

INTRODUCTION

PROBING THE LIMITS OF CATEGORIZATION

Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs



The term “bystander” has gained as much traction as it has stirred controversy in recent years. The reasons for this surged interest are manifold. In part, they stem from the fact that among the three categories used to analyze the role of individuals in the Holocaust—perpetrators, victims, and bystanders—the category of the bystander is the broadest and vaguest. At the same time, it hints at an elemental aspect of human life, namely that people in conflict situations take on various, often ambiguous roles. A scene in Erich Maria Remarque’s novel *The Night in Lisbon* (1964) aptly captures this ambiguity by steering the reader’s view away from the perpetrator and the victim toward the hesitant “onlooker”—Joseph Schwarz, the author’s fictionalized alter ego:

The SS men cast furious, challenging glances at me as they passed, and the prisoner stared at me out of paralyzed eyes, making a gesture that seemed to be a plea for help... It was a scene as old as humankind: the minions of power, the victims, the eternal third, the onlooker, who doesn’t raise a finger in defense of the victim, who makes no attempt to set him free, because he fears for his own safety, which for that very reason is always in danger.¹

¹“Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History”
Edited by Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs. <http://berghahnbooks.com/title/MorinaProbing>

Remarque's story draws attention to the potentially crucial and inherently fragile position of "the eternal third," and, aware of the gravity of Schwarz's predicament, he refrains from passing judgment. After all, Schwarz is himself a fugitive from Nazi Germany, which underscores the hybridity of the bystander position in processes of systemic violence. Nonetheless, the notion of bystanding always seems to carry assumptions about the personal responsibility and culpability of "the other"—assumptions that have both inspired and hampered the historiographical analysis of the role of the non-Jewish populations during the Holocaust.

When Raul Hilberg introduced the category of the bystander in 1992, neither the concept itself nor its inherent complexities were therefore new. Yet, without dwelling much on its earlier uses in public discourses on *Mitläufer* (onlookers, or literally: hangers-on, fellow travelers) in Germany and former Nazi-occupied countries, Hilberg did so to underline an obvious, painstaking fact: the Holocaust was a crime of historic proportions precisely because it had unfolded amid millions of people across the European continent.² By raising bystanders to the level of the two other groups, he sought to include in his account the many contemporaries who were neither victims nor perpetrators but who "saw or heard something" of the persecution and murder of the Jews and thus were "a part of this history," too—and thus equally relevant to the story.³ Many scholars have since relied on Hilberg's triangulation to examine the wealth of historical experiences under Nazi rule. Yet, while it seems relatively easy to define who belonged to the category of perpetrator and victim, analyzing the thoughts and actions of the *other* contemporaries, and thus their role in the unfolding of the crimes, remains a challenging endeavor in international historiography. The fact that historians keep introducing various alternative, more or less sharply defined terms such as neighbors, ordinary people, auxiliaries, accomplices, or profiteers speaks to the fact that this challenge is far from being resolved.⁴

The chapters combined in this volume provide the first comprehensive attempt to map the field of bystander studies. They each not only offer conceptual reflections on the bystander category in general but also suggest ways in which the concept can be modified and applied to specific historical contexts, both in Nazi Germany and in several occupied countries across Europe. Probing the bystander category in such a way deepens our understanding of the Holocaust as a crime not limited to the intentions of a single dictator or a few elites but as the result of a "dynamic interaction between state and society."⁵ Recent studies on the daily experiences of non-Jews' interactions with Jews have shown, however, that bystander attitudes and actions cannot be pinpointed

easily. The National Socialist seizure of power in 1933 and its expansion into the annexed and occupied countries confronted many non-Jewish Europeans with a defining moment, or rather a series of defining moments, forcing them to a *Stellungnahme*—to take a stand.⁶ It created million-fold individual imperatives to position oneself and to react in one way or another to what was happening to the persecuted. These reactions ranged from looking away, turning around, doing “nothing”—which is never doing nothing—to expressing a word of solidarity or hostility, signaling the willingness to help or refusing to denounce, to turning in neighbors and participating in violent assaults. They were often spontaneous, born in a particular moment and under particular circumstances. As “implicated subjects,” contemporaries took on shifting roles, oscillating between active and passive participation in the events and adapting to circumstances in various and varying ways.⁷ Thus, like scholars of other momentous historical events, Holocaust historians face a surfeit of human experiences, with thousands of individual stories from diverse sources. In their analysis and writing, however, they remain dependent on (by definition, static) categories to depict extremely dynamic social processes.⁸

