

# INTRODUCTION

WALTER H. PEHLE AND RENÉ SCHLOTT



*I am not a man who gives in.*  
Raul Hilberg in Weimar, 1995

ANYONE WHO INVESTIGATES THE PERSECUTION and murder of the Jews during National Socialism and World War II knows the name of Raul Hilberg. His work, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, remains indispensable even today. There are many other texts, however, in which Raul Hilberg offers important contributions to various debates in this field. A few of these still relatively inaccessible texts are now published together in one collection in their original language.

This volume of Hilberg's texts also invites interested readers and Holocaust researchers to trace the development of his scientific work over more than five decades. The thirteen texts presented here were published between 1965, just a few years after the appearance of *The Destruction of the European Jews*, and 2007, the year Hilberg died. In them, Raul Hilberg not only reflects on the results of his research and the controversies it generated, but also describes his perception of the ways the Holocaust is remembered. And, finally, the texts recount Hilberg's own memories of archival visits gathering material for his research work. They convey a sense of how the true extent of what was then known as the "Final Solution" was only gradually understood through the difficult process of digesting tens of thousands of administrative and court files after World War II. They show how the Holocaust became the subject of academic study and how this research developed into its current, highly professionalized form.

Hilberg's scientific engagement with the Holocaust did not attract much interest from either the public or historians in its first few decades.<sup>1</sup> Hilberg sometimes grew frustrated, even bitter, about the international ignorance, but he never gave up his dedication to the research.

Only in the mid-1970s did attention to the Holocaust increase, first in the United States and then in Western Europe, and it was not until 1990, when the German paperback edition of *The Destruction of the European Jews* came out, that an international boom in Holocaust research began that lasted through the next decades up to the present. In recent years, a number of research centers have been founded all around the world, e.g., in Germany with Munich's Center for Holocaust Studies at the Institute of Contemporary History and with the creation of a chair for Holocaust research at Johann Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt. The founding of the internationally renowned research department of the Washington Holocaust Museum really propelled Hilberg forward, himself a long-time member of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council.

This selection by the editors from the multitude of his published texts focuses on Hilberg's intellectual interests as a Holocaust researcher. Among other topics, they deal with the bureaucracy of the Holocaust, the number of victims, the role of the *Judenräte* (Jewish councils), and the function of the railway and the police in the extermination process. The scholarly impulses extending from Hilberg's work remain remarkable and virulent almost a decade after his death.<sup>2</sup> They deserve to be readily accessible in one place to historians and the interested public in the new compilation offered here. Many of the debates influenced by Hilberg are not yet resolved. The texts presented can be quite revealing in light of these controversies.

Hilberg's work has had a lasting effect on Holocaust research, even if the field has grown significantly more international and refined over time.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the groundwork still needs to be deepened, a task taken up in the ambitious project *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, whose volumes are now available in English (*Persecution and Murder of the European Jews by Nazi Germany 1933–1945*) as well. This benchmark source edition will serve as a complement to Hilberg's source-saturated main work,<sup>4</sup> whose sources are chosen in accordance with Hilberg's triad of *perpetrators*, *victims*, and *bystanders*.<sup>5</sup> Hilberg, who constantly referred to his sources and who himself brought forth in 1971 a collection of sources that had never been

translated into other languages,<sup>6</sup> promoted this large edition in the planning phases of its publication, but did not live to see the appearance of the first volumes.

Raul Hilberg died in August 2007 after a short, severe illness. In April of the same year, he gave his last public address at his local synagogue in South Burlington, Vermont, and reviewed his research on the destruction of the European Jews that he had begun in 1948 and continued through to the end of his life. On 1 September 2019 he would have celebrated the eightieth anniversary of his arrival in the United States as a young Jewish-Austrian refugee. To commemorate this occasion this book is a tribute to Raul Hilberg's life work, which helped to lay the foundation for Holocaust research, and highlights his six decades of scholarly engagement with the National Socialists' murder of the Jews.

