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978-0-521-01269-0 - Reading the Holocaust
Inga Clendinnen
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READING THE HOLOCAUST

The events of the Holocaust remain 'unthinkable' to many men and women, as morally and intellectually baffling as they were half a century ago. Inga Clendinnen challenges our bewilderment. She seeks to dispel what she calls the Gorgon effect: the sickening of the imagination and the draining of the will that afflict so many of us when we try to confront the horrors of this history.

Clendinnen explores the experience of the Holocaust from both the victims' and the perpetrators' point of view. She discusses the remarkable survivor testimonies of writers such as Primo Levi and Charlotte Delbo, the vexed issue of 'resistance' in the camps, and strategies for understanding the motivations of the Nazi leadership. She focuses an anthropologist's precise gaze on the actions of the murderers in the police battalions and among the SS in the camps. And she considers how the Holocaust has been portrayed in poetry, fiction, and film.

Searching and eloquent, *Reading the Holocaust* is an uncompromising attempt to extract the comprehensible – the recognizably human – from the unthinkable.

Inga Clendinnen is the author of *Ambivalent Conquests: Spaniard and Maya in Yucatan, 1517–1577* and *Aztecs: An Interpretation*, both published by Cambridge University Press.

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The hero Perseus undertook to cut off the head of the Gorgon Medusa, half human, half monster, and so hideous that all living creatures turned to stone at the sight of her.

Athene lent the hero her shining bronze shield, and Hermes his winged sandals and curved sword.

Perseus sought out the Gorgon, and found her sleeping.

Holding her reflected image steady in the shield he carried on his left arm, he struck her head from her shoulders.

Even in death the head retained its power to petrify.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book IV

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Alas, to our great grief, we now know all. I spoke to an eyewitness who escaped. He told me everything. They're exterminated in Chelmno, near Dombie, and they are all buried in the Rzuszow forest. The Jews are killed in two ways: by shooting or gas. It's just happened to thousands of Łódz Jews.

Do not think this is being written by a madman.

Letter from Jacob Schulmann, Rabbi of Grabow Synagogue, to Łódz, 19 January 1942

When all is said and done, a single word, 'understanding', is the beacon light of our studies.

Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* 1944

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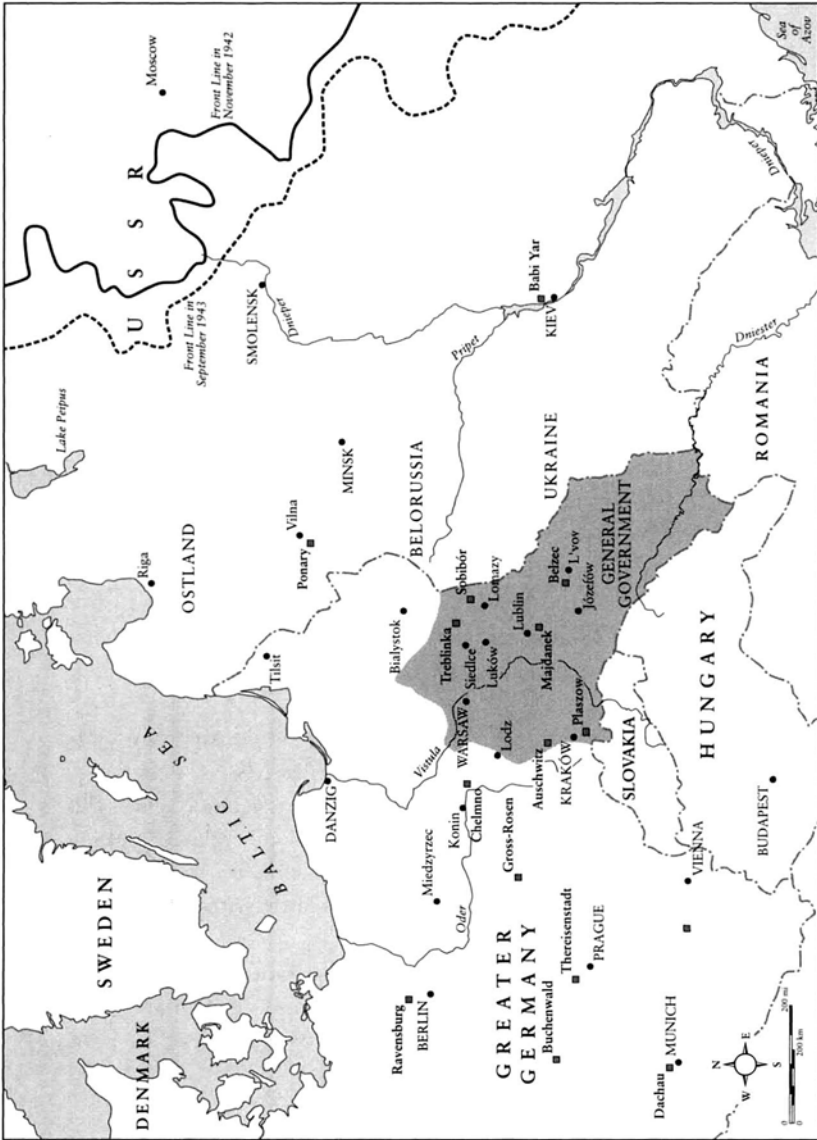
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This has been a taxing book both to read for and to write, and I have been a bad companion for its whole duration. Fortunately my husband John's patience, like his good will, seems inexhaustible. I am deeply grateful for both.

Inga Clendinnen, March 1998

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Northeastern Europe under the Nazis, 1942.