

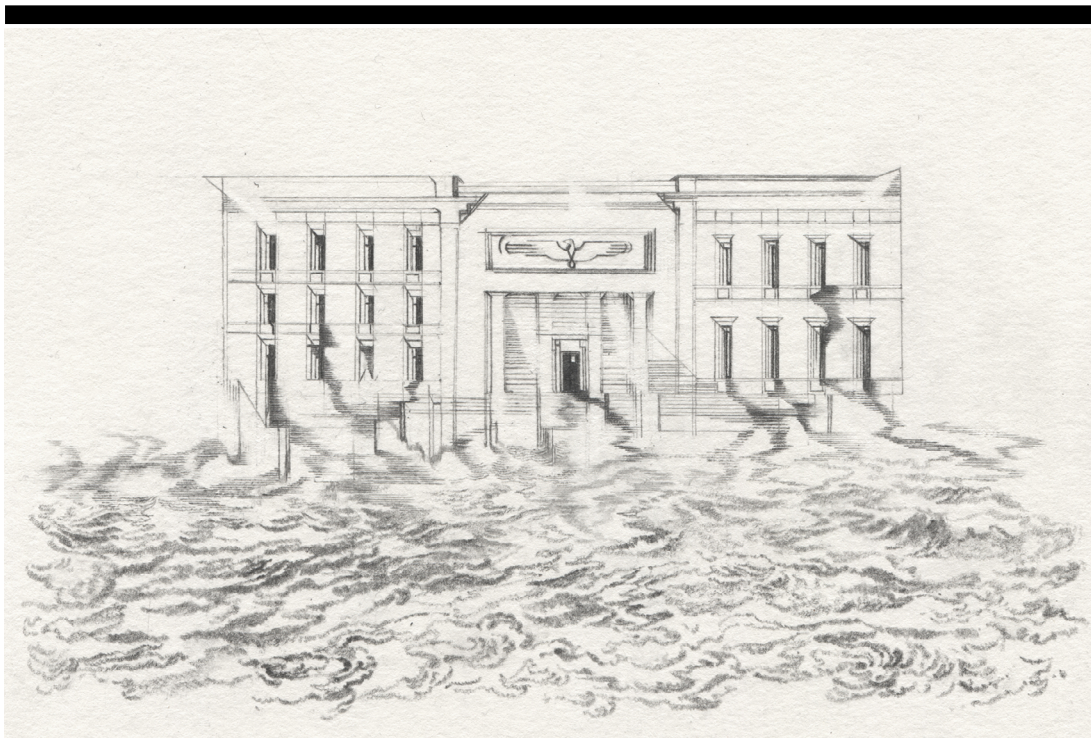


Illustration: Natalia Kulka

Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* and the Unexplored Research Perspectives in Studies about the Holocaust in Polish Lands

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Abstract: By reading Zygmunt Bauman's famous study critically, this text attempts to show how both the brilliant analyses, observations, and intuitions contained in *Modernity and the Holocaust* and its errors and distortions can still serve as important guideposts for further studies of the Holocaust in Polish lands and in Central and Eastern Europe even today, some thirty years after publication. What remains absent from our understanding of the Holocaust in this region is a broader and deepened historical perspective, taking into account the preceding decades as well as the challenges of peripheral modernity in this part of Europe and its impact on relations between Christians and Jews both before and during the Holocaust.

Keywords: peripheral modernity; Eastern Europe; Holocaust; Christian-Jewish relations; nationalism; Jewish history; Polish history

Introduction

Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* first saw print in 1989. For historians, sociologists, and practitioners of other sciences, the work became an instant classic, its extremely high scholarly standing entirely undiminished by the fact that it was such a deeply personal work. As Bauman himself admitted, it grew out of the conversations he had with his wife Janina, a survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto, as well as her memoirs based on notes made during wartime, originally published in 1986 as *Winter in the Morning: A Young Girl's Life in the Warsaw Ghetto and Beyond, 1939–1945* (Wagner, 2021, p. 567).

Before the war, Zygmunt Bauman had already been a thoroughly Polonised Jew socially and culturally removed from most of the Jewish community. Following the war, especially after his emigration from Poland in 1968, he became by all accounts an ideal citizen of Europe and of the world. He lived out the war in the Soviet Union, having avoided direct experience of the Holocaust. As shall become apparent, this had a major impact on his understanding of the event.

In the introduction to his book, Bauman concedes that before he started thinking about writing it, the Holocaust seemed to him akin to a “picture” – once completed, it remains unchanged, hanging on its wall, and thus separate from the life that continues to take place in and out of the house. When Bauman took to drastically reformulating his understanding of the event, the “picture” became a “window”, an integral component of his house (or life) that invites constant interaction, offering ever newer perspectives on the world (Bauman, 2009, pp. 7–8). Looking through the window, through the prism of the Holocaust, Bauman's gaze fixed the longest on what had pre-occupied him the most throughout his scholarly career – the problem of modernity. From his new vantage point, he was able to discern many things that were new, as well as many things that were deeply troubling. Perhaps foremost among them was that, in Bauman's opinion, another genocide on the same or even greater scale, conducted along similar lines, remained a possibility (Bauman, 2009, esp. pp. 184–248, 314–348).

