

Self-Justifications and Scholarly Reflexivity: Navigating Conceptual Ambiguities in the Study of Perpetration and Complicity

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REVIEW OF: Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Stefanie Rauch, and Bastiaan Willems, eds. *Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism and Beyond: Compromised Identities?* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023). 304 pp. (hardcover). GBP 85.00. ISBN: 9781350327771.

The volume *Perpetration and Complicity under Nazism and Beyond: Compromised Identities?*, edited by Stephanie Bird, Mary Fulbrook, Stefanie Rauch, and Bastiaan Willems examines political, cultural, journalistic, and judicial sources to analyse how societies and individuals, connected to historical crimes, have conceptualised their past involvement in Nazism, the Holocaust, and other forms of state-led violence. Spanning diverse disciplines, including historiography, legal studies, museum studies, literary studies, and media studies, the eighteen contributions that form this volume engage with the wealth of interdisciplinary research that has been concerned with developing a nuanced understanding of the varied ways individuals may become involved in historical injustices. Historiographically, the book builds on foundational works by Christopher Browning, Jan Tomasz Gross, and Dan Stone, the comparative research on genocides by Donald Bloxham, and more broadly, the scholarship that has shaped the voluntarist turn in Nazi research and the occupation of Eastern Europe.¹ It approaches literary texts as essential resources for reflecting on perpetrators, in close dialogue with the work of Erin McGlothlin.² Trials and court cases are discussed as critical yet limited means of pursuing justice for past atrocities, engaging with scholarship on transitional justice and human rights. More broadly, the volume uses focused discussions of lesser-known case studies – many from Eastern

1 Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperPerennia 1992); Jan Tomasz Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001); Dan Stone, *Historiography of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

2 Erin McGlothlin, 'Empathetic Identification and the Mind of the Holocaust Perpetrator in Fiction: A Proposed Taxonomy of Response', *Narrative*, 24.3 (2016), 251–76.

Europe – to explore the diverse collective dynamics through which individuals become enmeshed in mass violence. These discussions intersect with the extensive theoretical scholarship on complicity and responsibility from the past decade, including works by Chiara Lepora, Robert E. Goodin, Debarati Sanyal, and Mark Sanders.³

To unify its diverse contributions, the volume introduces the concept of '(un)compromised identities' – or 'compromised identity?' with a question mark – first discussed in the introduction and revisited throughout various chapters. Rather than being a precise conceptual category, these notions are presented as malleable, heuristic devices that enable research into the complex aspects of complicity in dictatorships, collective violence, and their memory. Throughout the volume, these concepts are employed in various ways. They serve to explore how perpetrators strive to present their identities as uncompromised and how this psychological tendency influences the articulation of collective memory in postwar societies. They highlight how citizens inevitably make compromises with dictatorial systems and how such compromises may lead to complicity or constitute the starting point for acts of resistance. Additionally, the notions of compromised or uncompromised identities are used to put forward reflections on the practice of scholarship – a metacritical approach that permeates many chapters of this volume – by questioning the potentially problematic neutrality that some scholars may adopt towards their subjects and by exposing the ethical limitations of assuming one's identity as uncompromised. This variety of applications is intellectually stimulating, and it creates synergy and dialogue among the volume's different sections. However, it inevitably limits the concept's effectiveness, as the idea of (un)compromised identities has been chosen more for the polysemic questions it raises than for specific analytical purposes.

The book has two major strengths. Firstly, it makes a compelling case for the importance of studying perpetrators and the cultural products that address them, offering numerous examples of how this approach uncovers narrative strategies of self-exculpation – often rooted in psychological defence mechanisms aimed at preserving a positive self-image – which are used to justify past violence and one's involvement in it through the discursive resources available in the present. Secondly,

3 Mark Sanders, *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Chiara Lepora and Robert E. Goodin, *On Complicity and Compromise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

the volume is driven by a terminological focus: it seeks to both theorise clear conceptual tools for analysing diverse, historical contexts of mass violence and to test the usefulness of existing categories, especially the bystander and the accomplice, against historical analyses and case studies. This terminological discussion, which connects the volume to other significant research by some of its contributors – particularly the work of Mary Fulbrook and Christina Morina on the concept of the bystander – is crucial for advancing the fields of complicity and perpetrator studies.⁴ Paradoxically, however, some of the proposed solutions may risk undermining the conceptual clarity that the authors aim to achieve. I will return to this key point at the conclusion of the review after an analytical discussion of each chapter.

