

Editorial

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Introduction to the Themed Issue: Gender

<https://doi.org/10.1515/eehs-2025-0032>

Published online November 14, 2025

Gendered analysis entered Holocaust historiography alongside the rise of social history and *Alltagsgeschichte* (the history of everyday life) in the 1980s, as scholars grew increasingly interested in history “from below,” particularly in how women experienced persecution. Historians Esther Katz and Joan Miriam Ringelheim emphasized the importance of contextualizing to centralize women and their experiences. They organized the 1983 conference, Women Surviving the Holocaust, at Stern College for Women in New York City.¹ Ringelheim explains that although feminist theory had already been available, scholars of the Holocaust were not prepared to use it, possibly to avoid a universalist approach and keep Holocaust studies within the confines of particularism. Consequently, there had been no discussions on women, women and men, women and children, gender differences, the connection between gender and survival, nor any exploration of women’s camps before the 1983 conference as “No concepts were readily available to shape such conversations; there was no historical road map” (Ringelheim 1998, 341).

Following this call for action, by the second half of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, women scholars of the field began publishing analytical works that engaged specifically with women and gender in the Holocaust. The dominant line of research included the understanding of women’s roles before the war and women’s responses to crises in war that were different depending on the forced environments they moved through or to, such as ghettos, forced labor camps, concentration, and extermination camps.² As the titles show, the majority of the work in the first gender

1 Founded in 1954, the Stern College for Women is the undergraduate women’s college of arts and sciences of Yeshiva University.

2 The most influential works include Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, eds., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (St. Paul, Minn: Paragon House, 1993), *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer

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histories of the Holocaust studied women and their roles, experiences, and reactions. Although some of these works addressed men's gendered roles, and George Mosse's *magnum opus* (1996) appeared during this historiographical peak, the gender analysis of men and masculinity remained comparatively underrepresented. These works born from this critical shift in historiography established the basis of gender research in Holocaust Studies. Consequently, several new publications and special editions emerged that have elevated gender as an analytical tool at the center of focus.³

The integration of gender analysis and feminist methodologies into Holocaust historiography has been a relatively late development within the field of Eastern European Holocaust studies, however. One of the most significant reasons gender perspectives were long absent from studies of Eastern Europe is that mainstream Holocaust research was suppressed under Communist rule between 1949 and 1989. After the Iron Curtain collapsed, histories of the Holocaust started to take off. They were mainly descriptive, lacking any methodological framework other than political history, and based on exploring state archives. Local contexts primarily shaped approaches to both remembering and researching the Holocaust. In the West, scholars developed widely accepted terminology and frameworks that facilitated understanding the Shoah. In contrast, Eastern European researchers faced the entanglements and complexities specific to each country and region (Himka & Michlic 2013, 13–35).

After 1989 among these divergent historiographical landscapes, a gendered approach to studying the Holocaust has been emerging. A complex yet timely task must be undertaken not only because of the multiplicity of national histories that require reading against the grain but also within a methodological framework that is

and Lenore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.), Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.), *The Women and War Reader*, edited by Lois Ann Lorentzen and Jennifer Turpin (New York: NYU Press, 1998.), *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, edited by Elizabeth R Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003.), Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.).

³ To mention some important works: *Gender and the Holocaust*, edited by Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H. Shapiro (Seattle–London: University of Washington Press, 2013), *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators*, edited by Elissa Bemporad and Joyce W. Warren (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018), *Gender and The Holocaust – New Research special edition of Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* No. 27 (Fall 2014), *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges*, edited by Andrea Pető, Louise Hecht, and Karolina Krasuska (Budapest: Central European University, 2018), *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010.).

constantly evolving and demands rigorous scholarly attention. Following a conference in Warsaw in 2015, Andrea Pető, Louise Hecht, and Karolina Krasuska edited *Women and the Holocaust. New Perspectives and Challenges* (2015). A volume that introduced new perspectives on women and the Holocaust, specifically focused on the Central and Eastern European region. This volume showed that gender is not only a category of social difference but also a framework through which trauma is experienced and represented, particularly in national contexts where both fascist and communist legacies shaped Holocaust memory.