However, it is not the purpose of this text to summarise and recount all that Bauman saw through the “window of the Holocaust”. Neither is it to ascertain which of his visions survived the test of time and which perished, and which proved to have been a simple misapprehension. The purpose is to make use of, for the most part, the brilliant observations and intuitions of the sociologist and, to a somewhat lesser degree, the equally inspiring errors and limitations of his approach, and to apply the perspective they provide to a fragment of the Holocaust that Bauman had almost entirely omitted. At stake here is the peculiarity of the Holocaust in Central and Eastern Europe, limited in this text to the lands of the pre-war Second Commonwealth of Poland.

The last thirty years, in particular, witnessed a revolution in the understanding of the peculiarity and local ramifications of the Holocaust in the so-called Polish lands. The mass of academic work produced during that period has yielded not only a host of factual verifications, but also new paradigms of thought about the fate of the Jews during World War II and their relationships with their non-Jewish surroundings in the context of that conflict. Significantly, during those three decades, this body of work was produced in new, global conditions of strict international cooperation and mutual interchange among scholars from various parts of the world. Dozens of major publications about the Holocaust in the lands of the former Second Commonwealth saw print in Poland and abroad. Numerous as they are, it is impossible to identify even the most crucial ones within this article. However, I shall use a part of that groundbreaking contribution to show that – contrary to what the number and quality of books and scholarly articles published in the past thirty years would suggest – there still remains a fair bit of work to be done. What is still missing from our understanding of the Holocaust in this part of Europe is an application of the perspective of a “longer duration” (longer, but not long – a view from fifty-to-seventy years prior to the event) and peripheral modernity in this part of the continent. *Modernity and the Holocaust* is full of highly inspiring suggestions for pursuits of this kind and potential directions for research.

The Holocaust, peripheral modernity, and “longer duration”

The central thesis of Bauman’s book, one explored (in different ways) by other scholars before and after, posits that the Holocaust was not an anomaly, an exceptional circumstance that cut across the history of civilisation with its *telos* of constant improvement of the human condition. On the contrary: Bauman believed that the Holocaust developed from fundamental, structural features of modern Western civilisation. Furthermore, some of the aspects of modernity that it revealed still persist today (Bauman, 2009, pp. 13, 29–30, 37–58). Such is the primary reason why he advocated a fundamental transformation of the contemporary status of studies on the Holocaust, reduced at the time to “the status of a specialist industry”. As he put it: “while the volume, depth and scholarly quality of specialist works in Holocaust history grow at an impressive pace, the amount of space and attention devoted to it in general accounts of modern history does not” (Bauman, 1989, pp. x–xi). Reading these words thirty-three years later, one finds them just as pertinent. The so-called Holocaust Studies have largely been cut away from major scientific disciplines, to which they return fleetingly and somewhat incidentally. Perhaps this applies the most to history itself and the fact that a vast majority of studies that discuss the Holocaust – especially those produced in Poland – look back no further than 1939 or 1941 and conclude in 1945, sometimes in

1946. Within such a curtailed time-frame, it is impossible to trace the events of World War II from the perspective of major historical processes that took place during the preceding decades and exerted a clear influence even in the altered reality of the war.¹

One title published in recent years that bucked that trend, receiving high acclaim in the process, is Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands*, in which the author not only takes a broader view of the Holocaust, putting it in the context of atrocities and genocides perpetrated in the same region at the same time, but also proves himself capable of analysing the mutual relations between them within a more extensive, diachronic perspective. More importantly, at least for Western European, North American, and Israeli readers of his book, Snyder also introduces into the historical discourses in which they operate the concept of "bloodlands", the idea that war and the Holocaust had a completely different meaning in Eastern Europe than in the West (Snyder, 2010). This is of primary importance for the argument put forward in this text, as well as in the context of the inadequacies of *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Similarly of note is the fundamental weakness of Snyder's opus: the fact that his explication of the causes of the Holocaust and other wartime atrocities in this part of Europe reduces the entire historical dynamic to the contest between Hitler and Stalin. Criticising Snyder, one could well deploy a statement Bauman made with a different purpose in mind and in an entirely separate context: "Yet the exercise in focusing on the *Germanness* of the crime as on that aspect in which the explanation of the crime must lie is simultaneously an exercise in exonerating everyone else [...]. [...] The more 'they' are to blame, the more the rest of 'us' are safe [...]" (Bauman, 1989, p. xi). Such is the main reason why *Bloodlands* met with such an enthusiastic response among a majority of its readers in Poland, Ukraine, or Lithuania.²

By focusing exclusively on the competition between Germany and the Soviet Union and its impact on Eastern Europe, Snyder completely overlooks the historical dynamic of the lands and peoples wedged between those two major actors. For instance, the American historian shows little interest in how the peculiarities of the origin and development of cultures and societies other than those of modern-era Germany and Russia / Soviet Union – such as their Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Jewish counterparts – and the social and economic transformations they underwent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had an impact on events and processes that took place during World War II. What role did the obviously peripheral nature of belated Eastern European modernisation play in it? How did post-feudal social structures

1 One unfulfilled promise of a study of this kind is *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* by Omer Bartov (2018). The book poses extremely vital questions about the impact the socio-political processes and the Polish-Ukrainian-Jewish relations during the inter-war period had on the dynamic of the Holocaust. However, in spite of that promise, the study effectively does not answer these questions, analysing the inter-war period on the basis of a very narrow selection of sources and focusing on inter-ethnic relations while contenting itself with using, almost exclusively, sources of German provenance for the wartime period and limiting itself solely and entirely to the German policies of the Holocaust without taking into account the Christian-Jewish relations of the period and the related processes of longer duration.