The first part of the book, 'Theorizing Ambiguity, Compromise, and Complexity', presents conceptual chapters that address the book's key issues through literary analysis or terminological reflection. In Chapter 2, Stephanie Bird examines empathy and forgiveness in literary depictions of ageing perpetrators, posing fundamental questions: Does literature risk aligning readers with exculpatory narratives or does it expose these narratives, encouraging critical engagement? And, if the latter, does this allow readers and scholars the comfortable privilege of assuming a position of critique that suggests they are uncompromised? Bird shows that literature, as seen in works by Borislav Pekić, George Steiner, Simon Wiesenthal, Michael Lavigne, and Jodi Picoult, serves above all as a conceptual space to confront these unsettling questions with its strength lying in its resistance to closure and normalisation. Many of Bird's reflections are further developed in Chapter 4, in which Juliane Prade-Weiss discusses Central and Eastern European documentary fiction that portrays involvement in twentieth century dictatorships. Her argument arises from the widely recognised need to have forms of reflection on mass violence that can go beyond the methodological individualism of the law by allowing for more relational understandings of responsibility and human agency, as indicated by many scholars who have worked on complicity, such as Christopher Kutz and Vladyslav Lanovoy.⁵ To address this issue, Prade-Weiss explores mass

4 Christina Morina and Krijn Thijs, eds., *Probing the Limits of Categorization: The Bystander in Holocaust History* (New York: Berghahn, 2018); Mary Fulbrook, *Bystander Society: Conformity and Complicity in Nazi Germany and The Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

5 Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Vladyslav Lanovoy, *Complicity and its Limits in the Law of International Responsibility* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2016).

violence as a linguistic construct, discussing how justificatory narratives can linger from the era of perpetration into our present. She shows that the representation of past violence in literature can reveal how national ideologies of purity or the conceptualisation of the past as a tragedy are forms of sense-making that were complicit in the perpetration of injustice and, by being reiterated in the present, can support the violence of the neoliberal order. Literary texts can both expose these dynamics and further reinforce them in our time. In other words, the chapter shows that literature is a space for reflecting on reality, where the revelations of past and present complicities coexist with the risk of turning the suffering of victims into spectacle, fostering problematic empathies, and developing cathartic patterns.

Mary Fulbrook's and Christina Morina's chapters (3 and 5, respectively) begin with the premise that the actions and inactions of ordinary people were an indispensable component of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis, not only within Germany but also in countries that were allied with Nazi Germany or fell under its occupation. While reflecting on the involvement of Eastern Europeans in Nazi crimes, Fulbrook maps the diversity of responses that individuals may exhibit when they become entangled in collective violence against minority groups excluded from their 'community of empathy' (p. 44). The chapter thus develops a framework for analysing patterns of involvement, based on the assumption that, while the categories of victims and perpetrators remain useful to distinguish those primarily involved in criminal acts, scholarly discourse requires a notion of the bystander that can dispel the passivity and powerlessness associated with the term, as well as an understanding of complicity that can extend beyond the legal definition of 'aiding and abetting' (pp. 38–39). Hence, Fulbrook discusses specific categories – 'conformity', 'constrained compliance', 'compliance', 'unwilling facilitation', and 'willing facilitation' – which illustrate a crescendo of involvement in wrongdoing, and she introduces the distinction between 'wilfully blinkered benefiting' and 'wittingly benefiting'. She then maps the diverse behaviours that constitute the spectrum of resistance, discussing the notions of 'retreat', 'principled refusal', 'rescue', and 'resistance'. While Fulbrook acknowledges that these categories serve only analytical purposes and is well aware that historical actors often occupy and move between several of these positions, her analytical effort is commendable. Her work provides more specific terminology for reflecting on, evaluating, and deconstructing

not only individual behaviours but, above all, the self-justificatory accounts developed post facto.

In her contribution, Morina focuses entirely on the concept of the bystander, offering a nuanced discussion of this notion as a heuristic device for exploring how the Holocaust unfolded, distinguishing it from the roles of beneficiary and accomplice. Considering bystanding a 'dynamic, relational and context-driven subjective position' (p. 70), Morina examines the various behaviours encompassed by this concept, such as tolerating stigmatising speech, observing violence, as well as making gestures of empathy and solidarity, all while being temporally and spatially proximate to wrongdoing. The latter conceptualisation appears particularly well thought out, as it offers a capacious yet precise understanding of the notion of the bystander that can be applied to the study of other contexts. Both Fulbrook and Morina rightly point out that reflecting on these terminological questions is not merely a classificatory practice but a matter of utmost importance, as the behaviours of ordinary individuals during times of collective violence have significant real-world consequences for victims. Thus, developing a differentiated language to describe the manifold forms of involvement allows us to understand how injustices are perpetrated within actual social structures (p. 36). Moreover, this approach can renew today's collective memory by fostering awareness that historical injustices are typically the result of 'clearly discernible, interwoven social and interpersonal processes', embedded in the everyday life of any society (p. 75), while challenging the comforting, and therefore dangerous, assumption that the collective has already fulfilled its duty to the victims of the past.