The contemporary political landscape has witnessed unprecedented attempts to instrumentalize gender studies and Holocaust research for anti-liberal agendas, which makes this themed issue particularly timely. The gendering of Holocaust scholarship has become more critical than ever as populist and authoritarian movements systematically appropriate academic institutions, research methodologies, and historical narratives. Eastern Europe has become the first battlefield for anti-gender politics as a part of the broader global backlash against gender studies. This political climate has direct implications for Holocaust and gender research, as both fields have become targets of populist and authoritarian movements (Pető 2021a, 241–249). The anti-liberal appropriation efforts have begun to co-opt feminist language and frameworks in the promotion of “her-story” narratives that appear to center women’s experiences but serve to reinforce traditional gender roles and nationalist ideologies (Pető 2021b, 160–173). These co-opted narratives often present Jewish women primarily as mothers and victims, stripping away agency and resistance that feminist Holocaust scholars have worked to document. By appropriating the language of women’s history while depriving it of its critical methodological and heuristic potential, these approaches undermine decades of scholarship that has revealed the complex ways women navigated, resisted, and sometimes collaborated with genocidal systems.

The implications for gendering Holocaust research are profound, especially when illiberal forces are capturing the state. Scholars who have spent careers developing expertise in the intersection of gender studies and Holocaust history find themselves marginalized or excluded from institutional leadership positions. For them, only self-censorship remained as a survival strategy while accepting the “despecification” of gender studies. That leads to integrating gender studies in women’s studies or broader frameworks. In this context, the rigorous application of gender analysis to Holocaust studies becomes not merely an academic exercise but a form of intellectual resistance against the distortion of historical truth. Therefore, it is particularly important that this themed issue, prepared in collaboration with *La Revue d’histoire de la Shoah*, uses the concept of gender.

1 This Themed Issue

Consequently, the development of historiography that includes inquiry into gender as a meaningful analytical tool is ongoing. This themed issue contributes to that effort by offering crucial new research on Croatia, Slovakia, and Yugoslavia.

Michal Brandl and Marijana Kardum's article, *Taking the Road Less Travelled? Jewish Modern Women Thinkers in 20th Century Croatia* is a rich and bold investigation into the female thinkers who significantly impacted Croatia's transition to modernity at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Their extensive research highlights aspects of the history of the Jewish community and Jewish women in Croatia that have been little explored to date, as well as their influence on Croatian and Yugoslav intellectual history. Through the figures of Vilma Vukelić, Vera Ehrlich, Ina Juhn Broda, Olga Hebrand, and Zdenka Novak, Brandl and Kardum's work presents a new attempt to examine the long-marginalized (if not ignored) influence of Jewish women in Croatia and Yugoslavia during the 20th century. The study also demonstrates that it is impossible to separate gender issues from history. Studying women allows us to see more clearly how the structure of society, organized into rigid gender divisions, impacts the formation of thought. This affirmation is true for everyone, and the intersection with gender studies allows us to see the different levels that make up an identity, such as that of "Jewish modern women thinkers".

Tiarra Maznick offers, in her contribution *Revisiting the Sterilizations at Ravensbrück Concentration Camp: A Victim-Based History*, a rich examination of the experimental sterilization carried out in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, integrating into her research the people who underwent this practice, the identity of the victims, their experiences, and their fates. As the subject remains understudied today, Maznick offers a detailed historical reconstruction of the methods and people involved and deconstructs the misreadings accumulated over time through an innovative approach to archival research. One of the distinctive features of Maznick's paper is her working method. The need to compensate for the lack of specific documentation led Maznick to develop a composite method, a "constellation," where information is composed of different elements from various forms of evidence that Maznick brings together to reconstruct a memory that is readable to us.