2 For more on this subject, including both the omissions in Snyder's book and the reasons for its popularity in our part of Europe, see: Krzywiec (2012, pp. 1–3).

affect the situation? To what degree did these features necessitate specific developments in the relations between Christians and Jews up until the war and how did this evolution impact the events of the war? To give justice to Snyder, it has to be said that studies which address these questions are virtually non-existent. In my view, the perspective they offer becomes truly fascinating once a kind of fusion is achieved, the “bloodlands” being observed through Bauman’s “window”, even as we keep in mind why such a perspective was not available to Bauman himself.

As viewed by Bauman, modernity is fairly unambiguous – it is hyper-rational. From this perspective, the Holocaust is a product of a bureaucratic, rational mind that hatched a diabolical and perfect plan defined by the triad of the chimney in the camp, the train, and the bureaucrat (Bauman, 2009, pp. 59–60; 62–76; 172; 206; 210–248; 269; 275; 284; 299–303; 387). In spite of the quotation cited above, Bauman’s book for the most part sees only one culprit of the Holocaust: the omnipotent German state. Here, its bureaucrats, scientists and industrialists take precedence over its soldiers, the SS, and other means of repression. Though Bauman’s oeuvre betokens his keen eye for the modern obsession with “purity” and the attendant dangers, this led him to be seduced by a hyper-sterile, “pure” image of the Holocaust. Captivated by this image, he distinguished the Nazi pogrom of German Jews in 1938, the so-called *Kristallnacht*, from the fate of the Jews during the war (Bauman, 2009, pp. 198–200). Such was also the reason why Bauman entirely lost sight of all of the anti-Jewish actions by those who belonged to nationalities wedged between Germany and Russia, overlooking the specificity of the Holocaust in this part of Europe as well as its distinguishing feature: that it grew out of an interaction between “cold”, “planned” factors he described so cogently and the “hot” factors he skipped over – emotions, symbols, spontaneous actions. In his description of a hyper-rational, planned-out world, Bauman completely failed to account for the chaotic nature of the “bloodlands”, as well as the obvious fact of a persistent, complex interrelation between the occupier and the non-Jewish residents of these parts. The chimneys of the crematoriums had completely hidden from his view the Holocaust perpetrated by hunger; bullets; axes; in barns; in the streets of ghettos; in ditches; fields and forest.³

Both *Bloodlands* and *Modernity and the Holocaust* entirely ignore questions concerning the impact conditions of war and occupation and the actions of German and Soviet totalitarian regimes had on the significance and meaning of phenomena that had already existed in the lands of Central and Eastern Europe for at least the previous few decades. Foremost among them is that concerning the development of ethnic nationalisms, dominated by their most extreme versions, and the conflicts they generated between non-Jewish and Jewish neighbours. When the Holocaust began, decades-old

3 The peculiarity of the Holocaust in the lands of the pre-war Soviet Union, especially in the summer and autumn of 1941, following the German invasion of the country, is only addressed by two pages. However, this fragment of the book has no impact on the later considerations. As far as the non-German participants in the Holocaust are concerned, only Ukrainians appear there (Bauman, 2009, pp. 293–294).

conflicts rooted in modern ethnic nationalisms came to the forefront. As a result, at least from the perspective of the so-called Polish lands, it seems reasonable to paraphrase one of Bauman's central questions in the hope that an answer might be found in future research: what long-term – or even immanent – features of Polish (but also Ukrainian, etc.) modernity did the Holocaust reveal in these lands?

Research projects that attempt to address different implications of this question are obviously not designed to downplay the importance of the context of World War II, with its ground-breaking and all-encompassing impact. War and occupation changed everything. This is not to say, however, that the decades of peripheral modernity in the Polish lands that preceded the war did not matter, and that it was during the war that certain firmly entrenched patterns of Polish-Jewish relations took shape. The war and the Holocaust certainly altered them, but not so much as to make them anew. For example, one can see clear instances of the longer duration of these relations in the most celebrated (occasionally even brilliant) studies published in recent years by historians, sociologists, and anthropologists who research the Holocaust – in spite of the incontrovertible fact that, as has been stated, they operate within a time-frame largely restricted by the boundary dates of 1939 and 1945.⁴ The image of the Holocaust, as well as of the general policy of German occupiers in Poland, that these in-depth studies put forward is also often characterised by chaos, lack of planning, and improvisation (see e.g. Silberklang, 2013; 74–83; 159–163; 218–219). All of this is far from the “perfectly bureaucratic Holocaust” imagined by Bauman. Given the right circumstances, this chaos could lead to cooperation between the occupier and a part of the occupied population, as well as pre-war state institutions that continued to operate after the defeat (such as the police or local government), in the implementation of policies of discrimination and extermination of the Jewish people (See e.g. Engelking, 2011; Grabowski, 2011, 2020). This cooperation is unlikely to have been possible at all if it was not for the preceding decades of social and cultural processes that defined the contemporary relations between the Poles and the Jews.