Part II, 'Confrontations with Violence', comprises of four historically oriented chapters. Leonid Rein (Chapter 6) reconstructs local complicity in the Holocaust in Belarus, a particularly daunting task for scholars due to the country's multilayered histories of violence and the inaccessibility of former KGB archives under Aleksandr Lukashenko's illiberal regime. The chapter explores Belarus's long history of anti-semitism, the role of the auxiliary police under Nazi occupation, the denunciation of Jews by the local population, and Soviet mythmaking that has shaped the discourse on the past in Belarus. Anne-Lise Bobeldijk (Chapter 7) examines the involvement of actresses in the Nazi cultural and leisure organisation *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength Through Joy) in Eastern Europe, particularly in Minsk. Addressing both the direct and indirect roles that women played in supporting the German occupation – and analysing disturbing, written testimonies that reveal

how these women internalised antisemitic propaganda – the chapter highlights the roles of actresses and leisure organisations in sustaining a genocidal system of domination in Eastern Europe. Stefanie Rauch's contribution (Chapter 8) also addresses gender aspects, focusing on how soldiers, who were required to kill female partisans, rationalised and justified their actions in postwar accounts. Drawing on hundreds of oral history interviews, Rauch examines in depth the accounts of two veterans – one of whom speaks in dialogue with his daughter – that provide the ' frankest discussion of direct, close-range violence' against female fighters (p. 114). The analysis convincingly argues that, in their memory narratives, veterans displaced transgression onto the women they killed, accusing them of having altered natural gender relations and ideals of chivalrous warfare. The chapter concludes with very interesting, albeit briefly developed, reflections on the Wehrmacht exhibition in Austrian memory culture, questioning its long-term effects.

In Chapter 9, Nina Fischer concludes this part of the volume with an analysis of Israeli national narratives about the Nakba, as they are deconstructed in Noam Chayut's memoir, *The Girl Who Stole My Holocaust*, and through the memory activism of the association Breaking the Silence. Written in the context of the prolonged occupation of Palestinian territories, and before Israel's brutal military response to the bloody attack carried out by Hamas on 7 October 2023, the chapter critiques Israeli narratives that underpin the dehumanisation of Palestinians and the notion that any action is justifiable if taken to preserve the Jewish people who have endured persecution throughout history. The inclusion of a chapter on Israel within a section of the volume dedicated to Nazi crimes should not be interpreted as an attempt to draw any form of comparison. Rather, it serves as a meaningful interpolation that underscores the relevance of studying processes of complicity in our contemporary world, as this can generate transferable knowledge that sheds light on both past and present histories of injustice. While Fischer's analysis is balanced and convincing, drawing on appropriate theoretical tools such as the concept of 'moral injury' and James Wertsch's theories of national memory, it also misses an important opportunity. In her reading of Chayut's book – a significant work for examining how Israeli national pedagogy perpetuates injustices against Palestinians – Fischer observes that the text 'shows little interest in complexities and is driven by absolute convictions' (p. 132). This point could have been developed further by openly discussing some of the book's limitations in presenting a more nuanced and multilayered

perspective on the conflict. As scholars, we ought to recognise that only by embracing complexity can there be hope of addressing Israel's unlawful occupations and the longstanding conflict in the Middle East.

