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# Acknowledgements

As we believe the saying should go, “no woman is an island.” This is particularly true for this volume, which could not have been created without the work and support of many individuals and institutions.

The editors want to warmly thank the institutions under whose auspices the conference was organized—Comenius University in Bratislava (the Department of General History at the Faculty of Arts, in particular), the Institute of History at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, and the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich. Thank you to the staff at Comenius University who enabled us make our conference a success. Thanks to Professor Eduard Nižňanský for early support and the motivation to organize the conference.

We are grateful to the partners that cooperated with in organizing the conference: the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI), the Faculty of Arts of Palacký University, Olomouc, the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, the Department of History at the University of Szeged, as well as the Sereď Holocaust Museum.

We are more than thankful to the institutions offering us financial support, without whom we could not have brought together such amazing scholars. They are the Visegrad Fund, Comenius University in Bratislava, the Goethe Institute Bratislava, the Polish Institute in Bratislava, the French Embassy, and the Israeli Embassy in Slovakia.

Furthermore, we would like to express our gratitude to the institutions providing the additional financial support that made possible the publication of the book you are holding in your hands. Our thanks go to the Institute of History at the Slovak Academy of Sciences (Project APVV-15-0349—The Individual and Society: Their Mutual Reflection in the Historical Process), the Slovak Research and Development Agency

(APVV-18-0333), the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava, the Polish Institute in Bratislava, and Paideia—The European Institute for Jewish Studies in Sweden. The vital bureaucratic work was taken on by the Vincent Múcska (the head of the Department of General History), the department's treasurer, Dr. Eva Škorvánková (a contributor to this volume), and the department's administrators Mária Bajbarová, Viera Feriancová, and Oľga Petreková. We want to warmly thank all the conference's participants, including those whose work is not featured in this volume. In particular, we want to thank our co-organizer Dr. Anna Ullrich for her dedication to the project.

Thank you to Academic Studies Press for providing the opportunity to publish our work and to Alessandra Anzani for her involvement in pushing it forward. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their extensive comments on the manuscript.<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Wolfgang Schellenbacher from the EHRI Document Blog for giving us the opportunity to share our research in a more popular setting. The blog contributions of conference participants are collected at <https://blog.ehri-project.eu>.

Thank you to all those who have encouraged this project from its conception to its realization. We are honored to collaborate with such intelligent, dedicated, and concerned individuals, and have enjoyed their support for this project. If these are the women and allies we could work together with in every project, we believe that academia would certainly be richer and more supportive.

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1 Authors were responsible for the implementation of reviewers' comments.

# Foreword: Unholy Alliances

Andrea Pető

We all know the value of the discussions during conference breaks. These are the moments when experts on gender and women's history usually talk to each other about their marginalization in the profession. Unless they find the separately flagged "gender" panels and special issues of peer-reviewed journals comforting, not much has changed in the power dynamics of the historical profession in the past decades. In the institutional inertia, the concept of "gender" as an analytical category has gone through a major transformation. Joan Scott, in her very influential and widely quoted Siegrist lecture of 2001, pointed this out in her article entitled "Gender as a Category of Historical Analysis," published in the *American Historical Journal* in 1986, did not bring the expected intellectual and political breakthrough. Instead of a major epistemological transformation by applying gender as a category of analysis, it led to "genderism," meaning that researchers used gender as a category of analysis ignoring intersectional approaches that take into consideration other differences.<sup>1</sup>

Those who are working in the field of Holocaust and Jewish studies are of course familiar with these complexities of institutionalization and application of gender as a category of analysis too well. They do not even need a conference break to recall that the famous debate about "asking the wrong question" has a long shadow, especially when jobs are scarce

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1 Joan W. Scott, "Millennial Fantasies. The Future of 'Gender' in the 21st Century," in *Gender: Die Tücken einer Kategorie*. Joan W. Scott, *Geschichte und Politik. Beiträge zum Symposium anlässlich der Verleihung des Hans-Sigrist-Preises 1999 der Universität Bern an Joan W. Scott*, ed., Claudia Honegger and Caroline Arni (Zürich: Kronos-Verlag, 2001, 19–37.

anyway.<sup>2</sup> Historians working on gendering the Holocaust are also struggling not only of the remasculinization of their profession but also the resistance of history writing against these epistemological challenges. Sara Horowitz sets out two aims for those undertaking gender analyses of the Holocaust: “recovering the experiences of women and reshaping or nuancing Holocaust memory.”<sup>3</sup> The first approach—“recovering the experiences of women”—seeks to gather the lost and neglected stories of the Holocaust; the second focuses on the framework, or rather settings, in which these stories are situated.

