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Raul Hilberg, the Holocaust and history

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Olof Bortz, *"I wanted to know how this deed was done": Raul Hilberg, the Holocaust and history* (Stockholm: Bokforlaget Faethon 2017). 267 pp.

In 1961, Raul Hilberg published *The Destruction of the European Jews*. Although this was not the first book on the Holocaust, it was the single most influential text in framing academic study of that event. Yet, despite this importance, Hilberg remains relatively neglected within studies of historiography or Jewish émigré scholars. It is this neglect that Olof Bortz aims to overturn. His interests are not whether Hilberg was right or wrong about this or that – which has tended to be the way that subsequent historians have engaged with his work – but rather to uncover the origins and initial reception of Hilberg's *magnum opus*. As Bortz argues, "what is needed in order to shed new light on Hilberg's work is an approach that situates it in a specific time and place, and in scholarly and political contexts."¹

In placing Hilberg's *magnum opus* under the spotlight, Bortz adopts "a three-pronged approach". Firstly he seeks to identify "themes, recurring interpretations and arguments" in Hilberg's work. Secondly, he seeks to link "these themes and arguments to broader contexts". Thirdly, he places Hilberg's work "in a comparative perspective" with other early – and later – works of Holocaust historiography.² The latter two are particularly important, as Bortz situates Hilberg's text as "the product of an intellectual milieu that he was both inspired by and critical of".³ Working with this three-fold methodology, Bortz adopts a broadly chronological approach as he examines Hilberg's life, the central text first published in 1961, and then its scholarly and popular reception. As well as drawing on a close reading of Hilberg's

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1. Olof Bortz, *"I wanted to know how this deed was done": Raul Hilberg, the Holocaust and history* (Stockholm 2017) p. 6.

2. Bortz (2017) p. 11–12.

3. Bortz (2017) p. 222.

published work and the writings of his contemporaries, Bortz makes good use of Hilberg's personal archive of unpublished notes and correspondence. In this review essay, I work with the broadly chronological approach adopted by Bortz, to highlight a number of key themes, as well the strengths and weaknesses of this important study.

The challenges of tracing "influence"

In the first of his empirical chapters, Bortz briefly sketches out the main events in Raul Hilberg's life. Hilberg was born in Vienna in 1926, left Austria for the United States as part of the wave of Jewish emigration in the late 1930s, and was drafted into the US Army and deployed in Europe in the final months of the war. On his post-war return to the United States, Hilberg studied Political Science at Brooklyn College and Columbia University. Here, Bortz argues that Hilberg's teachers were critical in shaping his thinking. At Brooklyn College, Hans Rosenberg, who was an expert on the Prussian bureaucracy, "created the prism through which Hilberg would approach the Nazi genocide".⁴ At Columbia, Franz Neumann who saw the key centres of power in Nazi Germany to include the civil service, Army and industry and business alongside the Nazi Party, became Hilberg's supervisor for his master's thesis which focused on the German civil service and the Nazi genocide.

Bortz is quick to point to the "influence" of scholars like Rosenberg and Neumann on Hilberg, however he would benefit from deeper reflection on the methodological challenges of tracing "influence" across authors and their works. Bortz is clearly aware of the dangers of making claims of simple, direct influence. For example, writing of Hilberg's sense that "in the right climate the destruction process began to function almost by itself", Bortz suggests that this can be traced back to Rosenberg's understanding of Prussian bureaucracy, which he described as "an almost autonomous political machine", and that, "to a certain extent this depiction is to be attributed to his teacher's influence".⁵ A few pages later, he argues that the deterministic tendency in Hilberg's work, "in part ... can be attributed to the ideas of Hans Rosenberg, but it should also be understood as a reflection of Hilberg's intention to derive far-reaching implications from a unique occurrence".⁶ Although his use of phrases like "a certain extent" and "in part" signal awareness of the difficulties of deciding the precise nature and extent of the influence of others, Bortz could have developed a more sophisticated methodology in tracing "influence" given the central role it plays throughout

4. Bortz (2017) p. 35.

5. Bortz (2017) pp. 95–96.

6. Bortz (2017) p. 99.

the study. In particular, I sense a missed opportunity here to develop a more nuanced analysis of intellectual influences.

Bortz's usage of the blanket term "influence" masks a more complex set of relationships between the ideas of others and Hilberg. In some cases, it seems that a relatively direct influence can be identified (Rosenberg). In others, the nature of that influence is more complex (Neumann). In yet others, the influence is almost oppositional and appears as a reaction against the work of another scholar (Poliakov). Finally, sometimes the influence appears more dispersed with Hilberg being "part of an academic milieu" influenced, for example, by the work of Max Weber in more dispersed ways.⁷ Rather than losing this rich range of different intellectual trajectories within the blanket term "influence", Bortz would benefit from thinking more carefully about this crucial concept.

