

Dan Stone, *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* (London: Pelican Books, 2023), pp. 464.

by *Anna Veronica Pobbe*

In his *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History*, historian Dan Stone attempts to trace the boundaries within which the event that goes by the name of Holocaust is placed today; to do so, the author mainly uses a pathway consisting of chronological steps, which unfold from the birth of the National Socialist Party to the liberation of the camps. Although the book defines the Holocaust as a “phenomenon which troubles all thinking people, as it should” (p. 36), it does not aim to be exhaustive and is intended primarily for Anglo-Saxon readers, given the predominance of scholarly references included in the text related precisely to the academic production from across the Channel.

This is not the first time Stone has measured himself against the themes addressed in *The Holocaust*; in fact, several references to other works by the same author appear in the text. However, unlike the previous works, *The Holocaust* has a threefold ambition: the first is to cover the entire temporal extent of the Holocaust phenomenon; the second is to present itself as the heir to a «traditional» literature on the specific case, represented, especially, by the works of Friedlander and Hilberg; finally, the third ambition is to integrate within this tradition other approaches such as the psychological and anthropological ones.

The book is divided into eight chapters, where the first seven are developed within a time frame covering the years from 1919 to 1950, while the last chapter is devoted exclusively to Holocaust remembrance, with particular reference to the prosecutions of some historians and some memorial policies of European states.

The reader is introduced to the subject by the “Ideology door”: for the author defining the ideological scenario of Nazism is fundamental in order to understand the crimes that will be committed later on, during the war. Nazism is defined as “a paranoid conspiracy theory which believed in history as a redemption story” (p. 44); this movement was successful within German society in that it was perceived first as pure, in comparison to the “rotten” Weimar Republic, and then as a reality capable of “healing” society itself, within a specific idea of history as “something organic” (p. 63).

During the second chapter, “Attack on the Jews 1933-1939,” Stone traces the stages that led to the pogrom of November 1938. The author focuses mainly on the violence of the Nazi message and, quoting Evans, describes how “the leading Nazis wanted to be able to control the violence but ‘in practice continually fuelled it with their rhetoric” (p. 70). The pogrom, within this narrative, is simultaneously a moment of rupture and cohesion, establishing the fundamental dichotomy between perpetrators and victims.

“Before the Final Solution” is the first chapter that begins, gradually, to go beyond German borders. In fact, the author traces the period between 1938 and 1941, dwelling on three issues/moments: the Anschluss and the elaboration of the Viennese Model; the implementation first of T4 and then of 14f13; and the invasion of Poland and the ghettoization process. Regarding T4 in particular, Stone stresses its importance within the Nazi genocidal path: “T4 was thus one vital part of the Nazis’ expanding genocidal visions. Nevertheless, the unique place of the Jews in Nazi ideology means that the Holocaust was not simply a logical extension of the euthanasia program: Jews were not merely regarded as sub-humans who needed to be removed for the sake of race progress; they were also considered a racial threat because of their supposed global power” (p. 113).

It is only in the fourth chapter that the scenario outlined by the author takes on a European dimension: first by talking about the so-called “Holocaust by bullets” and later, in the fifth chapter, by addressing the question concerning the co-participation of other states in the Nazi genocidal project. Regarding the action of the Einsatzgruppen Stone moves within the path already traced by the theory of the common men introduced by Browning “A combination of indoctrination, a routinized brutalization and a sense of obligation to comrades, superiors and the nation facilitated turning family men into mass murderers” (p. 139). As for the issue of collaboration, on the other hand, the author defines the word (collaboration) as “a highly loaded term” that should not be defined solely by “the lenses of the resistance movements, but also as a form of deliberately decided-on behavior and action by groups of people with specific aims in mind” (p. 158) and identifies a “large framework” within which the specific cases of: Vichy Republic, Hungary, Italian Social Republic (RSI), Slovakia, Croatia and Romania.

When it comes to addressing the darkest pages of Holocaust History, the author’s approach is, once again, built upon steps: the Operation Reinhardt camps, the

evolution of Auschwitz, and the subcamps system. In addressing the issue of the *Todeslager*, Stone admits a certain lag in the English-language scholarly production on this specific topic:

Because they were culled before the Allies got there, and because they were discovered by the Red Army[...], because mainly Polish Jews were killed there, and, above all, because there were so few survivors, the Reinhardt camps have long been obscured in Western Europe and the Americas, although the situation has changed somewhat in recent years” (p. 203).

In addressing, however, what is commonly referred to as the *Auschwitz paradox*, Stone seeks to deconstruct its modern/industrial myth and relies on the words of some of the best-known voices on the subject. “Here the combination of racial paranoia, sexual violence, looting and greed, ritual humiliation and what Primo Levi called *unnecessary violence* collide, exemplifying the reality of Auschwitz: not a factory of death in the sense of a clean and efficient site of genocide (as if such a thing could exist), but an abattoir of concentrated genocidal fantasy” (p. 211).

The three sub-sections (“Death Marches,” “Liberation and Displaced Persons - Refugees – Survivors”) that are part of the chapter “Great is the Wrath” are united by one very strong theme: suffering, first declined almost exclusively in physical terms and then increasingly psychological and emotional ones. It is in this part that the narrative effort to give voice to the testimonies appears most evident, making heavy use of the work done by Dawid Boder. As mentioned before, the last chapter is devoted, exclusively, to the Holocaust memory, which is defined as “far from being a comfortable place to inhabit for the liberal-minded, is now highly contested, confusing and not a little disorienting” (p. 276). Inside these last pages, the author aims to show the challenges of the Holocaust memory but he wants also to come back to the radical nature of the Holocaust, which “lay in the way in which modern characteristics such as science, bureaucracy or railways were used to intensify and make manifest of non-rational fantasy thinking that underpinned Nazism and was itself a product of modern age” (p. 285).

Overall, Stone’s work should be valued not by its exhaustiveness but by its attempt to bridge cultural history, social history, and the history of ideas inside the frame of the Holocaust. One remark should be made also regarding the title, which seems

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quite misleading: the book is more a collective report of the Anglo-Saxon historiography on the matter, than a look into the new waves of studies. Maybe one of the greatest accomplishments of this volume is the role that it gives to the readers; page after page, in fact, the author suggests a simple but very important question: “Who do we talk to when we talk about Holocaust History?”.

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