In her analysis of the behaviour of Poles at the time of the liquidation of the ghettos in the Biłgoraj district – specifically, in Szczepieszyn – Alina Skibińska cites the widely-known account of the event by Zbigniew Klukowski, who stresses the mass involvement of a large and socially varied group of people in the looting of Jewish property. “The mass snaps up whatever is to hand in the open Jewish houses; people brazenly drag sackfuls of miserable Jewish property and products from tiny stores” (Klukowski, 2017, p. 327; cited in Skibińska, 2018, p. 259). Other scholars – like Tomasz Frydel in his study of the Holocaust in the Mielec district – have highlighted the extreme danger faced by Jews who had possessions when they went into hiding after the liquidation of the ghettos. On the one hand, money and valuables were the most

4 Of necessity, all of the examples mentioned below and the referenced texts are of an anecdotal character; the purpose of this brief contribution is to pose questions, not prove claims.

common means of securing sanctuary; on the other, the threat of denunciation and the prospect of the immediate seizing of all the effects of the fugitives could induce the hosts to yield to the temptation of murdering them outright or giving them away to the Germans (Frydel, 2018, pp. 416–417, 431; see also e.g. Grabowski, 2011, pp. 55, 110–111). Extensive studies of the involvement of Poles in the Holocaust in the pre-war Kielce province illustrate the significant scale of looting of both property and goods (money, jewellery, clothing, etc.), which took place both during the liquidation of the ghettos and after. Members of village councils played a major part in those activities, as did Polish policemen. Jews were denounced by members of all social classes; some of the murders of Jewish fugitives were perpetrated by certain units of the Home Army, the Peasant Battalions, and especially the National Armed Forces (Skibińska & Petelewicz, 2005). A major question concerning the degree to which these attitudes were affected by the deep material deprivation of the pre-war period – one experienced by a vast majority of the inhabitants of the Polish post-serfdom countryside – remains unanswered. As is perfectly well known, this fundamental and immensely significant social fact was exploited during the inter-war period for anti-Semitic agitation. Already before the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, and even more so after, the nationalist right proclaimed a programme for the improvement in the lives of the popular classes based on the removal of Jews from the country. The social advancement of simple Polish folk was meant to occur through the takeover of Jewish workplaces, shops, and houses. In his study on Jewish perceptions of Polish-Jewish relations during the Holocaust, Havi Dreifuss quotes bitter diary entries from 1943 and 1944, whose authors relate sentiments voiced by contemporary Poles, satisfied at the prospect of a Poland without Jews. For Jewish witnesses, these voices resonated with their experiences of the 1930s, when discourses about the necessity of removing them from the country enjoyed considerable popularity (Dreifuss [Ben-Sasson], 2017, pp. 171, 200). That the inter-war period cast such a long shadow is certainly clear in Emanuel Ringelblum's account of the so-called "February pogrom" that took place in 1940 in Warsaw. According to the leader of Oneg Shabbat:

These bands were armed with clubs, canes, iron bars, etc. The assailants shouted slogans: "eradicate the Jews", "down with the Jews", "Long live independent Poland with no Jews", etc. Along the way, they shattered windows of stores with the star of David, tore down metal blinds, forced the doors, and engaged in looting. When they chanced upon Jews, they walloped them, threw them on the ground, beat them unconscious. (Ringelblum, 1988, p. 52)⁵

All of these items, slogans, and actions had been seen in the streets of Warsaw and other Polish cities during the 1930s (and before).

Without a doubt, the contrary attitudes – of helping and saving Jews under occupation – are equally deserving of in-depth, diachronic study. Scholars often stress that the

5 Exactly the same patterns of behaviour emerged a month later, during the so-called Easter pogrom; see Person (2019).

persons involved in those actions came from very diverse social backgrounds. When the political views or social class of the saviours are put at the centre of the narrative, it becomes difficult to define who became one and why. After all, aid was often motivated by pre-war acquaintances, trade partnerships, and personal friendships between those who gave help and those who received it (Bauer, 2009, pp. 96–120; Frydel, 2018, pp. 422–425).

However, it is beyond question that such attitudes were espoused by a narrow minority. The main rationale for embracing them was most certainly the scale of danger faced by those who decided to hide or otherwise aid the Jews. Yet, there were others; of particular significance was the degree of estrangement from the Jews within Polish society, which itself obviously had its own, long history. Among the most spectacular testimonies to this estrangement already produced during the war is the famous note by Jan Karski entitled “The Jewish question in the country”, based on his observations during a stay in Poland as emissary of the Polish government-in-exile in spring 1940 (thus, a long time before he visited the Warsaw Ghetto in November 1942 and took on the role of messenger to the West concerning the Holocaust of the Polish Jews). The report, which would later be redacted, included observations such as this: “Their [the Poles’] attitude toward the Jews is usually ruthless, often merciless [...]. The nation hates its mortal enemy – but this issue does create something akin to a narrow plank on which the Germans and a large section of the Polish society can meet”. Karski added that Polish-Jewish relations in the occupied Poland in 1940 were often coloured by the perception that Jews represented a hostile population (Gross, 2007, pp. 16–17). The same is affirmed by a string of other documents. As early as the conclusion of the campaign of September 1939, and then throughout 1940, up until the outbreak of the German-Soviet war in June 1941, reports of the Polish Underground subscribed to the narrative of Jews as internal enemies eager to collaborate, especially with the Communist regime in the east of the country (Engel, 1987, pp. 59–62). A handful of exceptions aside, the printed media of the Polish Underground State, regardless of political affiliation, and the leadership of the Home Army alike failed to recognise Jews as a part of the Polish civic community. Their tragedy was treated as an external fact irrelevant to the community these institutions formed to defend – the ethnic Polish nation, in which Jews were obviously unwelcome (Bender, 2018, pp. 241–244). In the well-measured summation of David Engel – incidentally, one of very few historians of the Holocaust who consistently combines analyses of the pre-war context with studies of later events –