Recently, however, unexpected allies showed up on the thus far quite gloomy horizon of gender historians of the Holocaust. A number of books and journal articles covering this “recovery of the experiences of women” during the Holocaust has, surprisingly, increased. But these new allies are only interested in the first task set by Horowitz: to recover women’s voices as they were. Representatives are returning to the main objective of women’s history writing of the 1970s, but with a very different political agenda. This “her-story turn” is a result of the failed epistemological change in history writing together with the illiberal memory turn. Their aim is to recover female figures, mainstreaming them into the very center of national history where they failed to find a “proper home” in the past decades.<sup>4</sup> The ongoing illiberal shift demonstrates that feminists do not have a monopoly to write women’s history, just as they cannot count on their monopoly to politically represent women. They have to prove that they are better, more relevant and first of all more interesting. *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust* is an attempt to do exactly that: because if we fail, there will not be too many conferences in the future to complain about marginalization over coffee.

2 Andrea Pető, Louise Hecht, and Karoline Krasuska, eds., *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges* (Warszawa: IBL, 2015).

3 Sara R. Horowitz, “Gender, Genocide, and Jewish Memory,” *Prooftexts* 20, nos. 1–2 (2000): 176.

4 Andrea Pető, “Roots of Illiberal Memory Politics: Remembering Women in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution,” *Baltic Worlds* 10, no. 4 (2017): 42–58.

# Introduction

Denisa Nešťáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer,  
Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik

When we decided to organize a conference on the history of World War II and the Holocaust with an emphasis on gender, we believed the subject was well-established. Despite this, we were faced with predictable stereotypes when a senior (male) scholar encouraged us to “invite some of your women, and have a female meeting” during the initial stages of the conference planning in 2017. We decided to interpret the comment as a challenge and set out to conceptualize a conference that would go far beyond his suggestion.

As organizers, we were interested in providing a space to discuss gender and gendered experiences within the context of World War II and the Holocaust, research by scholars from East-Central Europe or those working on topics focused on this geopolitical space. Spreading the word through and beyond “[our] women,” we received almost ninety applications from academics all around the world wanting to take part in the second “XX. Century Conference: If This Is a Woman” at Comenius University Bratislava. Under the subheading “If This Is A Woman,” the conference took place on January 21–23, 2019, in cooperation with the Institute of History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava, and the Center for Holocaust Studies at the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History, Munich. Ultimately, we were able to accept only eighteen speakers: our “female meeting” seemed to have sparked quite an interest among academics, doctoral students, and early career researchers, no matter the gender.

Anyone arranging a conference on gender will struggle not only to make selections from a large pool of quality work, but also with regard to the gender of speakers. Part of the reason for setting up a gender-focused

conference is precisely to offer female researchers a space for discussion that is not dominated (or less dominated) by gender-based power structures. We found ourselves in the privileged position of additionally being able to refine our selection in the light of two factors important to us as young researchers ourselves. One was bringing together established and non-established scholars in an environment in which each person's work could be reviewed critically, yet not destructively. We wanted to create structures of support which would link the academic and the private, could be built for the long term, and serve not only to mitigate the competitive atmosphere prevalent in much of academia, but also contribute to a positive mutual encounter that would reach far beyond our conference. The other was to highlight research on East-Central Europe as a geopolitical space decisively shaped by processes of occupation, collaboration, and perpetration during the Second World War and the Holocaust. Relevant writing in English-language publications is often produced by scholars from Northern America or Western Europe. Next to the factors of gender and the level of academic advancement, it was therefore a political imperative of this conference to encourage and support a stronger international inclusion of scholars from East-Central Europe.

A further issue faced by those organizing a conference on "gender" is how to handle the oftentimes prevalent equation of "gender" with "women" or "female" experiences. We did not help ourselves by giving it the title "If This Is A Woman." Luckily, Gender Studies in itself has always been interdisciplinary and, ideally, intersectional, and we believe that the present volume, as a presentation of some of the significant research discussed during the conference, is not required to restrict itself to a narrow conception of gendered experiences during World War II and the Holocaust. By purposely emphasizing female experience in the title, we hope we will encourage others to fill the lacunae that still—four decades after the enrichment of Holocaust studies by way of attention to gender—exist when it comes to female experiences. At the same time, any study of women must also keep in mind the gendered experiences of others. In this way, it increases its usefulness by being both a form of analysis and a comparative method.