The third part of the volume, 'Law, Complicity and Perpetration', includes three chapters from the perspectives of legal history and legal studies. In Chapter 10, Simon Lavis challenges the dominant view that has primarily framed Nazi law as a system of unlawfulness, barbarity, and legal terror – a perspective reminiscent, to anyone familiar with Italian culture, of the discourse that, for much of the twentieth century, regarded Fascist culture merely as a form of non-culture. Instead, Lavis advocates for studying Nazi injustices as acts carried out in accordance with the law, arguing that legal structures functioned as one of the normalising forces that facilitated the genocide by enabling ordinary people to accept it. For readers interested in the construction of consensus and complicity under mass dictatorship, this perspective is likely to resonate as the most fitting. What may sound controversial or surprising is not Lavis's compelling argument but rather the resistance this view appears to have encountered within the legal academy to this day. In Chapter 11, Bastiaan Willems examines the final months of the war in Germany, when the Nazi regime turned against its own citizens by establishing summary courts responsible for the public executions of numerous Germans. Analysing the grassroots participation in these ruthless courts, Willems offers a striking portrayal of the last days of the Third Reich, compellingly arguing that the spiral of violence was driven by a deep-seated fear of a home-front collapse similar to that of 1918 during the Great War (p. 165). In his contribution, Christoph Thonfeld (Chapter 12) reconstructs a comparative history of Nazi trials in Germany and Austria from the 1950s to the 1980s. Considering generational shifts, the mediatisation of society, and the role of magazines and weeklies in shaping the interpretation of Nazi trials, Thonfeld proposes an intriguing periodisation. He notes an excessive focus on individual responsibility in the 1950s and 1960s, followed by a greater emphasis on upbringing, socialisation, and societal factors in the 1970s. As a result, the various tropes used by German and Austrian media to discuss former Nazi trials rarely highlighted the issue of collective structural responsibility for injustice.

This part of the book concludes with a chapter by Francisco Bustos, Cath Collins, and Francisco Ugás (Chapter 13) on the role of civil lawsuits in domestic courts to address past human rights violations in Chile. The chapter outlines the different jurisdictions underlying in-

ternational law, Chile's criminal law, and its civil law, explaining why, for many victims' families, civil venues offered the most viable option for obtaining recognition of their suffering. According to the authors, civil claims in Chile serve as one of the primary avenues for advancing the truth-telling and reparation processes advocated by transitional justice. Thoroughly researched and carefully argued, the chapter posits that a significant issue affecting judicial cases against Chile's dictatorial crimes has been a tendency toward 'individuation', which frames past atrocities as private matters between relatives, survivors, and elderly perpetrators. This tendency has limited the understanding of responsibility by overlooking relational forms of structural complicity that enabled injustices to occur. Yet, this analysis begs the following question: Is it not the role of courts precisely to address individual claims against specific individuals? And if so, might the form of reckoning with the past that the authors propose be more effectively pursued through other cultural practices? Throughout the chapter and in an endnote, the authors refer to what they term 'more progressive judicial opinion and action' (p. 198). These alternative perspectives on the judicial process should have been addressed more directly to critically assess the potential for a form of law and justice capable of transcending the methodological individualism that is inevitably embedded in the contemporary legal system.

The fourth part of the book, 'Framing the Past', includes four chapters that provide in-depth analyses of specific case studies on diverse cultural responses to past perpetration in the postwar era. In Chapter 14, Zoltán Kékesi traces the trajectory of György Oláh, a Hungarian journalist and far-right politician who supported anti-Jewish laws in 1930s Hungary and celebrated the mass deportations organised by the Germans following their occupation of the country. Examining Oláh's postwar career as an émigré in Argentina, Kékesi reveals that, while Oláh acknowledged some of his past actions as mistakes, he found renewed purpose in Argentina's political and cultural landscape, becoming an active proponent of white supremacism and Eurocentric Christian racism in the Southern Cone. Overall, the chapter highlights the pivotal role journalists played in disseminating the language of racism and exclusionary policies of fascist regimes, showing how some were instrumental in transplanting fascist ideologies into new sociopolitical contexts. In Chapter 15, Sue Vice conducts an elegant comparative study of two canonical works on the Holocaust: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989). While

discussing Bauman's conceptualisations of complicity and victim cooperation in the genocide and analysing outtakes from Lanzmann's film, *Vice* highlights the shared understanding of the Holocaust presented by these two classic works – partially shaped by their mutual engagement with Hannah Arendt and Raul Hilberg – while also underscoring significant differences. Bauman employs testimonies and sources to advance a specific thesis on laypeople's cooperation, including that of Jewish victims, within a genocidal system, disguised as an orderly society by the social and technological tools of modernity – a thesis that *Vice* critically examines and often problematises. Lanzmann, by contrast, exercises greater restraint, deciding not to include the question of Jewish cooperation into the final cut of the film and developing an open-ended reflection on issues of testimony and representability.

