

BRITISH POWs AND THE HOLOCAUST: WITNESSING THE NAZI ATROCITIES, BY
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Over the past two decades, ‘the Holocaust’ has become more a palpable and perceptible presence in British culture and society than ever before. However, such is the present nature of our cultural consciousness of the Holocaust that attempts at critique and evaluation invariably end up whistling in the proverbial wind.

This is unsatisfactory, not least as the prevalence of the Holocaust in contemporary comes with significant contradictions. For instance, the pervasiveness of the Holocaust is not matched by high levels of public knowledge and understanding of how the United Kingdom is involved in this history. Equally, on-going state sponsored memory projects suggest – on paper at least – that those in power are not convinced about the security of Holocaust remembrance. Finally, there is the ever-growing “yawning gulf” between academic advances made in British universities and the condition of the Holocaust in popular culture;¹ including the persistence in the latter of myths, mis-memories, and misconceptions. All told, there is good reason to consider and to question just what it is that we as a nation are now so seemingly familiar with, the extent this marries with historical actuality, and what our cultural narratives at once reveal, conceal, and obscure.

Russell Wallis’ new book, *British POWs and the Holocaust: Witnessing the Nazi Atrocities*, is to be viewed against this backcloth. Ostensibly, Wallis’s is a “quest for historical accuracy”; his aim, “to construct an accurate picture of the ways in which British POWs reacted to the Holocaust” (3). The necessity of this objective is derived, in his words, from how “popular conceptions of the British POW experience” – principally in relation to the Holocaust – “oversimplifies and distorts the reality and can give traction to myths, or even positively encourage their creation” (206). For Wallis, these processes are borne of a broader cultural milieu; one where “the pervasiveness of general knowledge about the Holocaust has led to some inaccuracies about the subject becoming widely believed” at the same time as bringing about “standardised ideas about what ‘the Holocaust’ really was like” (207) – ideas that are invariably wholly divorced from reality.

Given this, *British POWs and the Holocaust* serves multiple functions. In one register, its meticulous construction of what POWs knew, understood, and did in response to the Holocaust creates an empirical portrait acts as a corrective to what is commonly known and understood about captured British servicemen and the genocide. In and of itself this is important work: as much as constituting a public service in terms of countering popular misunderstandings and mythologies, Wallis also deepens existing scholarly knowledge and understanding on a variety of fronts. But these outputs have added impetus and urgency in light of certain mendacious individuals who, for reasons unknown, seek to weave fabricated narratives for their own ends. Indeed, *British POWs and the Holocaust* has emerged out of research Wallis was originally commissioned to undertake by the Holocaust Educational Trust, which centred on investigating claims of heroic actions by British POWs enlisted in the E715 work detachment stationed close to Auschwitz-Monowitz. As it happens, Wallis' book achieves much more than this, but that such investigations are necessary in the first place, means *British POWs and the Holocaust* operates in a wider key as a mediation on the condition of our Holocaust consciousness.

In terms of approach and structure, Wallis is systematic and methodical. Across eight chapters, he moves from scene-setting, to examining POWs engagement with atrocities, to evaluating the value of POW testimony as a window into wider historical culture. Throughout, Wallis seeks to be balanced and measured. The key watchword in his introductory chapter, for example, is due appreciation of context, both the “general and specific”, since it is only through contextual understanding that one is able to build an appropriately “textured background” and exercise “due diligence to the interpretation of available sources” (3). To some postmodern ears such expressions of historicist faith will ring suspiciously hollow, yet in the face of how abstracted ‘the Holocaust’ has become in contemporary memory-culture, Wallis' historicization of the position of British POWs vis-à-vis the Holocaust is just what is needed. Furthermore, it allows Wallis to demonstrate it is “how these various contexts collide [that] forms the crucible in which we can assess the available evidence and build an accurate picture of POW responses to what they saw and heard” (17).

Wallis' introduction is effective in constructing this framework. Drawing on insights forwarded in his previous book, *Britain, Germany, and the Road to the Holocaust* (2014), Wallis paints the pre-war societal backcloth that informed the outlook and attitude of British servicemen. This includes the numerous challenges that faced inter-war Britain – both those of the domestic and the foreign policy realms – and outlining the sort of life servicemen entered into in the

lead-up to and at the outbreak of war. Notably, Wallis also draws particular attention to the level of cognisance that British society displayed towards the key matters of the day. Far from being impassive to the world around them, Wallis argues Britons were “well informed about international crises and heavily engaged with the issues”, reemphasising ideas found in his earlier scholarship that “humanitarianism was alive and well in interwar Britain” even if “the philanthropic urge had its limits” (16).

