. 404.
8. Jean-Michel Chaumont, *La concurrence des victimes: Génocide, identité, reconnaissance*, Paris: La Découverte, 1997, p. 201.
9. George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997, ch. VIII.
10. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, New York: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 279.

11. Saul Friedländer, *Memory, History and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 82–3.
12. Eberhard Jäckel, ‘Die elende Praxis der Untersteller’, in Jäckel, ed., ‘*Historikerstreit*’: *Die Dokumentation über die Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nazionalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung*, Munich: Piper, 1987, p. 118.
13. Nicolas Werth, ‘Un Etat contre son peuple: Violences, répressions, terreurs en Union Soviétique’, in Stéphane Courtois, ed., *Le livre noir du communisme: Crimes, terreur, répression*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1997, p. 178.
14. Nicolas Werth, ‘Gulag: les vrais chiffres’, *L’Histoire*, no. 169 (1993), p. 42. In his contribution to the *Livre noir du communisme* quoted above, Werth underscores the productive function of Soviet camps, adding that ‘being sent to a camp did not in general constitute a one-way ticket’ (p. 229). According to Werth, the total number of those who died in the gulag in twenty years was one third of the number of deaths due to the forced collectivisation of agriculture, which took place in only three years. The opening of the Soviet archives has led to a downward revision of the figure of 20 million deaths from Stalinism given by Robert Conquest in 1968 (Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). This kind of ‘revision’ is to be expected. In the aftermath of the war the Polish authorities said that 4 million people had died at Auschwitz-Birkenau. We know today that between 1 and 1.5 million people died there.
15. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
16. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985, vol. 3, p. 1219.
17. Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The ‘Final Solution’ in History*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.
18. Christopher Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 75–6.
19. Ian Kershaw, ‘Totalitarianism revisited: Nazism and Stalinism in comparative perspective’, *Tel Aviv*

Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte no. 23 (1994), pp. 39–40. This is also the conclusion Alan Bullock has reached in his comparative biography of the twentieth century's two great dictators, *Hitler and Stalin*, p. 1056: 'a comparison between the two is valid', but 'nowhere [in the Stalinist system] was there a counterpart to the Holocaust ... in which mass murder became not an instrument but an end in itself'.

20. Sonia Combe, 'S.K. Evtigneev, roi d'Ozerlag', in Alain Brossat, ed., *Ozerlag 1937–1964: Le système du Goulag, traces perdues, mémoires réveillées d'un camp sibérien*, Paris: Editions Autrement, 1991, pp. 226–7. Similar conclusions have been drawn by Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.
21. Dan Diner, 'Zwischen Aporie und Apologie: Über Grenzen der Historisierbarkeit des Nationalsozialismus', in Diner, ed., *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte?: Zu Historierung und Historikerstreit*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987, p. 73.
22. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 14.
23. Jean-Michel Chaumont, 'Connaissance ou reconnaissance?: Les enjeux du débat sur la singularité historique de la Shoah', *Le Débat* no. 82 (1994), p. 87.
24. A thesis of this kind is defended by Steven Katz, 'The uniqueness of the Holocaust: The historical dimension', in Alan S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique?: Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*, Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996, pp. 19–38.
25. Eric J. Hobsbawm, 'Identity history is not enough', in *On History*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997, p. 277.
26. Yosef Haym Hierusalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982.
27. See the correspondence between Saul Friedländer and Martin Broszat on the subject of the historicisation of National Socialism, in Peter Baldwin, ed., *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust and the Historians' Debate*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1990, p. 129.

28. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London: Routledge, 1985.
29. See in particular Weber's lecture in Munich in 1919, 'Politics as a vocation', in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1958, p. 128. On Weber and Auschwitz, see Detlev Peukert, 'Die Genesis der "Endlösung" aus dem Geist der Wissenschaft', in *Max Webers Diagnose der Moderne*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989, pp. 102–21; and Enzo Traverso, *L'Histoire déchirée: Essai sur Auschwitz et les intellectuels*, Paris: Cerf, 1997, pp. 45–50.
30. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Réflexions sur le génocide: Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent, III*, Paris: La Découverte, 1995, p. 288.
31. *Le Monde*, 16 November 1993. On this subject see Yves Ternon, 'Lettre ouverte à Bernard Lewis et à quelques autres', in Leslie A. Davis, *La province de la mort*, Brussels: Complexe, 1994.
32. See Arno J. Mayer, 'Memory and history: On the poverty of remembering and forgetting the Judeocide', *Radical History Review* no. 56 (1993), pp. 5–20.
33. Alain Finkielkraut, 'La victoire posthume de Hitler', in Jean Gillibert and Perel Wilgowicz, eds, *L'Ange exterminateur*, Brussels: Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1995, p. 261.
34. See Karl Heinz Roth, 'Revisionist tendencies in historical research into German fascism', *International Review of Social History* vol. 30, no. 3 (1994), pp. 428–55.
35. Nolte presented his theses in several articles, which set off the German 'historians' debate' in the mid-1980s. He later developed and clarified them in his book *Der europäische Bürgerkrieg 1917–1945: Nationalsozialismus und Bolchewismus*, Frankfurt: Ullstein-Propyläen, 1987.
36. Joachim Fest, 'Die geschuldete Erinnerung', in Jäckel, 'Historikerstreit', p. 103.
37. James E. Mace, 'The man-made famine of 1933 in Soviet Ukraine', in Serbyn and Krawchenko, eds, *Famine in Ukraine, 1932–1933*, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1986, p. 11, cited in Barbara B. Green, 'Stalinist terror

- and the question of genocide: The great famine', in Rosenbaum, *Is the Holocaust Unique?*, p. 141.
38. See in particular De Felice's introduction to the penultimate edition (1987) of his now classic work *Storia degli ebrei italiani sotto il fascismo*, Turin: Einaudi, 1993, pp. xxix–xxx. His statement about fascist Italy's exemption from the 'shadow of the Holocaust' appears in a shocking interview published in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 27 December 1987 (reprinted in Jared Jacobelli, ed., *Il fascismo e gli storici oggi*, Bari: Laterza, 1988, p. 6). For a parallel between Nolte's and De Felice's 'revisionism', see Wolfgang Schieder, 'Zeitgeschichtliche Verschränkungen über Ernst Nolte und Renzo De Felice', *Annali dell'Istituto italo-germanico di Trento* vol. 17 (1991), pp. 359–76.
39. Nicola Tranfaglia, *Un passato scomodo: Fascismo e postfascismo*, Rome: Laterza, 1996, pp. 53–6.
40. Nicola Tranfaglia, *La prima guerra mondiale e il fascismo*, Turin: UTET, 1995, p. 670. A comparable thesis is defended in Enzo Collotti, 'Il fascismo nella storiografia: La dimensione europea', in Angelo Del Boca, Massimo Legnani and Mario G. Rossi, eds, *Il regime fascista*, Bari: Laterza, 1995, pp. 17–44.
41. As we are rightly reminded in Tzvetan Todorov, *Les abus de la mémoire*, Paris: Arléa, 1995, p. 45.

5. The Debt

1. Marek Edelman, *The Ghetto Fights*, New York: American Representation of the General Jewish Workers' Union of Poland, 1946, p. 8.
2. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Jews: History, Memory, and the Present*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 127.
3. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985, vol. 3, p. 1030.
4. See the essays assembled by Karel Bartosek, René Gallissot and Denis Peschanski in the anthology *De l'exil à la résistance: Réfugiés et immigrés d'Europe centrale en*