## **The Necessity of a Gender Focus and Its Connection to Democratic Values in East-Central Europe**

Our having to work hard to push through the conference's proposed topic against initial reservations, mentioned previously, is certainly not unheard



of. Throughout the history of feminist scholarship, many scholars have had to face not only dismissive comments, but also verbal accusations and attacks on their work, including from their peers. One of the notorious cases in our field is that of Joan Ringelheim, one of the earliest feminist historians, working in the 1980s, to devote herself to working on the lives of women during the Holocaust. She was accused of appropriating the Holocaust to forward her feminist program, presenting it as another example of female oppression rather than a uniquely Jewish tragedy.<sup>1</sup> In the same way, when Zoë Waxman presented a paper addressing the subject of rape and sexual abuse during the Holocaust, her research was dismissed and deemed unworthy of discussion.<sup>2</sup> Though much has changed since, particularly due to the pioneering work of these scholars,<sup>3</sup> similar attacks continued well into the 2010s. To mention one example, Anna Hájková, who writes on queer Holocaust experiences, was accused of using the history of the Holocaust to support her “queer agenda” in an attempt to discredit her work.<sup>4</sup>

We believe that the discussion of gender as a fundamental component of human experience belongs in every conference, public debate, and academic institution. Understanding both majority society and persecuted groups is essential to writing the history of World War II and the Holocaust. Fascism, especially in its most radical form in National Socialist Germany, is generally seen as a quintessentially male ideology that is virulently opposed to feminism and advocates a kind of “kitchen-slavery.”<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 See Joan Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” *Signs* 10, no. 4 (1985): 741–761. For more on the initial criticism of a feminist approach to Holocaust research, see Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), xvii–xxvii; Marion Kaplan, “Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?,” *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 37–56.
  - 2 See Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
  - 3 For another work of exceptional significance, see Sonja M. Hedepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, eds., *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (Boston: Brandeis University Press, 2010).
  - 4 For example, see Anna Hájková, “How We’ve Suppressed the Queer History of the Holocaust,” *Haaretz*, May 2, 2019, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/.premium-why-we-ve-suppressed-the-queer-history-of-the-holocaust-1.5823923>. Her extensive work on the topic includes Anna Hájková, “Den Holocaust queer erzählen,” *Jahrbuch Sexualitäten* (2018): 86–110.
  - 5 Fascism was called “kitchen slavery” as early as 1934. See Palme R. Dutt, *Fascism and Social Revolution* (London: International Publishers, 1935), 241.

Most fascists around the world in the thirties and forties indeed argued that a woman's place was in the home—an approach epitomized by the Nazis' infamous “three Ks” (*Kinder, Küche, Kirche*), and Hitler's comment in 1934 that the German woman's world was “her husband, her family, her children, and her home.”<sup>6</sup> The picture is more complex, however. Some fascist movements promised to respect women's rights and the progress made in emancipation, but in fact advocated policies that would remove most of these. For example, soon after coming into power most fascist regimes stopped professing any interest in bringing about female suffrage and emancipation. Women's sections in various organizations were quickly subordinated to all-male branches and the authorities began to insist that women's responsibilities lay in the home.

Gender also played a key role in the lives of individuals in population groups deemed “racially inferior”—and who, as a consequence (even, of course, before the war), were socially excluded, persecuted, and in the case of Jews and Roma faced with mass murder. It determined how much danger someone was in as well as which social structures they could access and inhabit, whether in the camps, ghettos, or in hiding. Jewish men, for example, could be physically identified through circumcision, reducing their chances of “passing” in Gentile spaces. However, they also had a greater chance of avoiding immediate extermination in concentration camps by being selected for forced labor. Jewish women, on the other hand, were for the most part responsible for children. Labeled “unproductive,” their chance of survival in the camps was greatly diminished. Furthermore, they were more exposed to sexual assaults and were less likely to be accepted in underground or partisan movements.<sup>7</sup> In writing the history of Nazi persecution and murder in the German Reich and occupied countries from 1933 to 1945, then, it is crucial to examine and include experiences shaped by gender.