These are important precepts for Wallis’ later analysis. They allow him to argue British servicemen were not morally or politically detached from the sufferings of others, but rather came from an outward-looking society that “could be mobilised to support a rich variety of foreign victims”. Wallis does not pretend this empathy was boundless or operational without qualification; on the contrary, he notes victims of oppression and violence “could be cast and then re-cast in the British imagination to make them worthy of support”, and that when Jewish victims were involved “the level of support was noticeably less than for others”. In this Wallis follows others who have pointed to the particular terms of Jewish-Gentile relations in Britain, and how these translated into practice.² Where he departs from the likes of Tony Kushner, however, is in his contestation that an Anglo-Saxon “liberal imagination” explains this difference in and impaired comprehension of Jewish suffering. Though somewhat frustratingly Wallis does not expand on this critique extensively, it is evident he believes the liberal tenets of British society did not prevent British POWs “from understanding what was in front of them” (16).

Exploring the connections between comprehension and response is a key concern of the book, but Wallis is careful to avoid making definitive statements about how the one informed the other on an individual basis. This reticence is admirable. Quite rightly Wallis does not wish to speak for those who are the subject of his study, or project back onto POWs what one might assume to have been their motivations from today’s vantage point. Instead, Wallis prefers to allow the POWs to either explicate their reasoning for themselves, or – as is more often the case – leave it to the reader to make sense of the men’s behaviour in the contexts they found themselves in. This necessarily requires the reader to have a sound grasp on the nature of the prisoner of war experience; something which Wallis attempts to provide in his introductory chapter, and returns to throughout the book. So, for example, he is keen to emphasise the living conditions that POWs encountered – “everyday life was something to endure rather than enjoy” (22), “independence was a thing of the past” (23), with boredom and disillusionment hand in

glove with sensations of isolation and only partially alleviated by a rampant “chatter culture” (100). Notably, Wallis highlights that whilst provisions delivered through the Red Cross brought POWs sustenance and spiritual fillip, “hunger was a fairly constant companion” (23) with “food...sometimes scarce, sometimes less so”. As Wallis explains, the issue of hunger and availability of food is critical for our understanding of behaviour, and “needs to be considered when the generosity of British POWs faced with starving Jewish workers is assessed” (24).

In seeking to illustrate the situation British POWs found themselves in, Wallis takes on “the dominant narrative in modern Britain [which] drastically oversimplifies and distorts the general POW experience” (18). In so doing, he provides the reader with sufficient contextual understanding to begin to undertake their own evaluation of POW’s attitudes and actions. But this process equally requires of course an appreciation of just what it was captured servicemen were responding *to*. To that end, Wallis provides where appropriate brief but sound historical information on aspects of the Holocaust. For instance, in his discussion of the reactions of British POWs who found themselves in Buchenwald, Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, Wallis details the fundamentals of each of the camps in terms of origin, nature, and purpose. Meanwhile, so as to show what life was like for Jews within these institutions, he employs the voices of victims like Hans Frankenthal and Primo Levi. Those working in the field might – not unreasonably – suggest that in the interest of diversity other voices might have been employed alongside these, but for the general reader they suffice in constructing a picture of the travails experienced by Jews imprisoned within the camps.

How far did British POWs themselves grasp what was happening around them? Wallis is unequivocal that “overall, POWs witnessed and heard about, in real time, the murderous policies of the Nazis towards the Jews” and “they had little difficulty in understanding what was happening” (46). Certainly Wallis marshals an impressive amount of evidence to support the tenets of these claims, but one might suggest they could be accompanied by a layer of further qualification. Although Wallis shows it is possible to evidence levels of awareness or general ‘knowledge’ among individuals, determining how far this translated into a coherent, collective *understanding* of the Holocaust writ large, takes the historian into more murky territory. After all, it is difficult to assert that many contemporaries had a developed sense of the scale and scope of what was taking place, of how different processes were intersecting or

how policies were evolving in the context of the fortunes of war; least of all those who found themselves incarcerated for a duration.

These are, of course, issues which transcend the object of Wallis' study. But in giving a platform for British POWs to give voice to what they did know and seemingly understand, Wallis both debunks mythology and compels the reader to give thought to the complexities of what could and what was 'done' by these witnesses to atrocity. On this, Wallis further complicates matters by shedding light on the particular experience of those British POWs who were Jewish, and how these servicemen encountered the travails of Jews within the camps. Across two chapters (which arguably should have been amalgamated into one, given the brevity of chapter three) Wallis shows that as much as non-Jewish POWs could display sensitivity to Jewish colleagues and their predicament at being prisoners of the Nazis, "there is evidence to suggest that British POWs were less than accommodating" (54) at times; partly because of what Wallis depicts as an "unpredictable latent antagonism" (55) felt by many servicemen. Accordingly, Wallis speaks of a "double burden" felt by Jewish POWs (56), whereby the "deleterious effects of captivity" were compounded by a need to "prove their integrity" so as "to avoid accusations" from their comrades often shot through with antisemitism (56-57). In the very brief third chapter, Wallis seems to imply the particularities of this experience contributed to how Jewish POWs encountered the atrocities committed against Jews by the Nazis. "Being Jewish and a POW counted in a number of significant ways", writes Wallis, though he maintains "a shared Jewish heritage was not enough to overcome a set of obstacles" that POWs confronted when trying to respond to what they could see taking place before them (63).