- France 1933–1945*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 1989.
5. On the Jewish resistance in Poland, see Yejuda Bauer, ‘Résistance et passivité juives face à l’Holocauste’, in François Furet, ed., *L’Allemagne nazie et le génocide juif*, Paris: Gallimard, Seuil, 1985, pp. 404–19.
 6. According to Hannah Arendt, there was only a small nucleus of Jewish resistance; the miracle was precisely that this nucleus existed at all. See *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York: Penguin, 1977, pp. 122–3.
 7. Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, Jacob Sloan, ed., New York: Schocken Books, 1974, p. 213.
 8. See Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982, p. 60.
 9. See among many other works Günter Schwarberg, *Das Getto: Geburtstagsspaziergang in die Hölle*, Göttingen: Steidl, 1989, which assembles the images recorded by the German photographer H. Jöst in September 1942.
 10. Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, p. 194.
 11. Adam Czerniakow, ‘Journal du ghetto de Varsovie’, *Les Temps Modernes* no. 550 (May 1992), p. 57. See the complete version of this text: *Journal du ghetto de Varsovie*, Raul Hilberg and Stanislaw Staron eds, Paris: La Découverte, 1996.
 12. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah*, Paris: Fayard, 1985, p. 217.
 13. See Ionas Turnov’s eyewitness account, originally published in Buenos Aires in 1948, *C’était ainsi 1939–1943: La vie dans le ghetto de Varsovie*, Paris: Austral, 1995.
 14. For a summary of the historiographic debate over the controversial role of the *Judenräte*, see Michael R. Marrus, *The Holocaust in History*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, pp. 113–21.
 15. Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, p. 321.
 16. Marek Edelman and Hanna Krall, *Mémoires du ghetto de Varsovie*, Paris: Editions du Scribe, 1983, p. 54.
 17. Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, p. 348. For a good summary of the course of the uprising, see Annette

- Wiewiora, ‘L’insurrection du ghetto de Varsovie’, *L’Histoire* no. 164 (March 1993), pp. 34–44.
18. See Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler’s ‘Final Solution’*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.
 19. Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, p. 257.
 20. See Teresa Prekerova, ‘L’action de la résistance polonaise en faveur des Juifs: Zegota’, in Joël Kotek, ed., *L’insurrection du ghetto de Varsovie*, Brussels: Complexe, 1994, pp. 63–72.
 21. Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, ch. 11.
 22. Henri Raczymow, ‘La dette’, preface to Jarek M. Rymkiewicz, *La dernière gare: Umschlagplatz*, Paris: Laffont, 1989, p. 10.
 23. See in particular Adam Rayski’s contribution to the anthology edited by Denis Peschanski, *Qui savait quoi?*, Paris: La Découverte, 1987. On the uprising’s repercussions in the French workers’ movement (particularly among the Communists of the Immigrant Work Force (MOI), see Annette Wiewiora, ‘Les échos de la révolte en France’, in Kotek, ed., *L’insurrection du ghetto de Varsovie*, pp. 87–98. On the debates it led to within the Trotskyist Resistance in Belgium, see Maxime Steinberg, ‘L’écho de la révolte en Belgique: une lecture paradoxale’ (*ibid.*, pp. 99–116).
 24. Cited in Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, p. 363. On Zygielbojm’s suicide, see also Henri Minczeles, *Histoire générale du Bund: Un mouvement révolutionnaire juif*, Paris: Austral, 1995, pp. 418–20.
 25. Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, pp. 295–6.

6. The Shoah, Historians and the Public Use of History

1. Daniel J. Goldhagen, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*, London: Little, Brown and Co., 1996. The publisher’s blurb is taken from the inside front flap. Further citations from the book are given in parentheses in the text.

2. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985.
3. Arno J. Mayer, *Why Did the Heavens Not Darken?: The 'Final Solution' in History*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.
4. Götz Aly, 'Endlösung': *Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an der europäischen Juden*, Frankfurt: Fischer, 1995.
5. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: HarperCollins, 1992.
6. Zigmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Holocaust*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.
7. Mann, Niemöller and Barth were among the best-known Germans to speak out against Nazism. Goldhagen mentions Mann's ambiguous statements on the 'Jewish question', for example, without ever mentioning Mann's famous 'appeals to the Germans' during the Second World War, which forcefully denounced the Nazi regime's extermination of the European Jews.
8. Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933–1945*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, p. 269.
9. Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*, p. 277.
10. See above all the conclusions of Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men*. See also Browning's review of Goldhagen's book in *History and Memory*, 1996/1.
11. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.
12. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. 3, p. 1219.
13. This relativisation in Goldhagen's work of the gas chambers' role in the Jewish genocide is rightly stressed by Liliane Kandel, 'La lettre volée de Daniel J. Goldhagen ou "un révisionnisme radical"', *Les Temps Modernes* no. 592 (1997), pp. 42–4.
14. Raul Hilberg, 'Le phénomène Goldhagen', *Les Temps Modernes* no. 592 (1997), pp. 9–10.
15. See their collected critiques in Julius H. Schoeps, ed., *Ein Volk von Mördern?: Die Dokumentation zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse um die Rolle der Deutschen im Holocaust*,