The Polish government’s actions and inactions with regard to the promulgation of information on the fate of Polish Jewry [during World War II – K.K.] reflected the fact that the government-in-exile, like its prewar counterparts, tended to view its obligations toward the Jewish citizens of the Polish Republic as of a lesser order than its obligations toward ethnic Poles. [...] Only secondarily did it concern itself with the welfare of those Polish citizens who belonged to other ethnic groups, and then only to the extent that such concern stood to contribute to the satisfaction of the Polish community’s requirements and desires. (Engel, 1987, p. 203)

These desires were often of an anti-Semitic or anti-Jewish nature. Dreams of a “purified”, nationalist and Catholic Poland with no room for “others”, especially Jews, found their way into numerous underground publications. Radical nationalist circles occupied pride of place in that regard. *Propaganda Centralna*, a periodical of the National Armed Forces, stated in summer 1942 – at the height of “Aktion Reinhard” – “we must castigate those who want to secrete Jews among themselves, and brand them traitors to the Polish cause. For almost every Pole knows that a reborn Poland will have no room for a German or a Jew” (“*Propaganda Centralna*”, no. 14 (27), 15 July 1942, cited in Grabowski, 2011, p. 64). Positions like these, deeply rooted in Poland’s political culture of the previous decades, must have also influenced attitudes toward the few survivors of the Holocaust as they returned to their homes. As Jan Tomasz Gross deftly put it:

socialization into anti-Semitic ideology by the most numerous prewar political parties and the Catholic church, in addition to the demoralization of wartime, combined with the existence of a broad stratum of beneficiaries in Poland who for economic reasons resented and actively opposed the return of Jews to their towns and villages after the war. (Gross, 2006, p. 46)

What all of these necessarily brief and fragmentary examples suggest is the presence of a singular object of study that Bauman overlooked. In spite of the incredible creativity and brilliance of his work, in which he proposed original interpretations of, and sociological applications for, received ideas (mostly from Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt), Bauman also anticipated many of the later formidable studies describing the Holocaust as an apogee of the rational modern society (in this context, see e.g. Aly & Heim, 1991/2002). Nevertheless, he remained entirely oblivious to the fact that not everything about modernity was rational and planned. Furthermore, modernity also introduced new social technologies of managing emotions and channelling them (the press, posters, political rallies); it brought about, and continues to do so, many modern terrors, phobias, tensions, and irrationalisms. All of them also coloured the coexistence of Polish and Jewish neighbours and went on to play a role in the Holocaust. Essaying a creative approach to this phenomenon, one would do well to embrace the functionalism of Bauman’s own perspective.⁶ In his work, he convincingly argues that even in the years 1933–1939, the most fanatical Nazis – including Hitler himself – did not have a specific plan for their future dealings with the Jews. They had not yet formulated the notion of a “final solution of the Jewish question”; that would only come later, during the war. When it did, it was as a result of the mutual influence of numerous factors, including both the pre-war anti-Semitism of the Nazis and many members of the German society and the conditions created by the war. One should take the same approach to the problem of the involvement of members of Central-Eastern European societies in the Holocaust. There was no such thing as an intentional participation

6 For a basic discussion of the functionalist approach to the Holocaust and the difference between it and the intentionalist approach, see: “The ‘Functionalist’ and the ‘Intentionalist’ Schools of Thought. An Interview with Prof. Hans Mommsen” (Gordon, Morris Reich, & Goldberg, n.d.).

of the Polish “society” or “nation” in the Holocaust. However, as studies like the ones mentioned above indicate, many individuals did take an active part in it, and they came from a great variety of groups that comprised those vast multiplicities. Their involvement reflected on the one hand the context of the war and “bloodlands”, but on the other, also the anxieties, tensions, phobias, and obsessions inherited from the preceding decades. All of them were fuelled by political ideologies whose roots stretched at least as far back as the second half of the nineteenth century. The extensive post-feudal social and cultural disparities that typified this part of Europe certainly also played a key part in defining the context of the Holocaust and Polish-Jewish relations of the period, as did the differences between the country and the city. Only by studying all of that is it possible to gain an understanding of the role of another major factor – the anti-Semitism of the era. Within a study of the longer historical perspective of the Holocaust, its impact cannot be understood in isolation from the birth pangs of Polish modernity, but only in relation to them. On the one hand, war and the German and Soviet occupation that came with it sufficed in themselves to generate a social crisis. On the other, the crisis of Polish peripheral modernity, along with the crisis in Polish-Jewish relations, had been continuing and expanding for many decades before the Holocaust – at least since the final decades of the nineteenth century.

The problem with anti-Semitism and its role in the Holocaust

At the heart of this crisis was the dynamic development of modern anti-Semitism. One of the problematic features of *Modernity and the Holocaust* in this regard is its investment in the belief that the pre-modern version of the practice, the so-called traditional anti-Semitism, bears practically no relation to its modern iteration, especially in its exterminationist guise which provided the ideological foundation for the Holocaust (Bauman, 2009, pp. 56–57, 82).⁷ Within the Polish context that is central to this discussion, in the “bloodlands”, and particularly in the so-called “peripheries of the Holocaust” and outside of Bauman’s triad of German bureaucrats, the ghettos, and the death camps, this sentiment seems especially striking. The numerous and widely debated studies by the likes of Joanna Tokarska-Bakir testify to this. During the war and in its immediate aftermath, the traditional myth of Christian children being kidnapped for ritual purposes became mixed up with the modern myth of Christian blood being collected for transfusion to Jews weakened after passing through the camps, the medieval myth of the Jewish bloodsucker with the modern myth of the capitalist or communist bloodsucker, the traditional belief in Judaism’s hatred toward Christianity with the myth

⁷ Bauman also seriously underestimates the power of anti-Semitism in nineteenth-century Germany, its indelible ties to *völkisch* ethnic nationalism, German exceptionalism, and finally its orientalist/colonial attitudes to the so-called east.

of Jewish Communism, atheist Jewish depravers seeking the destruction of the Christian foundations of Europe (Tokarska-Bakir, 2008; 2012; 2018).