The complexities of human behaviour come very much to the fore in Wallis' analysis of how POWs reacted to "the outworking of Nazi anti-Jewish policies" (64-112). In this fourth chapter, Wallis skilfully blends history, historiography, and personal case studies to illustrate just how much some individuals did know and understand, but how these capacities were curtailed in terms of response – either by personal prejudices and/or the circumstances prisoners were positioned within. The overarching narrative that emerges is not a simple or bifurcated one. Just as Wallis contests notions of British POWs as heroes of the Holocaust, he also resists any sense that servicemen were unable to relate to or feel compassion for Jewish victims. It is here the reader is introduced to the recollections and first-hand observations of men like Colin Burgess, Christopher Burney, Forest Yeo-Thomas, Edward Stirling, and Kenneth Bone;

accounts all the more fascinating for how they at once reveal unanticipated levels of knowledge, perception, and human failings.

Exemplifying all of these characteristics is Burney – a man capable, for instance, of grasping the logic of Levi’s “grey zone” and unaccepting of the cruelties he witnessed, all the while harbouring his own antisemitic views (88-89). In this Burney personifies how, in Wallis’ view, he and others were “contaminated by the upturned morality of the camp” (90) to the extent that “daily exposure to Jewish suffering and death could create a degree of insouciance” (100) or allow for personal prejudices to acquire shape and form. By comparing the responses of British POWs to the suffering of Jews with that of other victims (like Russian POWs) and their German captors, Wallis underscores the capacity of captive servicemen to be empathetic, sensitive, and even undertake active measures. Yet Wallis is equally keen to emphasise how reactions and responses were contextually dependent, and takes issue with the idea British liberal culture was in itself an inhibiting factor. Instead, Wallis seeks to accent the Janus-faced qualities of these “liberal sensibilities”: underlining how this mind-set and value system “enabled them [POWs] to see that what they were witnessing was just plain wrong” and “facilitated a range of responses...from outrage at their treatment to outright hostility towards the victims” (124).

In showing how “traditional concepts of heroism and gallantry, cowardice and timidity are consequently insufficient to explain the reactions and behaviour of POWs” (124), *British POWs and the Holocaust* makes for necessary reading. For some, however, these will come as uncomfortable and inconvenient truths. Certainly this will be the case for those who since 1945 have embraced idealised visions of British responses to Nazism and the Holocaust; depictions which Wallis shows have been fed by folk-tales of daring feats of relief and rescue on the part of certain individual POWs.

Foremost among these are the stories – in every sense of the word – of Charles Coward and Denis Avey. Reflecting the origins of the book, Wallis dedicates over 80 pages to a forensic analysis of these two individual’s heroic accounts, meticulously deconstructing each key aspect of these POWs testimonies. Studious and sober, Wallis carefully subjects the core claims of Coward and Avey to close scrutiny, providing in the process a compelling critique of their dubiety. To his credit, Wallis does not descend into shrill accusation or emotional rebuke; indeed, where concrete conclusions prove elusive, he highlights possible explanations or gives these men the benefit of the doubt. Towards Coward, for example, Wallis occasionally displays

a measure of sympathy, writing he “should not be judged too harshly” for his “metamorphosis” into “an unmitigated wartime hero” (166) and suggesting some of Coward’s claims may “perhaps” have been made “in response to a public desire for an heroic retelling of the war” (147). Wallis is less explicitly empathetic about Avey, though he is eager to assert that “at issue” is not the “integrity” of his intermediary in *The Man Who Broke in to Auschwitz* – the journalist, Rob Broomby – “but his method of validation” regarding key components of Avey’s narrative (176).

Wallis’ concern for fairness should not be misconstrued as going easy on Coward and Avey. As he explains, the stakes involved couldn’t be higher, for distorted accounts and erroneous claims have the potential “to provide fodder for the hateful phoney theorising of Holocaust deniers”. Accordingly, there must be a commitment to subject all and any claims of heroism to “rigorous historical enquiry”, lest we also diminish and “undermine those who really suffered and those who made genuine sacrifices” (208). Wallis’ truck therefore is not just with poor scholarly practice or ‘bad’ history, but with how such exercises have moral, philosophical, and ethical dimensions. With that in mind, it is worth not losing sight of the societal oxygen that gave succour and encouragement to men like Coward and Avey – as Wallis poignantly remarks, these stories (since that is what they are) “resonate because they present tales that people in Britain and to an extent, across the world, generally want to believe” (207).

British POWs and the Holocaust is a timely publication. It appears at a moment when the ongoing work of the United Kingdom Holocaust Memorial Foundation and movement towards a new national memorial and learning centre is contributing to a spike in socio-cultural interest in the Holocaust and its relationship with Britain. In this context, there is a risk that the rhetoric and politics of memory combine with the construction of usable pasts to obfuscate historical actuality. The best means of starting to counter this lie with works like Wallis’: scholarship characterised by discipline and rigor, written with verve and style, that strives to illuminate and critically interrogate rather than narrate the past in the tones we prefer to hear.

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Notes

¹ Cesarani, *Final Solution*. xxiii

² See for instance Bolchover, *British Jewry and the Holocaust*; Kushner, *The Jewish Heritage*; London, *Whitehall and the Jews*.

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