Precisely because the term “bystander” itself is so ambiguous, it seems that it captures this hybrid spectrum between indirect and direct involvement rather well. However, while exploring the diverse experiences of the “eternal third” in various local and national contexts, historians remain skeptical of schematic categorizations. They grapple with the conceptual and methodological challenges arising from the use of “bystander” as a fixed category. They stress the changeability of people’s individual involvement in processes of discrimination, exclusion, and murder. Consequently, as the chapters published here illustrate, the concept’s multiple meanings, translations, and contestations in different national contexts themselves have emerged as fascinating subjects of study—regarding not only history but also memory and memorial cultures, in which historians themselves play myriad roles.⁹

Aside from these general challenges emerging from recent Holocaust scholarship, the concrete impulse for this book arose from the latest in a series of controversies in the Netherlands on the role of “ordinary people” in the persecution of their Jewish compatriots. They concern the “Dutch paradox,” a key question in Dutch contemporary history, namely how it was possible that in a country of relatively limited antisemitism about 75 percent of Jews were killed in the Holocaust, by far the highest rate in Western Europe.¹⁰ In the 2000s, several works had somewhat shifted focus from the fate of the Jews to the “gray history” of the non-Jewish majority, some (implicitly) challenging the

Holocaust's centrality in Dutch World War II history and memory.¹¹ In 2012, a book by Bart van der Boom on the alleged lack of knowledge of "ordinary Dutchmen" about the methods used to kill Jews in Eastern Europe triggered the latest round of discussions on this subject.¹² The question of guilt took center stage yet again, with the author arguing that the "guilty bystander" was a "myth" that finally had to be deconstructed. Issues of history and memory once more proved inextricably interwoven. Moreover, the debate highlighted the necessity to reflect on the historians' personal, more or less conscious identifications and (perceived) subject positions as they, with the wider public often listening closely, address the most controversial aspects of Holocaust history. Some of the main protagonists of the Dutch controversy are among the authors of this volume, yet their contributions seek to overcome the confines of recent Dutch memory debates. All other authors in this volume relate to these issues in various implicit or explicit ways without ever suggesting that they adhere to a shared sense of identification or perspectivity.

The issues addressed in this debate concern not just Dutch World War II history. Even though such controversies usually evolve within national boundaries—with Dutch semantics operating in a Dutch tradition of scholarship and memory, Dutch moral connotations and implications, and probing Dutch identities—throughout Europe, studies on local Holocaust histories have raised similar concerns and caused similar polarizations. France debates the history and legacies of Vichy time and again.¹³ In Denmark, Bo Lidegaard's widely discussed *Countrymen and the Rescue of Jews* weighed the potential and limits of "patriotism" under a peculiar German occupation regime as a motive for action/inaction.¹⁴ In Poland, Jan Gross's work on *Neighbors* and on the so-called *Golden Harvest* caused deep divisions among scholars as in the wider public,¹⁵ and, in Germany, several works on the reach and structural complicity of the *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) have shattered long-lingering assumptions about the *Mitläufer* society.¹⁶

All these debates allude to comparable moral, historiographical, and national identity discourses and simmer at the intersection between history and memory. They center on the role played by the seemingly uninvolved majorities in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe on the road to genocide. Everywhere, one of the archetypical categories framing these controversies—subtly or outspoken—is that of the bystander. Derived from Hilberg, the impact of the bystander concept can thus be observed in virtually every national context as the proximity or distance of the non-Jewish populations are being measured vis-à-vis processes of exclusion, segregation, expropriation, and murder. Various literal or rough

translations of the English term circulate, ranging, for example, from the French and Polish “witness” to the German “onlooker” and the Italian “spectator.” Each translation carries succinct, culturally coded meanings and connotations as the term is adapted to and shaped by different, mostly nationally framed narratives of war, occupation, and genocide. Consequently, the analytical value, historiographical operationalization, and moral implications of the category vary widely.