In Chapter 16, Stephan Jaeger examines a range of Holocaust exhibitions, questioning whether museums can effectively engage with themes of complicity and perpetration and, if so, how. His contribution is both theoretically rich and grounded in diverse case studies. Jaeger develops a theoretical framework based on Dominick LaCapra's empathic unsettlement, the scholarship on experientiality, and the concept of agonistic memory – as theorised by Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen on the basis of Chantal Mouffe's work.⁶ With the help of these theories, Jaeger discusses the representations of the past in the Resistance Museum in Amsterdam, the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, the Caen Memorial Museum in France, and the online exhibition 'Compromised Identities?', curated by the volume's editors – while also addressing a special exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. – objectively discussing the strengths and limitations of these commemorative spaces. Within this balanced analysis, Jaeger expresses a preference for exhibitions that transcend antagonistic perspectives, which position viewers against a group of clearly identifiable perpetrators, and instead promote bottom-up forms of visitors' participation, which allow for more open-ended engagement with the exhibited materials, free from strongly preconceived narratives. Such exhibitions allow for multiperspectivity and nuanced ambiguities, connecting the past to viewers' present experiences while preventing unguarded identification with

6 Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); Chantal Mouffe, 'An agonistic approach to the future of Europe', *New Literary History*, 43.4 (2012), 629–40; Anna Cento Bull and Hans Lauge Hansen, 'On agonistic memory', *Memory Studies*, 9.4 (2016): 390–404.

perpetrators and complicit subjects. In Chapter 17, the editors discuss the online exhibition they curated, which examines how individuals became complicit in the Nazi system and how their experiences have been represented in various cultural forms both before and after 1945. While explaining the project's genesis, describing the exhibition's sections, and reflecting on its reception, the editors situate this curatorial work within scholarly trends, arguing that the problematisation of local complicities and a comprehensive understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics that enable perpetration remain insufficiently addressed in both education and public understanding of the past. Additionally, the chapter provides valuable pedagogical insights for educators teaching the Holocaust with a focus on complicity, including an honest discussion of the use of graphic images for instructional purposes.

The volume – which concludes with a short reflection in which the editors examine the evolution of the understanding of agency in relation to the issues explored in the book – contributes to moving the transnational study of Nazism and the memory of state-led violence towards a more specific focus on complicity and ordinary people's participation in historical injustices. Such an endeavour remains critical for contemporary scholarship, not only because of the deeper understanding it provides of twentieth-century genocides and European mass dictatorships, but also for how it sheds light on other injustices and present-day concerns. In this regard, the volume's inclusion of chapters addressing historical phenomena beyond Nazism, as well as the editors' emphasis on the importance of scholars engaging in metacritical self-reflection regarding their own positionality and relationship to their object of study, are especially welcome. Yet, specific, conceptual choices made in this volume risk limiting the organic growth of this necessary field of enquiry. This is mainly due to the particular critical engagement that the authors of this collective work take towards Michael Rothberg's theorisation of the implicated subject.⁷

The volume deliberately does not make use of this category and advances important criticisms of this idea (pp. 3, 38, 49). The concept of implication is seen as too broad to be really useful, as it aims to capture diverse phenomena such as the differentiated involvement of human beings in the crimes of their times, as well as the relationship between descendants and the injustices of the past – a double value of his concept that Rothberg distinguishes with the ideas of synchronic

7 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

and diachronic implication. While a critical attitude towards categories that surge and dominate scholarly discourse is necessary and marks good scholarly practice, several of the solutions offered in the volume end up re-proposing issues that were central in Rothberg's reflection. Numerous contributors noticed the problems stemming from the use of the terms complicity and bystanding, which do not capture the array of actions and inactions that lead to collective violence. They argue that, in many instances, it is not even feasible to position people along the spectrum between perpetration and complicity. These issues are precisely some of the motives that led Rothberg to adopt a different terminology. Hence, a constructive engagement with Rothberg's concepts would have enriched the discussion, as his concept proves especially useful for analysing situations where terms such as complicity and bystanding fall short of capturing historical reality. In other words, the terminological and conceptual precision that this edited volume aims to achieve would have been increased by a selective adoption of or engagement with Rothberg's concept alongside their critiques of it. This more ecumenical and integrative approach, which would allow a tighter conceptual development of the field, appears highly possible since both the contributors of this excellent edited volume and Rothberg share a common understanding of complicity and implication. They are not seen as essential identities but as relational dynamics, created by the interpersonal, social structures in which human beings live their lives, structures that repeatedly produce injustices and forms of oppression in which, with different degrees of agency and responsibility, we are all involved.

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