Foundational Pasts

The Holocaust as Historical Understanding

Alon Confino seeks to rethink dominant interpretations of the Holocaust by examining it as a problem in cultural history. As the main research interests of Holocaust scholars are frequently covered terrain – the anti-Semitic ideological campaign, the machinery of killing, the brutal massacres during the war – Confino's research goes in a new direction. He analyzes the culture and sensibilities that made it possible for the Nazis and other Germans to imagine the making of a world without Jews. Confino seeks these insights from the ways historians interpreted another short, violent, and foundational event in modern European history – the French Revolution. The comparison of the ways we understand the Holocaust with scholars' interpretations of the French Revolution allows Confino to question some of the basic assumptions of present-day historians concerning historical narration, explanation, and understanding.

Alon Confino is a professor of history at the University of Virginia, where he has taught since 1993. He has written extensively and influentially on historical memory, historical method, and German history. Among his books are *The Nation as a Local Metaphor: Württemberg, Imperial Germany, and National Memory, 1871–1918* (1997) and *Germany as a Culture of Remembrance: Promises and Limits of Writing History* (2006). As a visiting professor, Confino has taught at the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, and École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, and was a visiting fellow at the European University Institute in Florence. He received a 2011 Guggenheim Fellowship for his new project on Nazi memories that made the Holocaust, as well as grants from the Fulbright, Humboldt, DAAD, and the Lady Davis Foundations; the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University; the Social Science Research Council; the Israel Academy of Sciences; and the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.

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ALON CONFINO
University of Virginia

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To Paolo and Davidi,
foundational

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Preface

Foundational Pasts works on two levels: one presents a specific interpretive argument about the Holocaust, whereas the other advances several claims about historical reconstruction. The two levels are connected, but each also makes arguments that stand independently. My intention is that readers will read this rather short text in one sitting and with minimal interruptions; I have therefore kept endnotes to a minimum. The aim is to be suggestive, not comprehensive. I hope that readers will take different things from this book depending on their interests and inclinations and, whether or not they agree with some of the arguments, will find it good to think with. I do not see the book as a package deal, a sort of hermetic argument that requires the reader either to accept or to reject it. It has several faces. Scholars of the Holocaust may read it somewhat differently than do other scholars. But it does invite each historian to probe his or her ways of reconstructing the past.

In different ways, this book has been on my mind for a long time. I first thought about the associations between the French Revolution and the Holocaust when I was a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley. I then went on to write on other topics in German history, although the Holocaust was never far from my mind. Several years ago, when I began to have doubts about some of the tenets of Holocaust historiography, I wrote an essay on Nazi fantasies of Jews. From that starting point, the book simply wrote itself in an intense, short spell. I have since rewritten and revised it and, while doing so, incurred enormous debts to friends and colleagues who shared with me their wisdom, knowledge, and time.

With my friends Paul Betts (University of Sussex), Amos Goldberg (Hebrew University), Dirk Moses (European University Institute, Florence), and Dan Stone (Royal Holloway, University of London), I shared many thoughts about the topics discussed here; I benefited immensely from their insight and erudition as well as from their splendid company. With Allan Megill (University of Virginia), I have had many conversations over the years that pushed me to sharpen my ideas about history. Maiken Umbach (University of Manchester) encouraged me to keep on with the project and shared with me her excellent ideas. Edward Ayers (University of Richmond), Doris Bergen (University of Toronto), Jane Caplan, Nick Stargardt, and Lyndal Roper (all Oxford University), and Mark Roseman (Indiana University) made good comments that improved the book along the way. Freddie Rokem (Tel Aviv University) directed my attention to the theatrical relations between the French Revolution and the Holocaust. Monica Black (University of Tennessee) and Sophia Rosenfeld (University of Virginia) read an early draft of the entire manuscript; I am grateful for their comments. At the University of Virginia, I benefited from the friendship and assistance of more people than I can possibly mention. Its Jewish Studies Program has been an excellent home in which to test and exchange ideas in an intellectually rewarding way; I am particularly grateful to Asher Biemann, Gabriel Finder, Jennifer Geddes, Jeffrey Grossman, and James Loeffler. In the History Department, I benefited from the good fellowship and scholarship of Lenard Berlanstein, Herbert Tico Braun, Charles McCurdy, Erik Midelfort, Neeti Nair, and Brian Owensby.

I presented part of the book at the fantastic research group "Ethnography and Experience: Theory, History, and Interdisciplinary Practice" at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University. I am grateful to my fellow members Galit Hasan Rokem and Carola Hilfrich (both at the Hebrew University), Amy Shuman (Ohio State University), Arkady Kovelman (Moscow State University), and especially to Ilana Pardes (Hebrew University); they pushed me to think of history as method and imagination. José Brunner, director of the Institute for German History at Tel Aviv University, kindly invited me to give the 2006 Walter Grab Memorial Lecture, in which I had the opportunity to present some of my ideas. Thanks too to the invigorating environment of the research group "Globalization of the Holocaust" at Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and to Haim Hazan (Tel Aviv University) and Amos Goldberg, who invited me to participate. My editor Eric Crahan enthusiastically supported me

in this project from the beginning and guided it with a wise and steady hand; he is a model for the profession. My heartfelt thanks to them all; they made clear to me what I meant to say, or thought I meant to say, before I could articulate it.

This book belongs also to Francesca, Paolo, and Davidi.