Introduction

Micro-annihilation

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In July 2012, President of France François Hollande recalled the Vel d'Hiv roundup seventy years earlier. He opened his commemorative speech with the usual reference to the "horror of a crime" and used the familiar expression of the "sorrow of those who experienced the tragedy." What stood out, however, were his allusions to the violation of France's, and by extension Europe's, social contract with its Jews. The men, women, and children who were assembled for internment and deportation "could not have known the fate that awaited them." They believed that the ties that united "the great French family [were] too strong," he said, quoting a distinguished rabbi just after the 1940 decree depriving Jews of their citizenship, too self-evident "to be broken." President Hollande then struck the memorable chord: "Therein lies the betrayal."

Betrayal may well lie at the heart of the destruction process. But this emerging assertion, in scholarly as well as in popular discourse, could not have taken center stage if not for an emerging "micropolitical turn" in genocide studies. Attention to the local circumstances of mass assault, triggered in the early 1990s by Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, opened up a field of investigation that is still disclosing new insights about the conditions of hyperserial killing.¹ From these studies the motivations of assailants and the experiences and vulnerabilities of victims acquire a kind of clarity that is missing in standard studies of large-scale, state-coordinated annihilation. It would be a mistake, however, to substitute microkilling for macrokilling as an explanatory paradigm. Like the debates over "intentionalism" or "functionalism" in the 1980s, the middle ground is the most fruitful terrain. Surely assailants were captives of ideas and the xenophobic enthusiasm. But even totalitarian regimentation permitted assailants and their victims room for negotiating local encounters.

Scholarship on the Holocaust era has, in the aggregate, accepted as axiomatic the *Führerprinzip*, or leadership premise, of the destruction process.

By exploring the “machinery of destruction”—a foundational thesis articulated some fifty years ago by the doyen of Holocaust historians, Raul Hilberg—the mainstream picture of the genocidal process that has emerged is large in scale.² Ideas in the form of ideological hegemony and indoctrination received paramount attention; the state, with its native capacity for *Gleichschaltung*, or coordination of the institutional levers of power, was widely regarded as the driving force. In his influential 1954 study *Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe*, Léon Poliakov explored “an efficient and rationalized industry of death.” He helped to galvanize the thesis of state-inspired, systematic annihilation: “What concerns us here is the more or less official method commanded from Berlin by the officials charged with the job of genocide.”³ Consolidating this argument in the mid-1970s, Lucy Dawidowicz, in her book *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945*—a work that catapulted research on the Holocaust into an autonomous field of study—asserted that the agent of destruction was “the German state under Adolf Hitler during World War II.” She acknowledges the accessories of “local initiative,” but for her the primary role of the state was beyond dispute: “The Final Solution had its origins in Hitler’s mind.”⁴

This impression received its first systematic revision in the past two decades with investigations into the local circumstances of what scholars sometimes refer to as “communal” or “intercultural” massacres. With the end of communist rule in Eastern Europe in 1989, Western scholars gained access to archives and began to harvest records from the Holocaust era that showed a zeal for assault among villagers. Jürgen Matthäus, in a 1997 study of assault in Lithuania after the German army’s attack in June 1941, observed that recent access to archival evidence made possible an investigation of the destructive process “as it had taken place on the regional and local level,” providing “a deeper understanding of the dynamic process that led to the annihilation of Jewish life and culture.”⁵ The picture that emerged showed that the destruction process was more incremental than intentional, more improvisational than calculated. The urtext that propelled this paradigm shift was Jan T. Gross’s 2001 work, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, with its unsurprising effect of piquing the indignation of contemporary local citizens who believe they, too, were Nazi victims. It helped to break a conspiracy of silence that occluded the ubiquity of collaboration and worse: not only the reality but also often the primacy of local initiative.⁶

This swerve toward locality for insight into the origins of genocide brought to light characteristics of genocide that were scarcely observed in the standard scholarship. First and foremost is the phenomenon of betrayal. What becomes clear from investigations into local circumstances is the prominence of betrayal as a worldview, a theme that commands attention and inspires debate in the articles collected in the present issue. Assailants refer to their broken faith in state authority; victims express disbelief in the behavior of assailants whom they knew, often by name, and resentment to-

ward their peers whom they impugned for their defection; and even postwar observers regarded assailants' behavior as a betrayal of Germany's better angels. This theme suggests a second characteristic: a desire to defeat despair by means of an imagined *sensus communis*, or common humanity, or by adopting a new faith. These strategies for negotiating the rupture in their lives inspire promising considerations of post-betrayal dynamics. Our contributors offer ample evidence of moral and psychological restitution, although not always as an epiphenomenon of betrayal. Third is the transvaluation of witnesses into reliable if not indispensable sources. Holocaust historiography has typically privileged official records and accounts, relegating witnesses' accounts to selective use for buttressing arguments or disregarding them altogether as subjective and therefore as unworthy. The search for evidence of genocidal conditions in local arenas grants witnesses a renewed authority, for it is their subjectivity and emotional memories that provide the corpus of evidence for how the actors interpreted and responded to the destruction process.