The value of comparative analysis

Hilberg's master's thesis formed the stepping stone to his doctoral thesis that drew on the wealth of published German documents used during the main Nuremberg trial, as well as the captured German documents that Hilberg got sight of when he worked for a brief period for Neumann's War Documentation Project in 1951. In 1955, Hilberg was awarded his PhD and took up a temporary teaching post at the University of Vermont: the university where he ended up spending the rest of his academic career. The thesis – and 1961 book – forms the heart of the Bortz's analysis. Here he makes strong and effective use of the comparative method to identify and highlight key themes in Hilberg's writing and contextualize these within broader intellectual traditions.

One example comes from the second empirical chapter where Bortz signals the importance of Hilberg's focus on the German perpetrators and his conceptualization of a "destruction machinery" made up of a range of organisations across Nazi Germany. In adopting this approach, Hilberg rejected more top-down and monolithic models of a single master plan fuelled by anti-Semitism articulated from the start by the Nazi elite, and shifted attention instead to the mid-level functionaries and the evolution of policy. While in many ways this work was novel, Bortz convincingly points out that Hilberg's unravelling of the way that the modern bureaucratic state facilitated mass killings reflected wider concerns across mid-century political science on the nature of the modern state. The rendering of perpetrators as bureaucrats who "could destroy a whole people while sitting at their desks" was not unique to Hilberg, although he was significant in putting this front

7. Bortz (2017) p. 83.

and center in his thesis and making bureaucracy the focus of his research.⁸

On the whole, Bortz deploys a comparative approach to intellectual history highly effectively to place Hilberg's work in its wider context. However, one gap is in downplaying the centrality of Hilberg's disciplinary identity as a political scientist. While Bortz does note the importance that Hilberg attached to his social science training, he reduces the significance of the disciplinary clash between political science and history to a suggestion that "Hilberg understood his outlook as a political scientist in contrast to the tradition historical writing, associating the latter with stasis and a reluctance to tackle contemporary developments".⁹ This misses other key differences, not the least the emphasis on generalization that can be seen in one central idea in the book, where, as Bortz himself notes, "the destruction process was Hilberg's way of combining individual facts to form an overarching narrative. It allowed his analysis to encompass anti-Jewish policies from the full twelve-year period of Nazi rule."¹⁰ The disciplinary differences between an emphasis on generalization versus the particular can be seen playing out in historians' critiques of Hilberg's work. Thus, for example, the dispute over the role of the Jewish Council between Hilberg and historians like Trunk or Bauer, which Bortz explains as "a historiographical tug-of-war between the interpretation of the Holocaust as Jewish or German history" can also be seen as conflict between political science and (Jewish) history.¹¹ Hilberg's disciplinary identity as a political scientist in a context where early writing on the Holocaust was dominated by historians is important both in understanding Hilberg's work, and reactions to it.

Productive binaries and philosophies of history

The dispute between historians such as Trunk and Bauer, and Hilberg, revolved in particular around the most controversial element of Hilberg's thesis, which Bortz addresses in his strongest chapter. As he notes, Hilberg's exploration and explanation of the reactions of Jewish victims is the one part of his thesis that "has not been canonized".¹² Importantly, Bortz suggests that despite Hilberg's opening words stressing that "this is not a book about the Jews", the question of Jewish reactions to the destruction process was much more central throughout the text as well as dealt with in detail in the introduction and conclusion.¹³ Faced with persecution, Hilberg saw five possible reactions on the part of the victims – resistance, alleviation, evasion, paralysis

8. Bortz (2017) p. 86.

9. Bortz (2017) p. 106.

10. Bortz (2017) p. 69.

11. Bortz (2017) p. 169.

12. Bortz (2017) p. 5.

13. Hilberg cited in Bortz (2017) p. 127.

and compliance. Rather than resistance or evasion being the norm, Hilberg suggested that these were rare and Jews were more likely to seek to alleviate their situation, through for example seeking to make themselves "indispensable" through work, and to respond with paralysis and what he terms "anticipatory compliance".¹⁴ As Bortz points out, Hilberg positioned this lack of resistance not simply as the result of a lack of knowledge, but a deep-rooted Jewish reaction suggesting that Jews in the diaspora had "unlearned the art of resistance" as they sought to negotiate with non-Jewish rulers.¹⁵

Throughout this chapter, and indeed the thesis as a whole, Bortz deploys what he terms "conceptual pairs" to good effect to both contextualize Hilberg's work and unearth key distinctives.¹⁶ These helpful binaries – the unique and the general, rupture and continuity, agency and determinism – ensure that Bortz moves well beyond comparative description to comparative analysis. The strongest parts of the thesis are those where Bortz uses this approach to good effect. One example is in his perceptive teasing apart of the different approaches to victims' reactions adopted by Hilberg, Bettelheim and Arendt through his use of the telling binary of the universal and the particular. In his highly effective deployment of these binaries to probe apart key differences across texts, Bortz shows himself to be a sophisticated and original intellectual historian. This sophistication and originality also comes through in Bortz's drawing together of the separate elements of Hilberg's thesis that are often treated separately.