Isaac Deutscher doubted in 1968 that Hitler, Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka could ever be explained. Raul Hilberg helped to dispel that doubt somewhat, in his own words, by writing "footnotes after Auschwitz" (see chapter 9), that is, by approaching the subject analytically using strict scientific methods. And yet: "At the end, nothing remains but despair and doubt about everything, because for Hilberg there is only recognition, perhaps also a grasp, but certainly no understanding."<sup>7</sup> In his parliamentary speech on the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war on 8 May 1945, German historian Heinrich August Winkler emphasized the particular significance of Raul Hilberg and included him in a list of distinguished Holocaust researchers: "Decades had to go by in Germany before the Holocaust was seen as the central fact of German history of the twentieth century, not least thanks to the groundbreaking research of Jewish scholars such as Joseph Wulf, Gerald Reitlinger, Raul Hilberg and Saul Friedländer."<sup>8</sup>

## The Texts

This book starts with an essay published in 1980, "The Anatomy of the Holocaust," which gave the volume its programmatic title. Research into the aim, form, and structure of the Holocaust was a life-long scholarly engagement for Raul Hilberg, traceable throughout his body of work. As a political scientist, Hilberg was always focused on the *how* of the National Socialists' genocide of the European Jews, in order to reveal the mechanisms that allowed a decimation of such

magnitude, and to grasp the bureaucratic functioning of the perpetrator apparatus. His dissertation, submitted in 1955 to Columbia University and published in 1961, “The Destruction of the European Jews,” was inspired by the work of his teachers Hans Rosenberg and Franz Neumann and analyzes the “machinery of destruction” as divided into different phases. In this volume’s first text, Hilberg discusses the importance of Neumann’s work for his own understanding, and presents his three-phase model of *definition*, *concentration*, and *physical extermination*, a model influential even today.

Only once did Hilberg grapple with the *why* of the Holocaust. The second work in this collection was originally written for a volume that was never published, commemorating his dissertation advisor Franz Neumann who died in a car accident in Switzerland in 1954. In it, Hilberg explores the ultimately unconvincing attempts to explain the Holocaust that resorted to blaming the essential qualities of the victims and perpetrators. Hilberg announced after his dissertation that he was planning to put forth a volume covering the reasons for the destruction of the Jews, but nothing appeared after the first essay came out in 1965.

Hilberg was much more interested in the interpretation of the Holocaust as an administrative process and added new categories to his analysis of the bureaucratic annihilation apparatus and the characters of its bureaucrats. Two examples are the railway and the police, whose roles he analyzed at a conference in Paris in 1980—his paper is the third text in this collection. Christopher Browning was also present at the conference and learned about the role of the police in the murder of the Jews from Hilberg’s presentation. In 1992, he put forward his groundbreaking study *Ordinary Men* about a German police battalion in Poland. Aside from his historical engagement with the Holocaust, Hilberg always tried to explain the meaning of the event and its consequences for the present day, for instance in his 1980 essay “The Significance of the Holocaust” (the fourth chapter here), which comes from a presentation given at the San José conference in 1979. At the end of his scientific career, Hilberg was aware that his historiographic work on the Holocaust was destined to remain incomplete and that the research process was more a journey than a destination, as he expressed in the fifth chapter here. US President Ronald Reagan’s controversial 1985 visit to the Bitburg soldiers’ cemetery prompted Hilberg to submit a contribution to an anthology (see chapter six) in which he contemplated not only the national memorial culture in

Germany, but also the participation of the German army in the destruction of the Jews—a good decade before the “army exhibition” (*Wehrmachtsausstellung*) visualizing this theme was to spark a great public debate in the country.

Hilberg himself also incited controversies with his work, some of which are ongoing. In addition to his skepticism of the Jewish resistance in the Holocaust, particularly his view of the *Judenräte* as “instruments” of the Germans in the murder of the Jews is hotly debated. In a discussion of Isaiah Trunk’s fundamental work *Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation*, which came out in the United States in 1972, Hilberg modified his previously staunch position. In this essay (chapter 7 of this book), he points again to the diary kept by Adam Czerniaków, chair of the Judenrat in the Warsaw ghetto from 1939 to 1942, whose records Hilberg published in an English translation in 1979.<sup>9</sup> Contributors to the edition besides Hilberg included a Polish-speaking colleague from the University of Vermont, Stanislaw Staron, and Josef Kermisz, who worked for Israel’s Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center.

Although Hilberg’s relationship with his Israeli colleagues was initially quite tense, not least because his dissertation was rejected there<sup>10</sup> and ultimately torn up in a review after its publication,<sup>11</sup> the relationship gradually improved later on. In 1977, Hilberg first participated in a conference in Jerusalem, where he spoke about the *Judenräte*, their “illusions,” and their roots in Jewish history—the eighth chapter in this volume. In terms of content, Hilberg’s position was still light years away from that of the historians at Yad Vashem, and Hilberg was subjected to harsh criticism at the conference from Gideon Hausner, former chief prosecutors at the trial of Adolf Eichmann and then chairman of the council of Yad Vashem. The adversaries were thus nevertheless now on speaking terms.