Real Comrades in Struggle and Suffering: Women's Experiences in the Vapniarka Concentration Camp by Olga Ștefan analyzes the experience of women in the Vapniarka camp within the context of the historical sociology of the Holocaust. The prism chosen by Ștefan is that of resistance, marked as a political and therefore anti-fascist act, which she emphasizes differs from other acts of resistance (such as spiritual or individual acts). Anti-fascist resistance is characterized as an organized form centered on collective survival. Through the analysis of memoirs and interviews

with survivors, Ștefan presents a multifaceted picture of the women who experienced the camp, highlighting the significance of aspects such as political vision and affiliation in the mechanisms of identity construction.

Dragana Stojanović offers a new theoretical framework to approach the interrelation of gender and power through an analysis of Yugoslav Jewish survivor testimonies. In *Surviving the gender matrix of the Holocaust: The axis of gender-power in the testimonies of Yugoslavian Holocaust survivors*, the author introduces the term *gender matrix* to describe the socially shaped and historically situated network of behaviors, norms, and relationships that influence how individuals experience and navigate gender. As the author argues, these matrices play a crucial role in shaping personal, collective, and political responses, especially in times of crisis. Drawing on the testimonies of women from the five-volume collection *We Survived: Yugoslav Jews on the Holocaust* (Gaon 2001–2009), Stojanović traces how gender-based treatment manifested across different survival contexts such as concentration camps, hiding, and participation in the resistance. These narratives reveal how patriarchal norms of the 1930s and 1940s constrained women's choices and shaped their responses to persecution, including the ways their bodies were viewed, controlled, and subjected to violence.

In *Intimacy as Survival: Ambiguous Gendered Strategies in Sereď Camp*, Denisa Nešťáková examines how Jewish women navigated sexual relationships during their imprisonment between 1941 and 1945, and how these encounters influenced their chances of survival. Survival depended in part on the ability to form, sustain, or avoid intimate relationships, which offered physical, emotional, and psychological protection amid daily violence. The author highlights the complexity of agency under coercion, showing how relationships, whether consensual, strategic, or exploitative, shaped women's daily lives, coping strategies, and vulnerability within the camp system.

2 Open Forum

In 2020, Judith Tydor Baumel Schwartz and Dalia Ofer published *Her Story, My Story? Writing About Women and the Holocaust*, a book of ego-documents, academic memoirs by 28 female researchers working on the Holocaust. The 28 researchers represented a diverse range of disciplines to which the individual scholars belonged. The aim was to hear their stories about how they decided to, or ended up, working on women in the Holocaust. The forum is inspired by this book (without, of course, aspiring to any comparison) to include in the examination on research that intersects with Gender Studies and the Holocaust, a reflection on the influence the work of a scholar has had, is having, and will have.

At the same time, in academia, publishing a *Festschrift* to commemorate a significant birthday is traditional. The Open Forum in this themed issue is the EEHS version of the *Festschrift* in honor of Andrea Pető's 60th birthday.

We chose to contact several scholars who work in different ways with gender studies and the Holocaust. The first part is the contribution that each of them sent. We left it up to the participants, Dalia Ofer, Sue Vice, Lori Weintrob, and Helga Embacher, to decide what form their contributions would take, hence the different natures of the contributions. The result is a multifaceted reflection on the challenges of research in the present and new directions for the future. Helga Embacher, *Approaching the Holocaust, Communism, and Post-Communism in Eastern Europe from a Gender Perspective*, emphasizes the importance of memoirs written by Jewish women dealing with postwar experiences in communist countries and how the memory of the Holocaust and the Second World War is still crucial to investigate when it comes to women. In *Voices of Courage: Women and Heroism in the Holocaust*, Lori Weintrob reflects on the potential and critical issues of the concept of heroines for understanding the agency of women in resistance. This aspect is key to the paradigm shift in the history of the Holocaust and genocide. Sue Vice in *Andrea Pető on Hannah Szenes: Multilayered Memorialization* highlights the role of Andrea Pető's research in the study of the figure of Anikó Szenes, using it as a starting point for her investigation into the representation of Szenes' history in Anglophone cultural production. Finally, Dalia Ofer's *The Contribution of Andrea Pető to My Research and Understanding of the Holocaust* offers a valuable overview of Andrea Pető's contribution to the social and cultural perspectives and gender analysis of the Holocaust in Hungary. As Dalia Ofer points out, Andrea Pető's work assists our understanding of the complex reality.