The chapters assembled in this volume explore these translations, applications, and contestations by combining conceptual thinking and empirical research.¹⁷ The essays’ contributors first shared their research with one another in Amsterdam in 2015, focusing on reviewing old and probing new ways in which the concept of the bystander is being used in Holocaust historiography. Thoroughly revised under a set of common goals and priorities, we have grouped the chapters into three parts. The first part, “Approaches,” discusses concepts and methods derived from different academic disciplines to analyze the role of bystanders in processes of mass violence. Focusing largely on Nazi Germany, Mary Fulbrook draws a distinction between individually motivated acts of violence and contexts shaped by systemic, state-sanctioned violence. In the latter case, she argues, virtually everyone present is in one way or another pulled into the dynamics of violence, and no one can plausibly claim to be standing “outside” the conflict. René Schlott zooms in on the early roots of the concept within Holocaust historiography. He analyzes Hilberg’s “discovery” of the bystander as an autonomous category in the 1980s until the publication of *Perpetrators Bystanders Victims* in 1992. Schlott highlights the relevance of Hilberg’s conversations with Claude Lanzmann for *Shoah* and, based on Hilberg’s correspondence with his publishers, reconstructs some of the problems surrounding the book’s—and therefore the bystander concept’s—translation into other languages and national contexts. Roma Sendyka proposes to study “onlookers” as visual subjects. Using both textual and visual evidence from two Polish Holocaust observers, she closely examines their “scopic activities” and introduces an alternative categorization by exploring how contemporaries acquired knowledge by seeing. Approaching the field from a comparative political science perspective, Timothy Williams introduces a typology of action and inaction based on the proximity and actual impact of people present in contexts of genocidal violence. His classification breaks down the broad categories “perpetrators,” “bystanders,” and “rescuers” into a spectrum of fourteen subcategories to account more realistically for the various shades of participation and impact. Froukje Demant explores the potential of social scientific concepts such as bullying, pluralistic ignorance, and false enforcement of

unpopular norms for studying bystander behavior in history. Using evidence from the Dutch-German border region in the 1930s, her chapter focuses on the period of social exclusion before the actual expulsions and killing. In the final contribution of this part, Remco Ensel and Evelien Gans reconstruct the emergence of the bystander as non-Jew, both in Dutch Holocaust history and historiography. Studying the historical roots and growing relevance of the divide between Jews and non-Jews in the Netherlands prior to and during the 1930s, they argue that the bystander in its “embryonic” form emerged long before the Nazi occupation and remained crucial in shaping the fate of the few surviving Dutch Jews well into the postwar years.

The second part, “History,” presents six case studies on the relations between the majority populations and Jewish minorities during the Holocaust in Nazi Germany and occupied Europe. Closely examining a series of photographs taken during the roundup of Jews in Baden-Baden in November 1938, Christoph Kreutzmüller analyzes the function of onlookers as complicit “audience.” By pausing to watch and even to cheer, by blocking escape routes, or by taking pictures, as the photographer himself, bystanders validated and in fact aggravated the spectacle of violence executed by local Gestapo and SS forces. Christina Morina examines how Jewish diarists viewed bystanders in their immediate surroundings in Nazi Germany. Focusing on the shift to war in 1939, she argues that Jews sought and—at least temporarily—found some comfort in the subjunctive solidarity ordinary Germans seemed willing to offer in turn for acknowledgment of their own sufferings in the wake of the ever-worsening war. In a third case study on Germany, Adam Knowles discusses Martin Heidegger’s attempts at establishing the Nazi revolution in German academia. Sidelined in 1934, the philosopher stylized himself as a thinker purer than the Nazi movement, who felt he was “standing by on ‘the invisible front of the secret spiritual Germany’” while, in fact, condoning the Nazis’ aggressive policies and murder of the Jews. Turning to the occupied countries, Jan Grabowski argues that in Poland, where knowledge of the Holocaust among the local population was widespread, few people offered help to the Jews. Faced with a range of options, moved by various motives and fears, most non-Jews took actions, which transformed them into active participants in the genocidal process unleashed by the German occupiers. Bart van der Boom builds on his work on ordinary Dutchmen and the Holocaust and compares the Dutch case to the events in Denmark. He questions that bystander attitudes and actions account for the fact that 75 percent of Dutch Jews died, while 99 percent of Danish Jews survived. Instead of pointing to the bystanders’ “mind-set,” he argues that these radically

different outcomes are overwhelmingly rooted in the contrasting roles played by the occupying and local authorities. Analyzing the French case, Jacques Semelin introduces the notion of social reactivity, which led many ordinary citizens to form a fragile and informal, yet effective network of support for the persecuted. Based on postwar Jewish testimony, he sees this network as the result of a relatively widespread spirit of non-collaboration and disobedience, expressed in an infinite range of small, often spontaneous gestures and acts of assistance.