Although Hilberg, who experienced the “Anschluss” of Austria in his hometown Vienna at the age of eleven and the November Pogrom of 1938 and was thus in a certain sense himself a survivor of the Nazi terror, he remained skeptical with regard to the source value of survivor reports—an attitude still debated. In 1988, he expanded upon his reservations for the volume *Writing and the Holocaust*, the ninth chapter here, in which he contemplated both the sources and the language with which the murder of the Jews was described.

In 1979, Hilberg returned to Yad Vashem, this time as a member of a delegation led by Elie Wiesel, who was commissioned by US Presi-

dent Jimmy Carter to develop a concept for a Holocaust Museum in the United States. To this end, the commission traveled to a number of places, including Poland and the Soviet Union, where Hilberg saw for the first time the actual places of extermination and in Warsaw found the grave of Czerniaków. In 1982, he published his very personal memories from this trip—the tenth text here.

Although by the end of the war Hilberg had decided for at least four decades not to set foot again on German soil, he traveled to West Germany in 1976 to access files for his research. The Jewish exile and former US soldier Hilberg's ambivalent relationship to the Germans at this time can be seen in the travel report that he published three years after the trip in the Jewish opinion magazine *Midstream*, found here as the eleventh chapter.

The twelfth text presents the minutes from a discussion circle on psychohistory. The well-regarded US psychiatrist Robert Lifton (b. 1926) had invited Hilberg to his summer house in Wellfleet on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. On this occasion, Hilberg, almost sixty at the time, spoke for the first time about his own biography and reflected on his life as a Holocaust researcher.

The collection concludes with a presentation that Hilberg gave at a conference in 2005 at Yad Vashem. In it, he examines the historiographic history of the Holocaust and reviews the results of his lifelong research. He ends with the words, "And, looking back, I am extremely gratified that we are making a far greater effort than I ever imagined possible."<sup>12</sup>

## Remarks from the Editors

This collection of texts by Raul Hilberg is based on the original English-language versions. The majority of them are presentations that were later printed as part of conference publications. Because Hilberg tended to speak without written remarks, the texts are based on his notes, and he reviewed the articles before they went to press. The language and structure correspond to that of an oral presentation; a few, therefore, have no notes or references.

Marginalia present in the original documents, such as typographical or punctuation errors in proper names and transposed numerals, were corrected without notation in the text. The correct Polish spelling of places like Łódź or Bełżec was not used in this book because during the German occupation their names appear without special

characters: e.g., Belzec was a German death camp close to but different from the Polish village of Bełżec. Deviations from the academic norm that were obviously intended by Hilberg were kept as they were. All editorial changes to the text are noted in brackets. These include, but are not limited to, updates and completions of the citations and bibliographical entries. Additional information given by the editors is marked with an asterisk in the lower margins.

The direct language and at times laconic tone with which Hilberg talked about the Holocaust are still recognizable, however. He himself once explained that his idiosyncratic writing style made up of short, consecutive sentences was inspired by the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

The chapters are organized following a loosely structured thematic grouping. The various rubrics are named according to the main theme of the texts in each group. The volume is not laid out such that the chapters build on each other or follow an overarching plotline. The interested reader can open the book to any section and begin reading. Repetitions of episodes or arguments in the various chapters were therefore consciously preserved without alteration. They may appear redundant over the course of the entire book, but they have their place in each chapter. The reader can thus in many different ways be impressed and challenged by the thematic breadth and intellectual depth of Hilberg's thought.

## **Thanks**

The editors wish to thank the Hilberg family, especially Raul Hilberg's widow Gwendolyn, for her support of the German edition of this compilation that appeared in 2016 commemorating what would have been the ninetieth birthday of Raul Hilberg. Gwen Hilberg died two years later and this English edition is dedicated to her.

Thanks also to Anne-Sophie Kruppa and Viktor-Emanuel zu Sachsen who took over the compilation of the index that would have been so important to Raul Hilberg, as his lifelong desire was the scholarly use and development of his research.

Finally, we thank the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam (Leibniz-Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung – ZZf) and the Miller Center for Holocaust Studies at the University of Vermont—two important research institutions that made this publication possible.

**Walter H. Pehle** was born in 1941, studied in Cologne, Bonn, and Düsseldorf, and holds a doctorate in history. From 1977 to 2011, he was the editor for historical texts at the German publisher S. Fischer Verlag. Since 1988, he has served as the acquisitions editor for S. Fischer Verlag's series "The Age of National Socialism," which to date includes over 250 books. His own publications include, as volume editor, the anthology *November 1938: From "Reichskristallnacht" to Genocide* (Berg, 1991) and, together with Wolfgang Benz, *Encyclopedia of German Resistance to the Nazi Movement* (Continuum, 1997). He is an honorary professor at the University of Innsbruck.