In this context, one is again justified in reversing Bauman's incisive intuition concerning a highly significant connection between a certain aspect of modernity and the Holocaust. In his work, this connection is exclusively limited to the "German bureaucratic perpetrator". Bauman proclaims: "We need to take stock of the evidence that the civilizing process is, among other things, a process of divesting the use and deployment of violence from moral calculus, and of emancipating the desiderata of rationality from interference of ethical norms or moral inhibitions" (Bauman, 1989, p. 28). In the context of Poland's peripheral modernisation, the birth of modern ethnic nationalism, economic programmes of "support your local gentile", and the anti-Semitism binding all of them together, it is worthwhile to review the history of the process of expelling the Jews from the moral community, a history of the development of a situation in which morality ceased to apply to the Jews. Perhaps one might make use here of the proposal for a new sociology of morality that reckons with the experience of the Holocaust, which *Modernity and the Holocaust* sketches out. In this part of his opus, Bauman seeks to define the conditions in which the modern society creates evil, how it creates norms of behaviour that are accepted by vast masses of people, even when they would think the same behaviours amoral given a different context (Bauman, 1989, p. 349–409). Bauman only concerned himself with German bureaucrats and scientists – yet the same questions could be posed when studying the attitudes of members of various strata of the Polish society. Tracing their genesis, one should review the process by which a Jew whose name one knew, who was a neighbour, became transformed by modern devices such as the press, leaflets, agitation, and many others into a "stranger", "enemy", an all-encompassing threat. One of the foundational theses of Bauman's post-Holocaust sociology of morality is the belief that a basic, essentially pre-social interpersonal bond can be broken by the means of modern processes of estrangement that remove the victims from the field of vision of the culprit. Bauman mostly discusses it in reference to Adolf Eichmann, who did not see people crowded into trains and murdered in gas chambers, but only dry reports and statistics about them. Yet, as is known well enough, this "pure" bureaucratic model of the Holocaust is untenable, especially in the context of the Polish territories and other "bloodlands". Hundreds of thousands of Jews were murdered here directly, face to face – not just by Germans, but also by the partisan units that fought against them, and even by their own neighbours. No bureaucratic estrangement was necessary; which is not to say that there was no social estrangement. It increased in conditions of a peripheral crisis of modernity, in a deeply divided, post-class society in which old differences were forged anew. Thus, modern processes of estrangement did not derive solely from bureaucracy, but also from exclusionist imagined communities in the shape of nations endowed with their own exceptional enemies. Anti-Semitism provided one such enemy in the guise of the abstract neighbour with an

obscured face. Just as Eichmann could not see the Jews he killed from behind his desk, so in Eastern Europe in the days of World War II, a shopkeeper, craftsman, or physician, often known personally by name, disappeared behind an imagined portrait of a Jew that no longer deserved any moral consideration. Studies of such processes of longer duration must also certainly involve an investment in the groundbreaking historical events such as the Revolution of 1905, the elections to the Duma in 1906–1907 and 1912, the crisis of World War I, the period of civil war, the unrest and revolution of 1918–1921, the Great Depression of 1929 and its consequences, and finally the political radicalisation of the 1930s.⁸ All of them reinforced this abstract anti-Semitic figure of the Jew as the enemy of the Polish nation.

The inquiry into the development and application of this figure in the German context certainly figures as one of the best parts of Bauman's book. In spite of overlooking the relationship between traditional and modern anti-Semitism, his structural analysis of the latter is flawless. Among others, Bauman deftly captures the aforementioned "paradoxicality" of anti-Semitism, the fact that it maintains its strength in spite of internal logical inconsistencies (e.g. the simultaneous portrayal of the Jew as a blood-thirsty capitalist and communist, as a godless liberal corrupter and a devout believer in a Judaism hateful of Christendom), as well as its nature as a phenomenon extending beyond mere national antagonisms. He also perfectly outlines the various functions of anti-Semitism in a modern society (Bauman, 2009, pp. 100, 108–111). Studies of the historical causes of the manner in which the Holocaust progressed in Polish lands should explore the development of the phantasm of the Jew within the society, taking place between various cohorts of the elite and different groups of the popular classes and involving various discourses and practices of alienation. At the heart of this area of study, one must place the activities of both the national-democratic movement and the Church. It must include aspects of modernity that Bauman evaded: a study of the press, literature, leaflets, rally slogans, modern agitation, and political sociotechnology. For obvious reasons, an analysis of this kind must go deeper than Bauman did; what it consists of is not an interest in the notion and discourse of anti-Semitism, which historians (and the sociologist Bauman) often entertain, but most of all, an inquiry into the social means and channels through which its message and symbolism "went downstairs", who and in what context it reached.⁹

In his book, Bauman also thoroughly examined the ties between modern anti-Semitism, the philosophy of Enlightenment, racism, and projects of an alternative modernity, one that imagined a brave new world free from the pathologies of actual reality. Each of them was an indelible part of European right-wing radicalisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Writing on the emergence of "garden culture" in Europe aimed toward a "perfect arrangement", Bauman limits himself to an analysis of

8 Of course, many high-quality works on these particular historical junctures also provide compelling overviews of contemporaneous anti-Semitism; see e.g. Blobaum (2017); Krzywiec (2017); Michlic (2015); Ury (2012).