Despite the quality of the scholarship that introduced feminist theory into Holocaust studies, (political) counter-narratives against a gender focus have strengthened in the last years. This development is particularly

6 Max Doramus, *The Complete Hitler: A Digital Desktop Reference to His Speeches and Proclamations, 1932–1945* (Mundelein: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1990), 532.

7 For the gender-based persecution of Jewish women, see e.g. Marion A. Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany: Daily Life, Daily Struggles, 1933–1939,” *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 579–606. For the gender-based persecution of Jewish men, see e.g. the article by Florian Zabransky in this volume.

frustrating in light of the #metoo movement and its impact on the academic landscape and within academic power structures. Gender Studies has been taught for about fifty years and there is an increasing acceptance of the historical and contemporary presence of women—both as subjects *in* history and as subjects *writing* history. Yet many academics, as well as broader society, are still unsympathetic and indifferent. Moreover, there is a small number of people who have the clout not only to hold back Gender Studies as discipline, but also put barriers in the way of scholars working in the field. This can affect feminist historians' academic standing and potentially prevent them carrying out their work.

In the geopolitical space of East-Central Europe, attacks on Gender Studies have recently become particularly common. These include attempts to delegitimize its academic credibility by disparaging discussions of specifically female historical questions. Approaches that look beyond heteronormative male experience challenge the dominant—that is, patriarchal—historical narrative, which gets its status from its claim to represent the whole of society. When women's history and experiences, as well as those of minorities, are taken into account, the dominant historical narrative is interrupted. Historians who benefit from a homogenous narrative, upon which their claim to objectivity rests, do not want to acknowledge the subtleties of societal and national self-understanding. Today, many countries in East-Central Europe with rightwing populist governments have introduced policies aimed at boosting fertility and reviving so-called “traditional family values.”<sup>8</sup> Inevitably, this political turn has had an impact on the field of Gender Studies too.

In the three years between our conference's initial planning in 2017 and the finalization of the present publication in April 2020, we witnessed and endured an unexpectedly powerful backlash against Gender Studies and women's rights in East-Central Europe. There was an offensive against the ideas of “progress,” gender equality, and individual freedom. In recent years, and in certain European countries, the devaluation of the humanities

8 See, for example, “Hungarian action plan seeks to dramatically increase birth rate by 2030,” *Hungarian Free Press*, 25 May 2017, <http://hungarianfreepress.com/2017/05/25/hungarian-action-plan-seeks-to-dramatically-increase-birth-rate-by-2030/>; “Hungary's new constitution: Family friendly, hostile to gays,” *Euractiv*, 28 March, 2011, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/hungary-s-new-constitution-family-friendly-hostile-to-gays/>; “Novák: Hungary's Family Policy Both Conservative and Modern,” *Hungary Today*, accessed September 4, 2020, <https://hungarytoday.hu/novak-hungary-family-policy-conservative-modern/>.

in its entirety is now taking place, with Gender Studies singled out as a special target. To mention a recent example: the Hungarian government banned Gender Studies at universities in 2018, arguing that it represented “ideology” rather than science, that it was not a profitable discipline, and that scholars in Gender Studies were of no value to the labor market.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, Slovakia has been continuously refusing ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The reasoning behind the rejection of the convention, meant to prevent and combat violence against women, is based on populist politics. The government claims that the document promotes a “gender ideology” that blurs the boundaries between the sexes, undermines traditional family values, and invites “moral decay” into the country.<sup>10</sup>

Attacks on Gender Studies, such as the ones coming from the governments of Hungary, Slovakia, and Poland at the time of writing this introduction cannot ever be read simply as hostility towards scholarship, its methodologies, sources, or analytic approaches. They are always followed by attacks on women’s (and minorities’) rights and need to be fought. As we have said, Gender Studies aims for the intersectional inclusion of women’s experiences into otherwise homogenous historical narratives. The suppression of Gender Studies currently taking place in regions of East-Central Europe, we believe, part of a gradual move towards a rejection of democratic values.

The “XX. Century Conference: If This Is a Woman” was organized with the explicit aim of standing against anti-gender narratives and related attacks on academic freedom and women’s rights described above.

