

## Archives, Scholarship, and Politics in the Study of the Romani Genocide: A Response to Marius Turda and Anton-Weiss-Wendt

by Ari Joskowitz

I would like to begin by thanking Marius Turda and Anton Weiss-Wendt for their generous and careful comments before taking the opportunity to clarify some fundamental methodological points.<sup>1</sup> Turda, Weiss-Wendt, and I agree on a great deal, so allow me to highlight these aspects first. Each of us is heartened by the increasing attention that scholars, politicians, and Holocaust educators are now giving the Nazi genocide of European Roma. Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a growing number of serious studies on the subject, notable progress in state-based and grassroots memorialization, and an increasing awareness among university instructors and museum pedagogues of the importance of bringing attention to the history of the Romani genocide.

We can quibble, of course, about how far we have come. While I share my colleagues' general sense of progress, I am less convinced than Weiss-Wendt that the relevance of the Romani genocide is beyond dispute among scholars. As Turda notes, in 2024, two major studies on the persecution and stigmatization of Roma appeared in English translations. Weiss-Wendt also mentions works that cover the genocides against Jews and Roma alike. Yet, there are many other examples that might lead us to draw different conclusions. It certainly seems premature to me to claim, as Weiss-Wendt does, that one "hardly finds a Holocaust synthesis on the market today that would not incorporate the victimization of the Roma." Some of the most successful recent syntheses, Peter Hayes' *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (2017) and Dan Stone's *The Holocaust: An Unfinished History* (2023), offer only a few words on the subject.

My book addresses these shortcomings of Holocaust scholarship by focusing on one revealing aspect: the history of Romani-Jewish relations. Weiss-Wendt is right to note that my attempt to explore that relationship does not put the emphasis on

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<sup>1</sup> Marius Turda, discussion of *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust*, by Ari Joskowitz, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 25, no. 1 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/14967; Anton Weiss-Wendt, discussion of *Rain of Ash: Roma, Jews, and the Holocaust*, by Ari Joskowitz, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 25, no. 1 (2024), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/14964

those places where the Nazis and their allies murdered the majority of Roma. This is not so much an oversight on my part than a decision guided by one of the fundamental questions that drive my book: how Jewish attempts to document that past have changed the way we understand the Romani genocide. By answering this question, I seek not just a deeper understanding of Jewish and Romani history but also a deeper understanding of our ability to know the past. This includes, most importantly, an emphasis on resources, rather than the more common themes of memory, representation, and the political will to learn about the past. To make this argument, I focused on places where Jewish and Romani victims interacted, particularly those that left an entwined documentary trail and inspired later memory work. In so doing, I sought to offer insights into the different forms these interactions took, rather than pursue a comprehensive account or one driven by the number of dead in different locations.

The discrepancy between the geography of my inquiry into Romani-Jewish relations and the places where the greatest number of Romani were murdered nonetheless raises interesting questions. Weiss-Wendt points to the importance of acknowledging the experiences of Russian-speaking Roma, who, he suggests, perished in numbers comparable to those of German-speaking Roma but whose histories receive much less attention. It will be the task of others to address this imbalance. Yet, as I sought to illuminate in other respects in my book, imbalances in coverage and scholarship have their own histories. Some of this has to do with the very moment of the crimes committed against different Sinti and Roma communities and the much more detailed documentation that crimes against German Romani populations left. In Germany, postwar survivors also inherited a more elaborate infrastructure of historical documentation than did Roma in the occupied Soviet Union. Roma in Germany have been able to build on the country's active memorial culture, strong research universities, and a ferment of individuals who are willing to tackle legacies of genocide. In spite of the deep and continuing history of anti-Romani discrimination in Germany, this infrastructure has allowed German Sinti and Roma to tell their stories more effectively than members of many other Romani communities have been able to do. While Weiss-Wendt insists that memory politics and academic work should be strictly distinguished, his own example of the biased representations of Europe's history of genocide hints at the way they can be entwined.

Archives and systematic documentation efforts are one major part of this story, although they play a slightly smaller role in my book than they did in the article that Weiss-Wendt anonymously reviewed many years ago.<sup>2</sup> While he may feel that I did not sufficiently take his critiques into consideration at that juncture, I agree that we need to qualify where and when Jewish archives were important for Romani history. In *Rain of Ash*, I focus on a cluster of institutions that states or civil society groups established to document the Nazi murder of Jews, study the Holocaust as part of a larger focus on genocide, or explore racially-driven extermination policies as part of their mission to research the Nazi occupation of their country. Jewish survivors frequently played a major role in these institutions, much as they did in the field of Holocaust Studies in general. In the book, I contend that these institutions continue to curate collections and access points for information that crucially change how we study Romani history and 20<sup>th</sup>-century politics and societies at large. Clearly the ones I chose to focus on are not the only ones out there. In many contexts, historians who made major contributions to the history of the Romani Holocaust have relied on centralized state archives or regional and municipal collections. Michael Zimmerman’s ground-breaking habilitation *Rassenutopie und Genocid*, which Weiss-Wendt cites, offers an important example of this.