The articles assembled here, constituting these and other arguments, possess the collective advantage of interdisciplinary inquiry, massing multiple methodologies for exploring perspectives on a broken world: historical (Weinberg, Klein, and Bartov); literary (Maier-Katkin); psychoanalytic (Laub); and philosophical and religious (von Kellenbach and Greenberg). With the exception of Bartov's contribution, which strongly amplifies the themes under scrutiny, their articles originated as papers presented at the 2010 German Studies Association conference in Oakland, California. Each piece, then, offers a discrete look at common problems.

Gerhard Weinberg sets an appropriate tone in the first article. In this suggestive piece, he observes that the "participation of local individuals ... in facilitating the German murder program," especially their motives for doing so, is among the "ignored and misunderstood aspects of the Holocaust." Privileging the evidentiary value of survivors' testimonies, he refers to the collaboration of the local police and military units in Hungary, Lithuania, Byelorussia, and Poland, where, as historian Jan Grabowski asserted, denunciations were epidemic.⁷ But importantly, Weinberg also notes the existence of extensive local complicity and assault in Western Europe, where, although mass killing and deportation was the rule, victims would have some "interesting things to say about [their assailants whom] they might themselves have met or observed in the community earlier."

Assailants, too, possessed "interesting" impressions about their compatriots. Exploring SS officer Artur Wilke's seventy-seven-page letter to his son, Katharina von Kellenbach presents an argument for the regnant optic of betrayal in postwar Germany. Wilke wrote this 1966 letter from prison, where he was serving a ten-year term for his supervision of mass killings in Eurasia. Kellenbach recognizes the limits of perpetrators' "evasive and deceptive" testimonies, noting their propensity for self-exoneration. But it is Wilke's "moral delusions" that precisely articulate his view of a broken world: He claimed to have been a victim of a regime that exploited his

youthful idealism and naïve trust. Kellenbach writes, “Wilke did not wrestle with his role in the betrayal of others but rested securely in his self-perception as a victim of betrayal who could blame others for their failure to guide and prevent him from engaging in genocide.” Wilke’s efforts at “patching up the fragments of his broken universe” were considerable, an endeavor that illuminates in the exculpatory process a search for erecting the foundations of renewed faith. However as Kellenbach shows, “patching up the fragments” could be specious: Wilke’s return to his youthful Christian faith was anchored in “totalitarian thought,” as he called on Jesus to denounce, in his own words, “people’s tendencies (especially among God’s chosen people) toward egoism ... [pushing] the world toward self-destructive uncertainty.”

More truly reparative were victims who reaffirmed their fellowship with their assailants without attenuating their determination to bear witness to their assailants’ unforgivable crimes. This is the argument I take up in my article based on a reading of memoirs by Jean Améry and Simon Wiesenthal. By bringing to the surface Jews’ historical wish for mutual recognition with their neighbors from other backgrounds, as well as the reality of their familiarity with them, I show how victims are often inclined to interpreting assault as a violation of trust as well as an act of mortal violence. Améry nonetheless recalls the “fellow man” in his torturers; Wiesenthal similarly sees “a good boy” in the SS officer who tells him his grim stories of murder. By vividly noting their assailants’ descent to wholesale criminality, it is clear that victims wrestle with betrayal as they stitch urgent vigilance into their quest for a human connection.

Dori Laub contends that survivors’ “yearning” to recall “traces of empathy in the death camps” is a matter of psychological splitting and not a response to betrayal. In fact he asserts that feelings of betrayal itself are relatively absent because survivors, in demanding a “good object” for emotional survival, can hardly permit competing memories of “yesterday’s friendly neighbor [turning] into today’s murderous brute” and therefore experience no sense of abandonment. Laub offers several vivid anecdotes of Nazi “kindness” in survivors’ testimonies—Louis Micheels’s memory of an unspoken covenant between the SS and their Jewish victims; the Hasidic tale of an SS officer who saved the life of a rabbi because he recognized a former neighbor; an interview with Leo G. who mentioned several Germans who saved his life. Survivors augmented their memories of the “other” Nazi or completely made him up to “protect themselves from ... psychic death,” but it is worth wondering how much they could “internalize the death camp,” and therefore hold contradictory memories in tension with each other, before losing their psychic integrity.

