

## 5-QUESTIONS:

### A Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies Interview with Wendy Lower

#### On her Recent Volume, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*

**Wendy Lower** is Assistant Professor of History at Towson University in Maryland. She was a research fellow and the Director of Visiting Scholars at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies. Her most recent book, *Nazi Empire Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*, was published by the University of North Carolina in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Professor Lower's other scholarly articles and essays have appeared in such journals as *German Studies Review* and the Museum's *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, and in such edited volumes as *Life in the Ghettos During the Holocaust* and *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and its Aftermath*. Her current research projects include a newly discovered diary of a Jewish laborer in Ukraine and the East German investigations and war crimes trials of Nazi perpetrators.

#### ***What new or under-utilized archival resources did you draw upon in your research?***

I didn't have a particular region in mind when I started my graduate studies in history, but—given the voluminous German documentation available in the U.S. National Archives—I wondered if more material could be found near the very sites where the Germans implemented their criminal policies. Ukraine had just declared its independence and opened up its regional archives to westerners. Most of my dissertation was based on captured German records, oral histories, and newspaper collections from Zhytomyr, Ukraine. As I was working on my dissertation, the Museum began assembling this amazing body of documentation for its archives from depositories in and around Zhytomyr. This allowed me access to records not only from Zhytomyr but from several other regional repositories in the former Soviet Union as well, and to conduct my research more thoroughly and conveniently at the Center than I could have done in Ukraine.

#### ***What issues raised by this topic drew you to this subject area for research?***

I became very interested in the early 1990s in the dynamics of how the Holocaust—or in Nazi euphemistic jargon the “Final Solution”—was implemented and questioned why it was done with such little resistance inside and outside the German administration. The historiographical debate on the Holocaust at that time centered on decision-making, with interpretations diverging along intentionalist and structuralist lines. The intentionalists argued that the extreme antisemitism of Hitler and his top leaders drove the Final Solution policy deliberately toward genocide, whereas the structuralists stressed that conflicts among competing bureaucracies and lower-level functionaries had the

cumulative effect of radicalizing anti-Jewish policies. It seemed to me that this conceptual divide could be narrowed through an examination of how the Nazi system functioned from the “bottom up” and beyond Germany’s borders. Christopher Browning’s earlier work on the Foreign Office and his subsequent studies of the Holocaust in Poland pioneered this interpretive approach. In Ukraine, I believed, one might gain another perspective of the Third Reich’s power structure and the context of the Holocaust as a state policy. In my book, I explored how German officials on the “eastern frontier” of the Reich’s empire in Europe understood, responded to, and put into action the directives and expressed goals of Nazi leaders. In addition to tracing the center-periphery dynamic of Nazi rule, I also examined the local impact of Nazi population policies, specifically what the everyday experience of occupation was like for Ukrainians, ethnic Germans, and Jews. Studies such as Raul Hilberg’s magisterial work on the German bureaucratic machinery and Jan Gross’s earlier social history of the Nazi occupation of Poland influenced my approach. As I wrote my dissertation on Zhytomyr, Dieter Pohl’s excellent regional studies of the Holocaust in Lublin and in eastern Galicia appeared, and I had the extraordinary opportunity of being able to discuss my research with him and benefit from his insights into the history of the region during a Summer Research Workshop that I organized at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies in 1999 and again while he was a fellow at the Center in 2000. These were some of the historical questions, interpretive developments, and published works that guided my research.

### *Why did you focus on the Zhytomer District of Western Ukraine?*

The research paths of historians are rarely straight, because the stories we write are often connected to unexpected and seemingly unrelated personal experiences. My first encounter with Zhytomyr had little to do with my interest in history. I was officially invited in 1992 to go there to work on a business venture. At that time, I was pursuing an M.A. degree in History at American University and had just read Richard Breitman’s study of Heinrich Himmler. I remembered a passing reference in his book to Zhytomyr, in which Professor Breitman described it as the site of Himmler’s Ukrainian headquarters. He confirmed that there were some captured German documents in the town’s archives, although he was not sure how many. I was delighted to find a significant amount. I ended up returning to Zhytomyr’s archives in 1996 and 1999, and pursued my doctorate with Professor Breitman, who is spending this year as the Ina Levine Fellow at the Center.

I developed a deeper interest in the region’s history and closer ties to the community with each research trip. Zhytomyr is located on the right bank of the Dnieper, in what is technically western Ukraine. Nevertheless, given its interwar Soviet history, Zhytomyr had more in common with eastern Ukraine. For centuries, the region was home to ethnic German settlers, Polish landlords, Ukrainian peasants, and Jewish traders. The rich complexity of its interethnic history and the fact that the worst aspects of Stalinism and Nazism converged in this area made it an appealing case study. During my research stays in Zhytomyr, I was fortunate to meet several local scholars and wartime survivors,

including some Jewish families. These local contacts became critical to my research. They helped me find new source materials, encouraged me to ask different questions about the region's history, and motivated me to complete the book.

***The geographic, social, and political scope of the Holocaust was immense and complex. How can a focus on local experience cast light on broader issues?***

The regional perspective brings individual, everyday experiences into sharper relief. It shows us how a community and its landscape are radically transformed by war and occupation. It is true that the geographic focus can be limiting because one can hardly draw general conclusions about the history of the Holocaust across Europe based on a detailed study of one place. On the other hand, the depth of analysis possible in a regional study allows scholars to better integrate the history's significant peculiarities and contingencies, which sweeping narratives might otherwise gloss over. If we want to understand the behavior and outlook of perpetrators, bystanders, and victims, it seems that we should start with a closer examination of what happened at or near the sites of mass murder. I hasten to add that more interdisciplinary analysis of these events is needed since historians can offer detailed descriptions of the murder and the killing machinery, but they are limited in their ability to analyze the psychological and sociological aspects of criminal behavior and inter-communal violence. Even if historians work exhaustively like detectives in the field and in the archives, they can never completely reconstruct what happened. For many of the smaller Jewish communities that I investigated in the Zhytomyr region, barely a trace of their existence remained. I did not find survivors, postwar testimonies, or wartime documentation of the Holocaust. This was a troubling discovery and humbling realization. I am glad that the Center has undertaken an initiative to try to find the remaining archives of the Jewish Communities annihilated during the Holocaust in the hope of preserving some record of these people and adding their voice to this history.

***In what ways was Nazi empire-building in Eastern Europe similar to or different from the larger phenomenon of modern European colonialism and imperialism in terms of its vision, practical implementation, and consequences?***

As Raphael Lemkin and Hannah Arendt pointed out decades ago, the governing structures, policies, and methods of Nazi imperialism were historically rooted in the European conquest and exploitation of the Americas, Africa, and the Far East. The links between Nazi imperialism and the Holocaust, however, have only recently been more fully explored. Like the generation of Europeans that preceded them, Nazi leaders saw the world in geopolitical and racist terms. They believed that securing and expanding the power of the state depended upon militaristic campaigns of conquest and autarkic economic policies of resource extraction and labor exploitation. On the other hand, there were significant differences in the pre-World War I and Nazi approaches to imperialism. The European view of the African 'native' was similar but not identical to the Nazi view of the Slavic "Untermensch." Furthermore, the Nazi characterization of "the Jew" as

Europe's quintessential "Other," that is, as a foreign influence and a global threat, was not the same as colonialist stereotypes of docile "natives" or "noble savages." Empire-building and antisemitism were European traditions that the Nazis forged into one genocidal ideology and policy, and the centrality of the Jews in the Nazi case sets it apart from the history of European imperial conquest in Africa and elsewhere overseas.