**René Schlott** is a historian and researcher at the Leibniz Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam and teaches history at the universities of Potsdam and Berlin. He received his PhD in 2011 from the University of Giessen and is currently working as a postdoc on the first biography covering the life, work, and legacy of Raul Hilberg. In 2017, he was awarded a three-year scholarship (*Habilitationsstipendium*) from the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for his research project.

## Notes

1. See Nicolas Berg, "Phantasie der Bürokratie," describing Raul Hilberg's pioneer study on the destruction of the European Jews, in *50 Klassiker der Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Jürgen Danyel, Jan-Holger Kirsch, and Martin Sabrow (Göttingen, 2007), 71–75. Nicolas Berg, "Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung," *Moderne Zeit*, 3, (Göttingen, 2003 [Diss. Freiburg, 2001]).
2. This is clearly the case, as shown in the latest "inventory" of Holocaust research and the frequency of references to Raul Hilberg's works contained therein. Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, eds., *Der Holocaust: Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2015).
3. See Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, "Tendenzen und Probleme der neueren Holocaust-Forschung: Eine Einführung," in *Der Holocaust: Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung*, ed. Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw (Frankfurt am Main, 2015), 9–30.
4. Lorenz Jäger, "Die Sache selbst. Zum Forschungsstand: Hilberg, Aly und die Vernichtungspolitik," in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 January 2005.
5. Ulrich Herbert refers to this connection in an interview in *tageszeitung (taz)*, 25 January 2008. Raul Hilberg, *Täter, Opfer, Zuschauer: Die Vernichtung der Juden 1933–1945* (Frankfurt am Main, 1992).

6. Raul Hilberg, ed. *Documents of Destruction. Germany and Jewry 1933–1945* (Chicago, 1971).
7. H. G. Adler, cited in Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago 1996), 203.
8. Deutscher Bundestag, “Rede von Prof. Dr. Heinrich August Winkler zum 70. Jahrestag Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges 8. Mai 2015,” retrieved on 9 January 2019 from [https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2015/kw19\\_gedenkstunde\\_wkii\\_rede\\_winkler/373858](https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2015/kw19_gedenkstunde_wkii_rede_winkler/373858).
9. Raul Hilberg, Stanislaw Staron, and Josef Kermisz, eds. *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom* (New York, 1979).
10. See René Schlott, “Der lange Weg zum Buch. Zur Publikationsgeschichte von Raul Hilbergs *The Destruction of the European Jews*,” in *Zeiträume: Potsdamer Almanach des Zentrum für Zeithistorische Forschung 2015*, ed. Frank Bösch and Martin Sabrow (Göttingen, 2015), 146–47.
11. Nathan Eck, “Historical Research or Slander,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 6 (1967): 385–430.
12. Raul Hilberg, “The Development of Holocaust Research: A Personal Overview,” in this volume.
13. Raul Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian* (Chicago 1996), 46.

## Bibliography

- Bajohr, Frank, and Andrea Löw, eds. *Der Holocaust: Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 2015.
- Berg, Nicolas. “Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker: Erforschung und Erinnerung.” In *Moderne Zeit*, 3. Göttingen, 2003 (Diss. Freiburg, 2001).
- . “Phantasie der Bürokratie.” In *50 Klassiker der Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Jürgen Danyel, Jan-Holger Kirsch, and Martin Sabrow, 71–75. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007.
- Eck, Nathan. “Historical Research or Slander.” *Yad Vashem Studies* 6 (1967): 385–430.
- Hilberg, Raul, ed. *Documents of Destruction: Germany and Jewry 1933–1945*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971.
- . *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: the Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945*. New York: Aaron Asher Books, 1992.
- . *The Politics of Memory: The Journey of a Holocaust Historian*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996.
- Hilberg, Raul, Stanislaw Staron, and Josef Kermisz, eds. *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow: Prelude to Doom*. New York: Madison Books, 1979.
- Jäger, Lorenz. “Die Sache selbst. Zum Forschungsstand: Hilberg, Aly und die Vernichtungspolitik.” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 27 January 2005.

Schlott, René. "Der lange Weg zum Buch: Zur Publikationsgeschichte von Raul Hilberg's *The Destruction of the European Jews*." In *Zeiträume: Potsdamer Almanach des Zentrum für Zeitbistorische Forschung 2015*, ed. Frank Bösch and Martin Sabrow, 143–52. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015.