Ruth Klüger and her 1992 memoir *weiter leben* (to continue in life), the subjects of Brigit Maier-Katkin’s article, exemplify the salience of locality for survivors. Like Améry, who spoke and wrote publicly about his ordeal for his fellow Germans,⁸ Klüger wrote in her dedication, “To my friends in Göttingen ... a German book.” The central concern for Klüger is her “lingual vi-

cinity to the Holocaust trauma," for she inhabited a lingual world with Nazi perpetrators who corrupted her native language. In recalling the importance of reciting and composing poetry in the camps, she distinguished between her exposure to the language of brutality and the "small reminders" that resided within her of "a greater literary tradition" and "a different time in her life" before the rupture in German-Jewish relationships. Maier-Katkin comments that these reminders constituted an escape from her unbearable reality. They also pointed to renewal: "While acknowledging the horror of the Holocaust," Klüger could identify herself with a common German culture.

For Gershon Greenberg, Orthodox Jews in German Displaced Persons camps experienced a limited sense of betrayal: They believed that Jews who had assimilated contravened the sacred Torah and provoked God's wrath. For the most part, their trust in God remained intact despite the tragedy, and, indeed, because of it: Though the Holocaust shattered their lives, they regarded it as a "negative miracle," a prod to intensified piety and "higher sanctity." In Greenberg's paraphrase of one Hasidic thinker, "The persecution of Israel in the Holocaust was a blessing." He explores this "death-ascent pattern" in their postwar outlook, noting that its Holocaust-redemption nexus complied with or expanded the *status quo ante*, the timeless "metahistory" of religious life. Observant Jews did not feel abandonment either, according to Greenberg. In contrast to Améry, whose experiences with brutality destroyed his certainty of help in circumstances of distress,⁹ they returned to God ardently pleading for help.

In the final article, Omer Bartov deploys another kind of witness-testimony, those presented in German courts from the early 1960s on charges against former Nazi perpetrators. State courts regarded testimonies by Jewish witnesses as admissible, although often with reservations about their reliability. Their judgments confirmed defendants' contentions, reminiscent of Wilke's, that they were victims of circumstances; as Bartov observes, the courts asserted that "the guilty party was ultimately Hitler's regime." They nonetheless insisted on the defendants' responsibility for their actions. The reasons they offered make clear the strength of the postwar inclination to incriminate violations of the social contract, the bond of man with man. Personal guilt, the courts argued, resided in the failure to uphold strong values—middle-class, Christian, German, democratic, instilled in the home, including an ability to distinguish criminal from lawful orders—and, in their own words, in the surrender to the "temptations of the National Socialist ideology." As Bartov observes in one case, jurists convicted a defendant for "betraying his conscience." This logic of betrayal was so rigorous that, as Bartov argues, it blinded them to its implications: By demanding conditions that permitted moral choice, they absolved committed, amoral Nazis. Bartov concludes, "The convicted were not typical, and the typical were not convicted."

Looking at the destruction process "from below" has its problems, of course. Like microhistory in general, its concentration on defining local cir-

cumstances runs the risk of ignoring activities beyond its scope—the day-to-day lives of men and women disengaged from theaters of assault, though Grabowski and Timothy Snyder, among others, show micro-annihilation’s surprising breadth.¹⁰ The articles in this issue suggest another problem: disciplinary methodology appears to influence conclusions. Historians Klein and Bartov tend to interpret their subjects’ negotiations toward restoring a community of human decency as a response to violations of a social bond. Other contributors tend to see these negotiations as hollow or possessing a dynamic of their own: Kellenbach’s Wilke failed to emerge stronger from his broken world; Laub’s subjects imagine rescue for psychic survival; Maier-Katkin’s Klüger articulates common ground with Germans, though on her terms of a “greater literary tradition”; and Greenberg’s Orthodox Jews inhabit a timeless metahistory. If there is a post-betrayal dynamic, this assertion requires elaboration from a range of disciplinary inquiry. Indeed, betrayal itself, as a constituent component of micro-assault, is open to question, as Laub and Greenberg maintain. I invite you to join this debate in the articles that follow.

Notes

1. Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).
2. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961).
3. Léon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate: The Nazi Program for the Destruction of the Jews of Europe* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 182–183.
4. Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933–1945* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), xxi, 184, 201.
5. Jürgen Matthäus, “Assault and Destruction,” *Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto*, ed. Dennis B. Klein (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1997), 15.
6. Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).
7. Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd: polowanie na Żydów 1942–1945: Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* [Hunting Down the Jews, 1942–1945: A Study of One County] (Warsaw: Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011). This study will be published in English in October, 2013, by Indiana University Press as *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland*.
8. See Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), xiv.
9. *Ibid.*, 28–29.
10. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).