The third part, "Memory," explores the historiographical application and public contestation of the concept of the bystander after 1945 in various national contexts and memorial cultures. Krijn Thijs recounts the recent controversy in the Netherlands on "ordinary Dutchmen" and their knowledge of the Holocaust. Reviewing the contrasting positions and the underlying assumptions about the relationship between scholarship and collective memory, he interprets the Dutch debate as a case study that highlights the tensions and challenges confronting Holocaust historiography in general at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Wulf Kansteiner explores how the "narrative square" of German, European, and US film and television programs about the Nazi era has evolved since the 1960s. Productions exploring the bystander (and perpetrator) realms emerged rather slowly and with limited resonance. Only since the 1990s has television developed a more persistent interest in exploring the experiences of "ordinary" men and women, perhaps not coincidentally as documentary formats simultaneously have lost relevance. Susanne Knittel's contribution focuses on a German theatrical performance that depicts the wartime biographies and self-representations of prominent SS wives based on their autobiographical accounts as a test case to explore the apologetic functionality of the bystander category. Informed by literary theory, Knittel argues that only an "affirmative" critique of these texts can fully unearth their epistemological implications and ethical abysms. Finally, Susan Bachrach reconstructs how permanent and special exhibitions in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum have depicted and narrated bystanders since 1993. Reflecting newer developments in Holocaust historiography as well as the dynamics of the public memory and civil society discourses in the United States, a special exhibition entitled *Some Were Neighbors* opened in 2013. It can be considered the most sophisticated attempt yet to capture the complexity of human behavior during the Holocaust in a popular history setting. Its reception by visitors from around the world suggests that bystander history—understood as the attempt to relate individual predicaments to larger, systemic contexts—indeed offers some valuable lessons.

The volume closes with two critical comments by Ido de Haan and Norbert Frei on the potentials and limits of future bystander research. Combined, the chapters in this volume thus seek to deepen our understanding of individual agency in instances of mass violence and suffering and—fully aware of the sobering privilege of hindsight and continuing massive human rights violations in the world—to realize which experiences are worth learning from and which forms of behavior we should see to “unlearn.”¹⁸

In Memoriam

While finalizing this volume, one of our authors, the eminent Dutch historian Evelien Gans, passed away. Her scholarly dedication, critical voice, and civil courage will be greatly missed.

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Krijn Thijs is Senior Researcher at the Amsterdam Institute for German Studies and Lecturer at the University of Amsterdam. He has published on political history, memory cultures, and historiography in Germany and the Netherlands. In 2006, he received his PhD from Amsterdam Free University. His dissertation about Berlin master narratives in the twentieth century was published as *Drei Geschichten, eine Stadt: Die Berliner Stadtjubiläen 1937 und 1987* (Böhlau Verlag, 2008). Currently, he is working on a book on professional and biographical upheavals in East German historiography after 1989. He also publishes on the experiences of Wehrmacht soldiers in the occupied Netherlands and on controversies in Dutch historiography.