Frankfurt: Campe, 1996. Zimmermann accuses Goldhagen of referring constantly to ‘the Germans’ in almost racial terms, a practice he finds unacceptable on a moral as well as scholarly level (p. 153). Jäckel deplores his recourse to ‘primitive stereotypes’, and even to forms of ‘biological collectivism’ (pp. 191–2). Wehler denounces Goldhagen’s attempt to ‘ethnicise’ the discussion and reproaches him with ‘quasi-racism’ (p. 200).

16. Goldhagen, ‘Reply to my critics’, *The New Republic* (29 April and 23 December 1996). Pierre Bouretz’s defence of Goldhagen also does not seem very convincing to me, though he is incomparably subtler than Goldhagen himself. Bouretz says we must concede that ‘with the exception of a few skids off the road, [Goldhagen’s] book does not turn all Germans into executioners any more than Weber [in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*] saw every Puritan as a future captain of industry’. Bouretz, ‘Daniel Goldhagen, la Shoah et l’Allemagne: Les piliers ont-ils vraiment tremblé?’, *Les Temps Modernes* no. 592 (1997), p. 31).
17. Robert Wistrich, ‘Helping Hitler’, *Commentary* (July 1996), p. 29.
18. John Dower, *War Without Mercy*, New York, 1986, p. 65, cited in Norman G. Finkelstein, ‘Daniel Jonah Goldhagen’s “crazy” thesis: a critique of Hitler’s Willing Executioners’, in Finkelstein and Ruth Bettina Birn, *A Nation on Trial: The Goldhagen Thesis and Historical Truth*, New York: Owl Books, 1998, pp. 65–6.
19. For example, he mixes together under the vague, odd heading of ‘Holocaust literature’ all those who defend the uniqueness of the Nazi genocide. He counterposes to ‘Holocaust literature’ the category of ‘Holocaust scholarship’, which tends to be historical and multicausal’, although he restricts himself in his essay to criticising Goldhagen’s interpretive model, without proposing any alternative.
20. Edouard Husson, *Une culpabilité ordinaire?: Hitler, les Allemands et la Shoah*, Paris: François-Xavier de Guibert, 1997, p. 140.

21. Jürgen Habermas, 'Geschichte ist ein Teil von Uns', *Die Zeit* no. 12 (14 March 1997), pp. 13–14.
22. Helmut Dahmer, 'Holocaust und Geschichtsschreibung: Nachlese zur Goldhagen-Kontroverse', *Archiv für die Geschichte des Widerstandes und der Arbeit*, Bochum: Germinal Verlag, 1998, p. 462.
23. 'Goldhagen thus endows anti-Semitism with a unique ontology, one that virtually defies historical analysis ... Thus all Gentiles are potential if not actual homicidal anti-Semites. The subtitle of Goldhagen's book is "Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust" but the subtext is "Ordinary Gentiles and the Holocaust"' (Finkelstein, 'Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's "crazy" thesis', pp. 94–5).
24. Pierre Bouretz, 'Daniel Goldhagen, la Shoah et l'Allemagne', p. 26.
25. The most radical version of a functionalist interpretation of the Shoah, German historian Hans Mommsen's, seems to reduce it to a sort of process without a subject, unplanned and 'improvised' in a spiral of 'cumulative radicalisation' whose final outcome was extermination. See above all Mommsen's essay 'The realization of the unthinkable' in his collection *From Weimar to Auschwitz*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991.
26. Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, New York: Dial Press, 1947.

Conclusion

1. Ernst Bloch, *On Karl Marx*, New York: Herder, 1970. See also on this point the brilliant essay by Norman Geras, *The Contract of Mutual Indifference: Political Philosophy after the Holocaust*, London: Verso, 1998.
2. Daniel Bensaïd, *Le pari mélancolique*, Paris: Fayard, 1997, pp. 244–58.
3. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history', in *Illuminations*, New York: Schocken Books, 1969, p. 256 (thesis vii).
4. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 260 (thesis xii).

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