9 For more on that type of case study, see e.g. Buchen (2020); Kijek (2018).

the writings of a handful of the most famous German and French radicals (Bauman, 2009, pp. 140–183, 200, 242–243). Recent publications indicate how important this trope is for the study of modern political culture in Poland, as well (Krzywiec, 2014, 2019; Mrzygłód, 2021a, 2021b). The author of *Modernity and the Holocaust* is clearly right when he observes that neither anti-Semitism in itself, nor the visions of alternative modernity that accompanied it, could have caused the mass murder of the Jews. However, he seems entirely oblivious to the fact that both in Germany and in occupied territories, among soldiers of the Wehrmacht and the SS, as well as the cadres of various collaborating auxiliary formations, and even for many of the members of nations conquered by Germany, decades of anti-Semitic agitation made a difference. Its symbolism and the feelings and emotions it had moulded helped ensure compliance and justify the injury of erstwhile neighbours. The impact of this agitation and the dreams of alternative modernity that it fostered – even in the guise of “Poland without Jews” – cannot be ignored. One might therefore again paraphrase Bauman’s grand question and ask, what does the Holocaust say not about modernity in general, but Polish modernity? What does it say about the fear among the elites – its roots reaching deep into the nineteenth century – for the survival of Polish agency, for its chances of survival in a modern world?¹⁰ This fear often went hand in hand with a refusal of ethno-national pluralism in Polish lands, of the right for a Jewish civilisation to develop side by side with the Polish one.

Jewish agency and the Holocaust

The latter, in its most advanced and extensive Eastern European variation, was also completely overlooked by Bauman. The image his book paints of the Jewish community presents it as a fairly consistent mass of people, all too often resembling Bauman himself. In his characteristics of the victims of anti-Semitism in its late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century guise, he refers exclusively to German and French examples, writing of the Jews as an “invisible”, assimilated community. There is barely any mention in *Modernity and the Holocaust* of Eastern European Jews as a nation, established not only on the basis of its own languages and culture, but most of all on the belief of the vast majority of the members of the community who saw themselves as a separate nation. Bauman’s entire notion of Jews as a “prismatic” community evoking exceptional anxieties in uncertain modern times simply does not fit the Eastern European case. In spite of his assertions, most of the victims of the Holocaust knew the Yiddish and Hebrew languages and Jewish religious rites; their lives were not defined by the culture

10 For more on nineteenth century debates over Polish agency, see especially Jedlicki (1988). The constant proclamations by the elites of the Second Commonwealth of a sense of insufficient agency, fear for the survival of the just recently established country, is addressed in e.g. Engel (1987, p. 21).

of the majority. In Bauman's opus, Jews are only ever scientists, industrialists, physicians, the avant-garde of capitalism and modern social change (Bauman, 2009, pp. 108, 124, 128–129).¹¹ It is futile to search for Yiddish-speaking Orthodoxes or traditional Jews, workers, minor salesmen, Zionist elites (acculturated or not) among his accounting of victims of the Holocaust. As a result, Bauman sees the history of the Jews up to the Holocaust as defined by a general axis of a “dream of assimilation”. According to him, this dream collapsed when the Jews were rejected. The history of the Jews in *Modernity and the Holocaust* is virtually restricted to the history of anti-Semitism, the attitudes of others toward the Jews. Bauman's work portrays Jewishness in a Sartrean guise of a negative identity, an identity of a people marked by their surroundings, one they themselves sought to shed (Bauman, 2009, pp. 23, 26–27, 131–139).

It is the great failing of *Modernity and the Holocaust* that in spite of the numerous quotations from figures such as Emanuel Ringelblum (member of the Poale Zion Left) or Izajasz Trunk (member of the Bund), Bauman remains so personally invested in the “dream of assimilation” that he cannot see the national-religious and cultural peculiarity so natural to the Jews in this part of Europe. One need not seek in Bauman's book even the tiniest reference to the fact that Yiddish-speaking Jews in inter-war Poland (and many other states in this part of Europe) densely inhabited entire districts of major cities (constituting dozens of percent of the total populations), often forming a majority in minor townships (shtetls). There is nary a mention of the fact that they voted primarily for parties proclaiming a separate national or religious-national identity, that they possessed an impressive network of institutions maintaining their modern national culture. As a result, there is a lack of understanding (not only by Bauman, but by a majority of scholars fixated on the years 1939–1945) for the fact that to set the Holocaust in a longer historical perspective requires a serious and critical consideration of the history of the Jews.