## The Articles

The volume begins by discussing theoretical approaches to Holocaust studies through a gender lens. Dalia Ofer’s contribution, based on the conference’s keynote speech, looks back on almost forty years of research that has integrated female voices and experiences into Holocaust historiography. Natalia Aleksium’s article traces the “familial turn” in Holocaust scholarship,

9 Becky Prager, “The Hungarian Ban on Gender Studies and Its Implications for Democratic Freedom,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender*, accessed April 28, 2020, <https://harvardjlg.com/2019/01/the-hungarian-ban-on-gender-studies-and-its-implications-for-democratic-freedom/>.

10 “Slovakia’s parliament rejects women’s rights treaty,” ABC News, February 25, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/slovakias-parliament-rejects-womens-rights-treaty-69207493>.

work that has taken the family as a fundamentally gendered social institution and thereby opened up a new area of research—studies that puts women's and men's experiences front and center.

The next section concentrates on gender expectations, as well as lived reality under occupation and authoritarian regimes. Agnes Laba examines shifts in conceptions of masculinity under German occupation in various European countries during World War II. Her work also examines how changes in the perception of masculinity and its expression in everyday life influenced women's conceptions of themselves and their roles in society. Eva Škorvánkova's article on the feminine ideal propagated by the authoritarian Slovak state from 1930 to 1945 also adopts this comparative stance. She draws out the consistencies and changes to prewar gender expectations by examining print media aimed at young girls.

The following group of articles emphasizes the gendered experience of life in two internment camps run by the authoritarian Slovak state, underlining the conference's focus on East-Central Europe. Reading the testimony of their children, Denisa Nešťáková discusses the role of mothers in the labor camp of Sered'. She builds on the "familial turn" and argues that children's testimony is a vital historical source. Finally, Marína Zavacká analyzes the experiences of women in the detainment camp of Ilava, concluding that the experiences of women, aside from their labor allocation, was not significantly different from those of men.

The next section of this volume shows that persecution sometimes enhanced the influence and power of women. Anna Nedlin-Lehrer discusses Zivia Lubetkin and Havka Folman Raban, both part of the Zionist youth movement Dror and its resistance activities in the Warsaw ghetto. Through case studies, she investigates the different positions women could hold in egalitarian organizations before and during the Holocaust, and develops a nuanced understanding of both breaks and continuations of prewar gender roles. Laurien Vastenhout, who examines Gertrude van Tijn and Juliette Stern, female members of the Jewish Councils in Netherlands and France, traces these two women's spaces of actions in a male-dominated atmosphere. Neither article argues that women were necessarily offered more spaces of action during wartime; rather, the authors examine the extraordinary situations of women who were, in fact, both on their own initiative and through the positions allotted to them, able to offer significant contributions to counteracting German persecution in both official and underground structures.

Networks of rescue and resistance from the perspective of women, particularly the challenges and dangers they entailed, is the focus of the next section. Joanna Sliwa, focusing on female non-Jewish aid givers who sheltered Jewish children in occupied Cracow, examines the betrayal of these Polish women by their neighbors and family members. She shows how these women, who were faced with threats in the private, domestic sphere, struggled with both fulfilling and transgressing traditional gender norms under extreme circumstances. The female role in resistance activities is further underlined by Hannah Wilson. In her article, she studies female accounts of the uprising in the death camp Sobibor. In the larger narrative surrounding this major act of Jewish resistance, testimony given by female survivors has in general not been noticed adequately. Wilson convincingly demonstrates that the female perspectives which can be found in oral testimony or memoirs can enrich our knowledge of the uprising. Women's work in the resistance is further elaborated on in the article by Modiane Zerdoun-Daniel, which offers a closer view of Jewish female partisans in Lithuania, and the challenges posed by the intersection of Jewish identity and female gender.

One of the greatest problems Jewish women faced was their increased vulnerability to sexualized violence. This topic is explored by Marta Havryshko, who analyzes the handling of rape survivors' testimonies in the Soviet prosecution of Ukrainian Nazi collaborators. The topic of male sexuality and its expression is taken up by Florian Zabransky, who explores how three male Jewish teenagers reflect on their sexuality in Nazi Germany in their postwar testimony. Focusing on the transmission of male sexual performativity, Zabransky argues that sexuality, in the boys' and young men's recollections, is linked with youth, questions of belonging, and identity, as well as the concept of courage.

Together, the articles in this volume, diverse in their methodology and thematic foci, offer a multifaceted contribution to the field of gendered experiences in the Holocaust and World War II.