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Notes

1. Erich Maria Remarque, *The Night in Lisbon* (New York, 1964), 91. We thank Christoph Kreutzmüller for bringing this passage to our attention.
2. See, with a focus on Germany, the classic exploration by Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, ed. E. B. Ashton (New York, 2001), 57–64; see also Gesine Schwan, “Der Mitläufer,” in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 1, ed. Étienne François and Hagen Schulze (Munich, 2001), 654–669; for an up-to-date introduction into approaches to bystander history beyond the German case, see Henrik Edgren, ed., *Looking at the Onlookers and Bystanders: Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Causes and Consequences of Passivity* (Stockholm, 2012).
3. Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators Victims Bystanders: The Jewish Catastrophe, 1933–1945* (New York, 1992), xi–xii.
4. For a recent overview on Holocaust research and narration, see Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw, eds., *Der Holocaust: Ergebnisse und neue Fragen der Forschung* (Bonn, 2015); Norbert Frei and Wulf Kansteiner, eds., *Den Holocaust erzählen: Historiographie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Empirie und narrativer Kreativität* (Göttingen, 2013); Paul Betts and Christian Wiese, eds., *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedlander and the Future of Holocaust Studies* (London, 2010). On the concurrent widening of the category of the perpetrator, see Frank Bajohr, “Neuere Täterforschung, Version: 1.0,” *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 18 June 2018, http://docupedia.de/zg/Neuere_Taeterforschung.
5. Frank Bajohr, “The ‘Folk Community’ and the Persecution of the Jews: German Society under National Socialist Dictatorship, 1933–1945,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 20, no. 2 (2006): 183.
6. Michael Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung: Gewalt gegen Juden in der deutschen Provinz 1919 bis 1939* (Hamburg, 2007), 10. See also most recently Susanna Schrafstetter and Alan Steinweis, eds., *The Germans and the Holocaust: Popular Responses to the Persecution and Murder of the Jews* (New York, 2015); Doris Bergen, Andrea Löw, and Anna Haikova, eds., *Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Grossdeutschen Reich 1941–1945* (Munich, 2013); Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Bloomington, 2013); Peter A. Fritzsche, *Life and Death in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, MA, 2008).
7. On this approach see, e.g., Mary Fulbrook, *Dissonant Lives: Generations and Violence through the German Dictatorships* (Oxford, 2011); Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*; Götz Aly, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries: Plunder, Racial War, and the Nazi Welfare State* (New York, 2007); Tim Cole, “Writing ‘Bystanders’ into Holocaust History in More Active Ways: ‘Non-Jewish’ Engagement with Ghettoisation, Hungary 1944,” *Holocaust Studies* 11, no. 1 (2005): 55–74; Tanja Penter, *Die lokale Gesellschaft im Donbass unter deutscher Okkupation 1941–1943* (Göttingen, 2003); Wolf Gruner et al., eds., *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, 16 vols. (Munich, 2008ff.); on the notion of “implicated subjects,” see Michael Rothberg, “Multidirectional Memory and the Implicated Subject: On Sebald and Kentridge,” in *Performing Memory in Art and Popular Culture*, ed. Liedeke Plate and Anneke Smelik (New York, 2013), 39–58.
8. On the Holocaust as social process, see recently Frank Bajohr and Andrea Löw eds., *The Holocaust and European Societies: Social Processes and Social Dynamics* (London, 2016).
9. Some of these issues are explored in Edgren, *Looking at the Onlookers and Bystanders*.

10. For the broader context, see Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940–1945* (London, 1997); Ido de Haan, “Imperialism, Colonialism and Genocide: The Dutch Case for an International History of the Holocaust,” *BMGN-LCHR* 135, nos. 2–3 (2010): 301–327; Katja Happe, *Viele falsche Hoffnungen: Judenverfolgung in den Niederlanden 1940–1945* (Paderborn, 2017).
11. Krijn Thijs, “Kontroversen in Grau: Revision und Moralisierung der niederländischen Besatzungsgeschichte,” in *Täter und Tabu: Grenzen der Toleranz in deutschen und niederländischen Geschichtsdebatten*, ed. Nicole Colin, Matthias M. Lorenz and Joachim Umlauf (Essen, 2011), 11–24.
12. Bart van der Boom, “*Wij weten niets van hun lot*”: *Gewone Nederlanders en de Holocaust* (Amsterdam, 2012); Christina Morina, “The ‘Bystander’ in Recent Dutch Historiography,” *German History* 32, no. 1 (2014): 101–111.
13. Sarah Fishman, Robert Zaretsky, Ioannis Sinanoglou, Leonard V. Smith, and Laura Lee Downs, eds., *France at War: Vichy and the Historians* (Oxford, 2000).
14. Bo Lidegaard, *Countrymen: The Untold Story of How Denmark’s Jews Escaped the Nazis, of the Courage of Their Fellow Danes—and of the Extraordinary Role of the SS* (New York, 2013).
15. Jan T. Gross and Irena Grudzinska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events on the Periphery of the Holocaust* (New York, 2012); Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).
16. Wildt, *Volksgemeinschaft als Selbstermächtigung*; Bajohr, “The ‘Folk Community’”; Aly, *Hitler’s Beneficiaries*.
17. Thus, the volume’s title was inspired by the premises of the conference “Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the ‘Final Solution’” held by Saul Friedländer and colleagues in 1990 in Los Angeles. See Saul Friedländer, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).
18. This thought draws on a comment made by Wulf Kansteiner during a discussion in Amsterdam in 2015.

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