Yet, my argument about “infrastructure” goes further than this. As Weiss-Wendt noted, I am particularly interested in the material bases that makes historical work possible. Here many of the examples that Weiss-Wendt mentions are more closely tied to Jewish documentation efforts than he concedes. Zimmermann’s work, for example, emerged in a context in which Jewish individuals and institutions supplied crucial resources. Zimmermann first started working on the topic as a postdoctoral assistant in a project directed by the Jewish public intellectual Micha Brumlik, among others, and found employment at the Jewish cultural center of the Old Synagogue in Essen once that project ended. Weiss-Wendt’s example of his own research center is also revealing. Although he suggests that Jews were not involved in research and exhibition-making on Romani victims in Norway and that this research did not rely on “Jewish archives,” he fails to mention that the

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<sup>2</sup> Ari Joskowicz, “Separate Suffering, Shared Archives: Jewish and Romani Histories of Nazi Persecution,” *History and Memory* 28, no. 1 (2016): 110-140.

Norwegian government founded the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, where he works, as a means to offer a moral reckoning for the confiscation of Jewish property during the war and as a result of lobbying on the part of Norway's Jewish community. Its statutes say its first mission is the study of the Jewish Holocaust and antisemitism.<sup>3</sup> I note this not to challenge the research that either Zimmermann or Weiss-Wendt's center has produced in any way, but to suggest that we cannot understand the rise of their scholarship without the efforts previously put in place by Jewish communities.

The fact that Jews were involved in such efforts will not matter substantially in every single case, of course, just as not all documentation centers of the Jewish Holocaust have contributed to the study of the Romani Holocaust. Yad Vashem, cited at length in Weiss-Wendt's response to my book, is indeed a notable counterexample. Its efforts to copy material, its fellowship program, and its publications have largely ignored the Romani genocide.<sup>4</sup> The reasons for this are multifold. Most importantly, the Israeli archive is defined by its mission to focus on Jewish victims and to frame their fate to visitors of the memorial site within the narrative of Jewish nationalism and state-making. None of this changes the overarching argument of my book. One can highlight the unique nexus of Jewish and Romani efforts to account for the past and still concede that some Jewish archives have been reluctant to include Romani material and also that much important work has been done in state archives.

Weiss-Wendt's comments on the place of state archives make apparent the most significant disagreement that emerges in this forum: he and I have fundamentally divergent views of the nexus between archives, scholarship, and politics. This disagreement goes to the heart of my project and debates in the field writ large. It is a highly productive disagreement, in my view.

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<sup>3</sup> "Statutes for The Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies," Articles of Association for the Center for studies of Holocaust and Minorities. Adopted by the University of Oslo the 27 March 2001 with amendments adopted on 21 January 2003 and amendment adopted by the Vice-Chancellor 16 November 2005. <https://www.hlsenteret.no/english/about/statutes/> accessed June 21, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> There are some exceptions: Roma figure in many testimonies of Jewish survivors, which Yad Vashem started collecting very early thanks to Rachel Auerbach. Boaz Cohen, "Rachel Auerbach, Yad Vashem, and Israeli Holocaust Memory," in *Making Holocaust Memory*, *Polin* 20 (Oxford, UK: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2008), 197-221. There are, however, no original Romani oral history interviews in their collection.

Weiss-Wendt asserts that, archives, “in their traditional form, function merely as knowledge banks.” Yet, their holdings, cataloguing, and accessibility policies are hardly neutral. They follow their own political logic, which is the central theme of a whole wave of scholarship associated with the “archival turn.”<sup>5</sup> We can defend our discipline’s methods, I believe, without abandoning all questions of state archive’s unintentional and deliberate decisions to highlight and obscure certain realities.

Weiss-Wendt is right, of course, that these archives deal differently with the documentation of Nazi mass murder than do Holocaust documentation centers. Whereas the new institutions founded to study the Holocaust copied only parts of holdings according to their perceived relevance to their mission, state archives keep core collections intact and organized according to the bureaucratic unit that originally produced or retained the files.<sup>6</sup> In archival study, this principle of maintaining provenance is called respect des fonds. In this sense, archives focused on documents produced by a single state seemingly “avoided the pitfall of recontextualization,” as Weiss-Wendt claims.<sup>7</sup>

Yet reality has always been much messier than the principle. Let me mention just two issues that challenged the straightforward application of respect des fonds: First, ministerial authorities often retained and reorganized material from predecessor administrations with different agendas. States also frequently transferred sub-collections to other state archives as a result of territorial conquest and peace treaties. In an age of profound regime and border changes, these were not trivial issues.