## **Concluding Remarks: COVID-19, Attacks on Gender Studies, and Democratic Values**

The final stages of editing and compiling this book took place in April 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe. The measures implemented by governments to contain the disease's spread have made us

reflect on different historical issues as well as on historical writing itself. The pandemic has, we see, invoked historical consciousness: historians, anthropologists, and ethnographers alike have invited the general public to participate in the collective and individual documentation of their everyday experiences.

The pandemic has directly affected this volume's publication, the contributors, and we the editors. Aside from the distress of potential infection, many have been forced to complete their work while in government-imposed lockdowns of varying severity; but everyone involved has had their individual movement strictly restricted. The pandemic has posed a risk to authors' health, as well as necessitating an adjustment to new conditions of daily life, including the disruption caused by the closure of workplaces, homeschooling, or childcare. Almost all of us have been confronted with the inevitable insecurity and fragility of academic life and exchange, highly dependent as it is on the freedom of movement as well as access to libraries and archives both home and abroad. Fellowships have been postponed, and conferences, seminars and trainings canceled or delayed. The academic community has also had to reckon with governmental stimulus packages. While measures have been taken to help the natural sciences, which, politicians have argued, can contribute tangibly to the fight against the virus, the humanities and social sciences, unsurprisingly, have been neglected.

This, for us, sheds light on an already-known larger issue, namely the secondary value of humanities in our society. In a profit-oriented capitalist economy, the scientific results produced by academics in the humanities and social sciences are not seen as bringing about immediate "profit"—a view reflected in the lack of state support they receive, pandemic or not. This certainly affects faculties of history, such as those to which the scholars contributing to this volume are affiliated. Historians, social scientists and other representatives of the "soft sciences" are often faced with the criticism and cynical remarks of laypeople who question their research since the humanities do not operate with replicable experiments nor hard facts. Far more detrimental to the humanities, however, are the actions the state may take as a funding body of both public and private research institutions and projects.

As mentioned previously, governments in Hungary and Slovakia are just two of the countries in East-Central Europe that have gone after Gender Studies and a woman's right to self-determination on ideological grounds. One imagines that such attacks and attempts to restrict the field of Gender Studies will grow more extreme as the expected economic recession caused



by the pandemic settles in. Scholarship in the humanities may be marginalized as economically irrelevant.

To counteract the politics of the new illiberalism,<sup>11</sup> particularly in East-Central Europe, and its aggressive advocacy of “traditional” family values and assault on critical discourse, we believe it is more important than ever to stress the significance of gender. We are convinced there is an intrinsic link between the study of gender and political support of democratic values, which, turning back to the situation of pandemic and government-imposed lockdowns, calls our attention back to the historical context dealt with in the present volume. The historians and social scientists editing this volume are skeptical of simplified historical parallels. However, historical study does not occur in a social vacuum, nor do the historical events resist interpretation or transposition. The events of World War II and the Holocaust, then, are a valuable guide for our actions in today’s society. They serve as extreme examples of what happens when governments suppress democratic values by dictating what is allowed and forbidden, and restricting access to public space. It also shows that a government can use a crisis to conceal political activity that at other times would provoke vigorous civil opposition. In Poland, for example, the national parliament debated two bills seeking to radically curtail access to abortion and criminalize sexual education, while equating homosexuality with pedophilia, rushing these items through under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup> While respecting the validity of public health measures, as citizens of a democratic Europe we must remain critical and politically active when our values are at stake. We must be wary of any limits imposed on democratic rights and forms of expression. The latter, we believe, include the practice (and financial support) of the academic study of gender.

We end our introduction to this volume on gendered experiences of the Holocaust and World War II with a call to energetically defend democratic structures in order to encourage debate about government rulings. We must vigorously shape democratic space so that it includes all classes, ethnicities, ages, and, as this volume emphasizes, genders. We hope that this work contributes to this task.

11 See also Andrea Pető’s foreword in this volume.

12 Rachel Savage, “Poland Mulls Law Denouncing Sex Educators as Paedophiles and Gay Activists,” *reuters.com*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-lgbt-education-trfn/poland-mulls-law-denouncing-sex-educators-as-paedophiles-and-gay-activists-idUSKCN21X2ZA?fbclid=IwAR0MWJ7TT89-DWpPWxAr-L7zKtD8jHXILRRpTmQjesQIDP1c0bPxzOcWO6A>.



## **Part One**

# **Theoretical Reflections on a Gender Focus in Holocaust Studies**



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