Bauman in his book is obviously right to criticise the practice of instrumentalisation of the Holocaust by Israeli and other nationalisms. He is undeniably correct to bemoan the removal of the history of the Holocaust from the wider histories of Europe and the world in the name of nationalist martyrology (Bauman, 2009, pp. 10–11, 23). However, even as he does that, he also commits the grievous error of practically separating the history of the Holocaust from the history of the Jews, instead of trying to place the event in the context of the history of the said group and its neighbours. To understand the Holocaust from the perspective of a longer duration, one must not study the relationship between the Jews and their surroundings in terms of their attitudes, anxieties, modern obsessions, and anti-Semitism alone. To fully understand Christian-Jewish relations in the preceding decades and their significance for the Holocaust, it is crucial to study the Christian community side by side with the Jewish community – the transfor-

11 Even as Bauman engages in what might well be called a falsification, he cites studies that clearly present the vast mass of the Jewish community in Poland that Bauman himself failed to mention.

mations of its social structure, mentality, culture, consciousness, its own confrontation with the same peripheral modernity. It is, of course, vital that this is done with the use of Jewish sources produced in the Yiddish and Hebrew languages, truly representative of the perspective of the people whose attitudes are being studied. Because Bauman fails in that regard, he allows himself to, for instance, assume that the *Judenrats* during the Holocaust were essentially the same all over Europe and manned exclusively by “traditional Jewish elites” (Bauman, 2009, pp. 255–256, 281–282, 285–286).

As a result, Bauman paints a rather disempowering image of the Jewish responses to the Holocaust. In the context of the impact of the preceding decades of peripheral modernity on Christian-Jewish relations, which has been the object of this discussion, this perspective needs to be abandoned. To understand the variety of Jewish responses to the Holocaust and how relations within the social context affected them, one must study questions such as the emergence of a Jewish nation and of Jewish political institutions and the ways in which they positioned themselves towards the projects of other national elites, including the Polish, in this part of Europe. One such key question for this phenomenon is the (inconsistent) attitude of the Jewish political elites to the radical changes brought about by World War I, to various political projects, including that pertaining to the reborn Polish state, as well as to the wars and revolutions of the years 1918–1921. In the context of Polish-Jewish relations during this period, anti-Semitism or the high incidence of anti-Jewish violence do indeed matter, but another component – the conflict between various national elites in Polish lands, the fact that Jewish elites (of various kinds and in various ways) and their Polish counterparts defined their national interests and consequently their attitudes toward the re-emerging Polish state differently – is of equal importance. The history of peripheral modernity in this part of Europe is also the history of national conflicts in which Jews, like all other ethnic groups, played an active part (Engel, 2018; Rybak, 2021; Silber, 2014).

This kind of in-depth, political as well as social history of relations between Poles and Jews must also incorporate sources that offer an internal view on the Jewish side. Of importance here are, for example, letters in Hebrew sent to Palestine in 1934, describing the changes in economic and social relations between inhabitants of the shtetls and local villagers, accounts of scuffles between Jewish youth (radically politicised at the time) and young peasants, news stories in Yiddish on the Great Depression, etc. (on this issue, see e.g. Kijek, 2021; Moss, 2021). A study of this kind must make room for voices of both the Polish and Jewish popular masses and the process by which peripheral modernisation often fostered antagonism between their representatives.

More than ten years ago, David Engel issued a vital call that was ignored particularly (though not exclusively) in Poland, advocating a reintegration of the history of the Jews and the history of the Holocaust (Engel, 2010). Engel’s proposal appears not to have been taken up, however much it deserves to be. What pushes us to embrace it is, in part, Bauman’s observation about the persistent relevance of the Holocaust as an

indispensable part of the times we live in. In an unpredictable world order that is drifting in an unknown direction, surrounded by capitalism on steroids, economic crises, class disparities, rising xenophobia, and armed conflicts even in our part of Europe, the commitment that Bauman proposed for this type of reflection seems particularly pertinent.*

Translated from Polish by Antoni Górny

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* This article was written thanks to the support of Gerda Henkel Foundation during the research fellowship at Wiener Wiesenthal Institut.

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Nowoczesność i Zagłada Zygmunta Baumana a brakujące perspektywy badań nad Holokaustem na ziemiach polskich

Abstrakt: Poprzez krytyczną lekturę głośnej pracy Zygmunta Baumana staram się pokazać, w jaki sposób błyskotliwe stwierdzenia, obserwacje i intuicje wyrażone w *Nowoczesności i Zagładzie*, podobnie jak zawarte w niej błędy i przeinaczenia, również dzisiaj, po trzydziestu latach, mogą być istotnym drogowskazem do dalszych badań nad Zagładą na ziemiach polskich i w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Tego, czego ciągle brakuje nam w rozumieniu Holokaustu na tych terenach, to jego pogłębionego pojmowania z dłuższej historycznej perspektywy – perspektywy kilku poprzedzających go dekad – oraz z uwzględnieniem kwestii związanych z peryferyjną nowoczesnością tej części Europy i jej wpływem na relacje chrześcijańsko-żydowskie zarówno przed, jak i w trakcie Zagłady.

Wyrażenia kluczowe: peryferyjna nowoczesność; Europa Wschodnia; Zagłada; relacje chrześcijańsko-żydowskie; nacjonalizm; historia Żydów; historia Polski



Article No. 2844

DOI: 10.11649/slh.2844

Citation: Kijek, K. (2022). Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* and the unexplored research perspectives in studies about the Holocaust in Polish lands (A. Górny, Trans.). *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 2022(11), Article 2844. <https://doi.org/10.11649/slh.2844>.

This is a translation of the original Polish-language article entitled “Nowoczesność i Zagłada Zygmunta Baumana a brakujące perspektywy badań nad Holokaustem na ziemiach polskich”, which was published in *Studia Litteraria et Historica*, 2022(11), Article 2844. <https://doi.org/10.11649/slh.2844>

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This article was written thanks to the support of Gerda Henkel Foundation during the research fellowship at Wiener Wiesenthal Institut.

Competing interests: The author has declared he has no competing interests.

Publication history

Received: 2022-06-03; Accepted: 2022-10-10; Published: 2022-12-31