The tendency when approaching Hilberg's groundbreaking work has been to focus on his analysis of the genocidal bureaucracy and dismiss his seemingly more maverick views on Jewish reactions. However, as Bortz suggests, there is a need to see these as two sides of the same coin, framed in an understanding of Hilberg's broader philosophy of history. As he argues, Hilberg set the Holocaust up as nothing less than the clash of two histories. On the one hand, he saw a kind of "progress" in the "assembly line" killings of the Holocaust. Rather than seeing the Holocaust as a "genocide" – as Raphael Lemkin suggested, thereby situating it alongside earlier atrocities such as the Armenian genocide – Hilberg saw the Holocaust as novel and "the world's first completed destruction process".¹⁷ This emphasis on "progress" came close, Bortz perceptively suggests, to "Hilberg's account of the destruction process ... [being] closer to a negative tribute to the organizational skills of the perpetrators than a condemnation".¹⁸

14. Hilberg cited in Bortz (2017) p. 135.

15. Hilberg cited in Bortz (2017) p. 131.

16. Bortz (2017) pp. 15–16.

17. Bortz (2017) pp. 108–110.

18. Bortz (2017) p. 118.

In contrast to this rendering of "progress" on the part of the perpetrators, Hilberg painted a picture of the victims' failure to adapt to the novelty of the situation, going so far as to suggest that Jews "plunged themselves physically and psychologically into catastrophe" and were compliant in their own destruction.¹⁹ Here, Hilberg went much further than earlier writers. In particular he saw German and Jewish reactions as linked. As Bortz notes, "even though certain elements of Hilberg's thesis on Jewish reactions can be found in earlier research on the Holocaust, Poliakov and Reitlinger kept Jewish and German actions distinct from one another. Both of them ... treated the Jewish response as inevitable or of little consequence for the outcome of the Holocaust".²⁰ Across the two central chapters Bortz convincingly points to the way that Hilberg imagined the newness of the German destruction process and the oldness of Jewish reactions as inextricably, and fatally, linked.

Politics

In explaining Hilberg's "analysis of Jewish reactions", Bortz suggests that it "reveals more about his views on politics than it does about his knowledge of Jewish history".²¹ In part, he points to the importance of Hilberg's revisionist Zionism, which he sketches out briefly in his biographical chapter. However, Bortz also suggests that Hilberg's critique of Jewish responses was aimed at sending a contemporary 'message to minorities in general, not to Jews exclusively'.²² Although Bortz does consider both Hilberg's politics and the broader political context in explaining his controversial thesis on Jewish reactions, he does little with this wider political context elsewhere in his analysis. While he sets his project up as seeking to situate Hilberg's work in both its "scholarly and political contexts", it is clear that Bortz privileges the former over the latter and his study is more intellectual history than political, social or cultural history.²³ This is a missed opportunity, in particular given Hilberg's early activism which included seeking to oust a university administrator on the grounds that he was racist and not simply antisemitic. The broader context within which Hilberg wrote – in particular the civil rights movement – needs consideration given that Hilberg was interested in understanding the Holocaust as an instance of a more widespread "destruction process" that spanned time and space, including the contemporary.

19. Hilberg cited in Bortz (2017) pp. 136–137.

20. Bortz (2017) p. 143.

21. Bortz (2017) p. 154.

22. Bortz (2017) p. 156.

23. Bortz (2017) p. 6.

Reception

In his final substantive chapter, Bortz examines the reception of the book in the 1960s. Contra Hilberg's claims in his autobiography that it met with a muted reaction, Bortz demonstrates that the book was widely reviewed in both the press and academic journals, although not much outside of the Anglo-American world. What is perhaps particularly surprising is that, as Bortz concludes from a survey of the initial wave of reviews, Hilberg's "conclusions regarding the victims were at first even more widely accepted than his analysis of the German perpetrators".²⁴ It was only from 1962 onwards that a more critical response to this aspect of Hilberg's thesis emerged, Bortz argues "in reaction" to the initial positive reception and "took the form of a minority attempting to purge a majority opinion".²⁵ Bortz suggests that this more sympathetic view of the victims gained momentum across the 1960s in the aftermath of the Eichmann trial meant that "Hilberg's thesis on Jewish reactions was read with new eyes".²⁶ Despite the increasing criticism of Hilberg's portrayal of Jews in the mid to late 1960s, Bortz points to the initial generally positive reception of both sides of Hilberg's thesis as evidence that "there was no Cold War taboo against acknowledging the Holocaust".²⁷ This is suggestive, although Bortz's decision not to devote much attention to Hilberg's later career limits his ability to offer a more convincing narrative of post-war reception. A fuller study would allow Bortz to make a more convincing contribution to debates over American post-war silence over the Holocaust giving way to noise, given that Hilberg's life spans the full chronology. However, while Bortz's study does not provide as rich a contribution to those debates as it might, he does succeed in ensuring that no-one will ever read Hilberg's *magnum opus* in the same way again.

24. Bortz (2017) p. 185.

25. Bortz (2017) p. 207.

26. Bortz (2017) p. 212.

27. Bortz (2017) p 217.