The second part is a reciprocal reflection on the contributions of the four participants, akin to a roundtable discussion. If the focus is on reflecting on the impact of other researchers on our work, what better form than a commentary? Andrea Feldman opens this section with an excellent introduction to Andrea Pető's contribution to Gender Studies and Holocaust studies.

3 Early Holocaust Historiography by Women

Beginning with this themed issue, we start a new series on forgotten early female researchers of the Holocaust. In curating the section on "Early Holocaust Histories by Women", co-editor Alexandra M. Szabo raises a historiographical question that emerged during her academic training: where were the women among the early historians of the Holocaust? Throughout her undergraduate and graduate studies, it became clear that the most frequently cited foundational voices in Holocaust

history – Philip Friedman, Raul Hilberg, Yehuda Bauer, and Saul Friedländer, among others – were all men. Although Hannah Arendt and Lucy S. Dawidowicz gained recognition particularly among American scholars, and Rokhl Auerbakh was recognized yet treated more as a historical figure rather than acknowledged as a historian or archivist in her own right, such recognitions did not translate into a sustained acknowledgment of women as authoritative voices in shaping the field.

Respecting the lasting influence of the foundational male scholars who laid the groundwork, we were compelled to question the structural and intellectual conditions that led to the marginalization or omission of women's contributions to early Holocaust historiography. The emergence of gender studies and the parallel growth of women's history, primarily through the work of Debórah Dwork, Marion Kaplan, Dalia Ofer, Lenore J. Weitzman, Claudia Koonz, Carol Rittner, and others, opened space for the study of women's experiences as victims, survivors, and perpetrators during the Holocaust. Yet even as these inquiries deepened the field, a parallel absence persisted: the under-recognition of women as producers of Holocaust scholarship during the formative years of the discipline.

Building on the work of Laura Jockusch, who has challenged the postwar “myth of silence” regarding Jewish responses, the question arises whether there were women who survived the war and the Holocaust and felt compelled to document, interpret, and preserve its history. If so, what obstacles prevented them from gaining visibility within the emerging academic discourse? This new series was developed from such questions, bringing together contributions that highlight how women shaped knowledge production about the Holocaust well before the institutionalization of Holocaust studies as a discipline.

Christine Schmidt opens this new series on forgotten early female researchers of the Holocaust with her insightful piece on historian and sociologist Dr. Eva Gabriele Reichmann. The essay outlines Reichmann's intellectual work on the history of antisemitism and the experiences of German Jews. It also highlights her pivotal role in postwar documentation efforts through institutions such as the Wiener Library and the Leo Baeck Institute in London, drawing renewed attention to a figure long overlooked. Therefore, Schmidt interrogates the reasons for this marginalization, arguing that a constellation of gendered, social, and political factors contributed to Reichmann's limited recognition within the broader field of Holocaust studies, despite her essential standing in German Jewish historiography.

4 Book Reviews

The book reviews in our issue focus on recent scholarly work exploring under-researched histories concerning the Holocaust. Tamar Aizenberg offers a thoughtful

overview and highlights the key insights on masculinity during the Holocaust presented in Florian Zabransky's first monograph, *Jewish Men and the Holocaust*. By surveying the most recent scholarship on men during the Holocaust, Aizenberg highlights the critical importance of integrating masculinities into broader gender analyses, enriching our understanding of how gender shaped experiences of violence, survival, and memory.

Nikoletta Kende offers a perceptive review of Dagmar Herzog's recent monograph, *The Question of Unworthy Life*, highlighting its compelling structural analysis of eugenics in twentieth-century Germany. Kende draws particular attention to the book's engagement with gender dynamics and reflects on its potential implications for future research in Eastern Europe.

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