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<sup>5</sup> Apart from the crucial work of early modernists, scholarship on colonial archives has broken new ground here. See, for example, Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). Newer works also deal more with the domestic collections of state archives: Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> This difference has been central to crucial studies on Jewish historical archives. Lisa Moses Leff, *The Archive Thief: The Man Who Salvaged French Jewish History in the Wake of the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Jason Lustig, *A Time to Gather: Archives and the Control of Jewish Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Weiss-Wendt notes that state archives have often balked at assembling oral history archives and thus remained “pure” in the application of these principles. Nearly all state archives have vast holdings of collected papers from politicians, military leaders, and famous individuals, however, collections which raise the same issues.

If we explore the history of state paperwork, its retention, and its use, it also becomes clear that the “pitfall of recontextualization” does not only happen when archives copy partial holdings from another archive. Bureaucracies are recontextualization machines, reframing interactions in a particular language, obscuring some acts of violence while highlighting others.<sup>8</sup> Historians themselves are trained recontextualizers of documents and information. Much like administrators and archivists, they make decisions based on their background, politics, and more. Whether “historical analysis is embedded in rational choice,” as Weiss-Wendt claims, depends on our understanding of the terms “embedded” and “rational choice.” The same goes for the idea that documents find historians, not the other way around, a notion he attributes to the historian Martin Dean. It is hard to know precisely what to make of this suggestion, since Weiss-Wendt writes only that “Dean told this anecdote in private conversation sometime in 2003.” I am happy to agree if it is meant to propose that good historians should seek to arrive at conclusions that are transparent and compelling based on professional standards. I also certainly believe that historians need to be open to unexpected finds and permanently rethink their interpretive frameworks based on the materials they encounter. I disagree, however, if this is supposed to suggest that documents speak for themselves and that historians merely articulate the truth that they find ready-made in the archive.

Following basic assumptions of the archival turn does not mean that we cannot draw clear lines “between memory politics and academic research” as Weiss-Wendt argues that I should have done. At their core, academic history, the historical work of identity and interest groups, and personal memory are not the same thing. Each has different priorities, constraints, and conventions, which is not to say that we cannot—or should not—interrogate each with related questions about their tacit assumptions, framings, and institutional frameworks. Weiss-Wendt writes about the important work done at the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies where he works. He has good reason to be proud

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<sup>8</sup> For a deep history of bureaucracies, the law, and filing systems, see Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, Meridian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008). On the results in the archive, see, among others, Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

of its achievements. I am sure that researchers at the United States Holocaust Museum, Yad Vashem, and any other genocide research center for that matter would reflect on their publications and exhibits in similar terms, emphasizing the professional standards they employ in their research, their careful interpretation of documents, and eschewing the idea that their scholarship is determined by preconceived notions or political platforms. I feel the same way about my own work. Yet, that sentiment is moderated by the abstract knowledge that there is more to how we arrive at our conclusions, irrespective of how objective we may strive to be.

I don't want to fight a theoretical battle here between positivist and constructivist views of history or the archive. Yet in practical terms, I believe we lose something profound and fundamental when we emphasize "rational choice" and claim that records or categories in particular archives have "no subjective quality." Doing so discards questions that can help us rethink our own approach and improve our methods. Yes, we need to defend the discipline against politicized claims that historians are merely cynical agents of powerful interests. Still, I cannot subscribe to Weiss-Wendt's notion that "Academic scholarship, obviously, does not approach history from the vantage point of advantages for any chosen subject of research." The problem here is the word "obviously." The same empirically minded historical scholarship that he wants to defend shows us that academic scholarship of the past—whether in colonial empires, fascist states, under socialism, or in the Cold-War West—has represented the advantages of particular groups.

We should also remain attuned to the fact that genocide research of the type Weiss-Wendt highlights is a subfield that differs from other areas of historical study. The tendency of many scholars to emphasize the difference between memory and historical scholarship or to insist on the importance and possibility of apolitical primary source work is paradoxically an outcome of the field's role in commemorative work and politics.<sup>9</sup> Weiss-Wendt highlights how his center created new lists of names, added panels to a state-supported exhibit, and convinced the government to issue an apology for the state's actions under Nazi

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<sup>9</sup> It is, of course, not unique to that field. On the development of truth claims, see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

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occupation. I can see how that type of work requires particular truth claims. Holocaust Studies focused on particular killing operations, as described by Weiss-Wendt, can also frequently rely on state sources in ways that other fields cannot. Romani history—like Jewish history for most of the past millennia—is the attempt to account for the presence of a group that did not pursue or succeed in ethnic state capture. It is largely ethnicized, transnational, non-state history. The notion that professional history worthy of its name exclusively consists of discovering documentary evidence of state actions in state archives does not do justice to this task.

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